

THE VOICE-VOICELESS CONTRAST IN IRISH SONORANTS

Dónall P. Ó Baoill, Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, Dublin

The analysis of the sonorant consonants in Irish presents many intriguing problems for the linguist, for phonological theory and for the theory of universals of language. There are two developments which are worthy of consideration and I outline them briefly below.

- (i) The first problem has to do with the process of lenition which in general changes all stops to fricatives. The process is complicated by the fact that certain nasals and liquid consonants participate in the lenition process as well. In this case, one type of nasal/liquid is converted into another. This poses many problems for distinctive feature theory and the writing of rules.
- (ii) Secondly, the occurrence of voiceless nasals/liquids under certain conditions in Irish have to be dealt with. On the phonetic surface contrasts occur between the voiced and the voiceless type but the question to be answered is: do the same contrasts occur at a more abstract level? For example, the dialect of Irish to be discussed has eight phonemic voiced nasals (4 palatalized, 4 velarized). When the future morpheme or past participle ending is attached to words ending in nasals, the nasals tend to be devoiced. Thus, a contrast between the future tense and the present subjunctive is one of voiced-voiceless. If the contrast is phonemic, we have 16 nasal phonemes. These problems will be discussed, and suggestions made about what constitutes an appropriate analysis in this case.