

Functional approaches to metathesis. Evidence from dialects of Polish

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Various approaches have been proposed to deal with metathesis. Here I discuss two proposals that make reference to production and perception: phonetically-based sound change and language processing. Ohala (1981) and Blevins (2004) claim that all language change is diachronic and results from errors in transmission of sound patterns across generations. Furthermore, sound change is non-teleological and any apparent phonetic optimization happens by chance. The other functional model makes use of language processing in general and the difficulty of serial encoding in particular. Similar sounds are predicted to be difficult to encode in a serial sequence in perception and production (Frisch 2004).

Phonetically-based approaches to metathesis fall into four categories: perceptual, compensatory, coarticulatory and auditory (Blevins & Garrett 2004). Two of these are attested in dialects of Polish. Perceptual metathesis applies to segments or features with elongated phonetic cues, such as rhotics. As rhotics have been shown to span domains up to three syllables long, both local and long-distance metathesis is expected, e.g. [durʂlak] → [druɕlak] and [kɔwdra] → [kɔrdwa]. Regarding the directionality of metathesis, the process is anticipatory, rather than preservative. Moreover, in line with Blevins & Garrett (2004), in most cases the rhotic is moved to a more salient position. The data motivate the following scale of prominence: stressed prevocalic > stressed preconsonantal > unstressed. A very interesting case of perceptual metathesis involves rC_α onsets turning into CrC_α onsets and can be classified as copying, e.g. [rdɛst] → [drdɛst]. The underlying factor is the difficulty of localizing the origin of the elongated cues of rhoticity. This case provides support for the claim that sound change is non-teleological. Instead of optimizing the syllable structure, the [rd-] → [drd-] change adds to the count of sonority violations.

Coarticulatory metathesis resulting from extreme gestural overlap is exemplified by [bidɔʂtʂ] → [bigdɔʂtʂ]. In line with the directionality predicted in Blevins & Garrett (2004), the process yields non-coronal – coronal sequences. A smaller degree of gestural overlap between consonants of different manner features may give rise to an excrescent segment (Ohala 1974), as seen in [hɛnrɪk] → [hɛndrɪk] and [rusk'ɛ] → [rustk'ɛ].

There remain several cases of lexicalized metathesis that seem incompatible with the tenets of phonetically-based sound change. The obvious driver for [miɕl] → [miɕ] and [katɛxism] → [katɛxmis] seems to be syllable structure. However, Blevins & Garrett (2004) dismiss such cases, contending that syllable optimization is in fact a by-product of the increased perceptual salience of the transposed segments. More problematic is the transposition of segments with short phonetic cues, e.g. [wɔdɪgi] → [wɔgidi], [prɔtsɛsja] → [prɔsɛtsja] and [pɛrmanentni] → [pɛrnamɛntni]. Given the inapplicability of phonetically-based solutions, a plausible explanation is afforded by the approach involving the difficulty of the serial encoding of similar segments. I conclude that metathesis is a cover term that comprises two types of processes: those which can be explained phonetically and those which require a psycholinguistic account incorporating the difficulty of the processing of similar sounds.

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