

SPONTANEOUS VELAR ~ LABIAL ALTERNATIONS: THE CASE OF CONSONANT
GRADATION IN DANISH AND NORTHERN SAAMI

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One of the most serious challenges for modern phonology nowadays is to establish the character of primes utilized to code speech sounds. This is even more so as it has been repeatedly pointed out that large amounts of phonological phenomena still remain problematic because the classical acoustic-perceptual and articulatory-based models are not suitably equipped to deal with them. One of such problematic areas include the phonological patterning of articulatorily distant consonant classes such as labials and velars which interact phonologically on a massive scale. Since the representation of labials is pretty uncontroversial, in this talk I concentrate on the internal structure of velars which has recently captured much attention in the literature, especially in Element Theory (Cyran 1997, 2010, Huber 2007, Scheer 2004).

More specifically, the main aim of this short talk is to back the solution according to which labials and velars share a resonance element (Broadbent 1996, Backley 2011). Since the evidence on the intimate phonological relationship between labials and velars is massive, the discussion is narrowed down to only some examples of the relationship between velars and labials in Danish and Northern Saami. For example, the latter language is characterized by the presence of a synchronically active consonant gradation. In one of the gradation sub-patterns (Group 9) the velar plosive [k] is lenited to [w] before voiceless coronals. More specifically, the velar plosive [k] in the strong grade is lenited to [w] before voiceless coronals in a weak grade, e.g. *gakcut* ~ *gavccui* ‘to climb’, *raksa* ~ *ravssat* ‘diaper’. This is an extremely common pattern as evidenced by the alternation in recent loan words, e.g. *teaksta* ‘text’ ~ *teavsttat* ‘text, pl’. The spontaneous velar-labial alternation can also be found in Danish. In this language [g] is often lenited to [w] after low vowels. A similar development is present in Finnish, another language characterized by Grade Alternation. In this language the velar [k] alternates with the labial approximant [v], e.g. *suku* ‘family’ ~ *suvussa* ‘in the family’. However, while in Finnish the alternation is presumably motivated by the labial context, this is not the case in Danish and Northern Saami. In the last two languages the shift must be recognized as an instance of the unconditioned velar > labial development as it operates after any vowel. The general conclusion I draw from the analysis boils down to the observation that the relationship between labials and velars can be easily captured if we postulate the presence of |U| not only in the content of labials and /u, w/ but, first and foremost, in velars. What differentiates both categories is the status played by this element, i.e. in labials |U| functions as the head, while in velars it is an operator.