

Issues in lenition and fortition

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Although the notions of lenition and fortition are widely used in the phonological literature across various linguistic theories, a number of issues can be identified. One of them is the issue of defining lenition/fortition. Lenition broadly understood operates in the direction from a more to less difficult sounds. Under the traditional, most common approach (e.g. Trask 1996, Bussmann 1996), lenition substitutes the fortis sounds with the lenis ones, whereas fortition substitutes the lenis sounds with their fortis counterparts. Such a definition is circular instead of explanatory and operates in an automatic, indiscriminate way, which does not take into account the mental character of phonological processes. It also stipulates that the speaker is not aware of the processes implemented in his or her own speech.

The OT approach (Boersma 1998, Kirchner 1998, 2004) advocates articulatory effort as the lenition/fortition criterion. For instance, lenition is effort-based and is driven by a natural need to minimize articulatory effort (Kirchner 1998). Articulatory effort is employed by Boersma in the sense of biomechanical parameters such as precision, distance, coordination, energy, mass etc. There is no denying that these parameters can be measured. Moreover, a holistic approach could be implemented, under which the parameters can be simply added. The holistic approach, however, was merely signaled in the OT literature (Boersma 1998) but failed to become a standardized measure. Thus, the idea of biomechanical parameters as such is not subject to critique, unlike the lack of the idea's implementation. Besides, biomechanical parameters as the solely lenition criteria do not take into consideration the mental reality of processes.

Within the NP framework (Donegan – Stampe 1979), the lenition/fortition criterion is based on the needs of the speaker as well as the listener and offers an operational procedure: if the phonological material is deleted for the benefit of the speaker, it is a lenition; when the material is added for the sake of the listener, it is a fortition. Furthermore, it is the speaker who bears the entire burden of articulation contrary to the common belief that the roles of the speaker and the listener are of equal importance. They are not since in the communication act the speaker must satisfy both his or her own needs as well as the needs of the listener.

Therefore, in the absence of any coherent definition of lenition and fortition, the paper proposes to define lenition as reduction and proposes its three types: reduction of energy, reduction of complexity and reduction of aerodynamic unnaturalness, whereas fortition is an effortful suppression of lenition. The advantage of these definitions is that they acknowledge the dynamic aspect of speech in terms of gestures and mototrics of the vocal tract.

Another issue in lenition and fortition is the criteria which classify a given process as a fortition or a lenition. The paper proposes a new typology of phonological processes based on the three types of lenition. The new, revised typology results from the most evident lenition type and motivation present in operation of a given process.

References

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