

## 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<sup>h</sup>al/ ‘knife’ + /nal/ ‘edge’ → /k<sup>h</sup>allal/ ‘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<sup>h</sup>i] > Modern Mandarin [tʃ<sup>h</sup>i]

**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)