

Historical Linguistics 2: Types of sound change

Assimilation

A sound becomes more similar to a sound in its environment.

- A sound can become more similar in place of articulation.

Example 1: Latin *in-* ‘not’ → *possibilis* ‘possible’ = *impossibilis* ‘impossible’

Example 2: English /n/ → [ŋ] before /θ/, as in *tenth* /tɛnθ/

- A sound can become more similar in manner of articulation
(including change from oral to nasal, or nasal to oral).

Example: Early Old English /stefn/ ‘stem’ > Later Old English /stemn/

- A sound can become more similar in terms of voicing.

Example: English plural morpheme {-s} → /z/ after voiced stops

{*bag*} + {-s} → *bags* [bægz]

{*load*} + {-s} → *loads* [lowdz]

- A sound can fully assimilate, becoming identical to a sound before or after it.

Example 1: Sound changes from Latin to Italian.

octo ‘eight’ > *otto*

septem ‘seven’ > *sette*

noctem ‘night’ > *notte*

somnus ‘sleep, dream’ > *sonno*

Example 2: Korean /k^hal/ ‘knife’ + /nal/ ‘edge’ → /k^hallal/ ‘knife blade’

Palatalization (may result from assimilation)

Non-palatal sounds (dental, alveolar, velar, etc.) become (alveo)-palatal.

- Usually happens in the environment of a **front vowel** or **glide /j/**.
- Stops often become affricates when they palatalize.

Example 1: *did* /dɪd/ + *you* /ju/ → /dɪdʒju/

Example 2: Old Mandarin ‘seven’ [ts^hi] > Modern Mandarin [tʃ^hi]

Nasalization (may result from assimilation)

The change of an oral vowel to a nasal vowel.

- This usually happens when an oral vowel occurs next to a nasal consonant.

Example: Taiwanese ‘walk’ /kiaŋ/ > /kĩãŋ/ > /kĩã/

Deletion - loss of a sound

Example: Loss of *i* vowel in *family* > /fæmli/

Epenthesis - sound insertion

Example 1: English /fæmli/ > /fæmbli/ for some speakers

Example 2: English *else* /ɛls/ > /ɛlts/ in some dialects

Example 3: English *tense* /tɛns/ > /tɛnts/ (pronounced identically to *tents*)

Example 4: English *triathlon* /tɹajæθlɒn/ > /tɹajæθəlɒn/

Metathesis - change in the order of sounds

Example 1: Kids’ joke word *psghetti* for *spaghetti*

Example 2: *nuclear* /nukliər/ > *nucular* /nukjələr/

Example 3: Early Old English /wæps/ > *wasp*

Example 4: Italian *formaggio* ‘cheese’ from *formed* (milk).

French *formage* > *fromage*

Example 5: English *comfortable* > /kʌmftəbəl/

Weakening

Vowels - become short and centralized (**vowel reduction**);
- disappear (**deletion**)

In English, vowel reduction usually means a change to schwa [ə].

Example 1: English *the* /ði/ > /ðə/

Example 2: English *decide* /disajd/ > /dɪsajd/ > /dəsajd/

Consonants - voiceless become voiced, stops become fricatives
- disappear (**deletion**)

- usually happens between vowels or at edge of word

Example 1: Middle English /fader/ > Modern English *father* /fɑðər/

Example 2: English *butter* /bʌtɹ/ > /bʌfɹ/

Other types of vowel change:

fronting - a vowel becomes more front (e.g. $a > \text{æ}$)

backing - a vowel becomes more back (e.g. $\text{ə} > \text{ʌ}$)

raising - a vowel becomes higher (e.g. $e > i$)

lowering - a vowel becomes lower (e.g. $u > o$)

rounding - a vowel becomes rounded (e.g. $\text{ʌ} > \text{ɔ}$)

monophthongization - a diphthong becomes a monophthong

diphthongization - a monophthong becomes a diphthong

etc.

Example 1: English *dude* [dud] > [dʌd] > [dyd]

Example 2: Middle Korean [taj] > Modern Korean [tɛ] ‘great’

Notation

Two types of sound change.

One is a change related to the realization of a phoneme or morpheme of a language at a particular point in time. Rules for such changes are written with an arrow, like this: /s/ → [ʃ].

These are **synchronic rules** (i.e. apply to a language at one stage of time)

The other is a change that has occurred in a language over a period of time. Rules for such changes are written with an angle bracket, like this: $s > \text{ʃ}$, /s/ > /ʃ/, or [s] > [ʃ].

These are **historical rules** (i.e. they apply to a language over a span of time)