Asymmetries in assimilation in English through the ages: new directions for the laryngeal phonology of English obstruents

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It is well known that the opposition ‘voiced’ vs ‘voiceless’ does not well describe the contrast between the series of obstruents in current English. Word and foot-initial ‘fortis’ plosives (typically transcribed as /p,t,k/) are realised as voiceless aspirated (and in codas typically as glottalised), and ‘lenis’ obstruents (typically transcribed as b,d,g,v,d,z,ʒ/) are realised as (plain) voiceless segments unless they are in an interonsonant, passive-voicing environment. Although long recognised, this observation has only recently been built into phonological theory (eg, in Harris, 1994, Iverson & Salmons, 1995, 2003, Honeybone, 2005), to develop a model (sometimes called ‘Laryngeal Realism’) in which the privative features widely assumed to account for laryngeal contrasts (such as [spread (glottis)] and [voice]) are used underlyingly in different ways in different languages; thus the contrast in English is, in fact, between a ‘fortis’ series specified for [spread] and an unspecified ‘lenis’ series, whereas in other languages, such as Dutch (with no aspiration and fully-voiced ‘lenes’), the contrast is between an unspecified ‘fortis’ series and a ‘lenis’ series specified for [voice].

In this paper we draw out the implications of this to present a full new interpretation of the laryngeal phonology of English obstruents (such that underlying /pʰ, tʰ, kʰ/ contrast with /p,t,k/, and the fricative contrast is made in a similar way). More importantly, we show how this model predicts the patterns that exist in consonant-to-consonant contact laryngeal assimilation in current English — e.g., those shown in (1) — there are only assimilations to ‘voicelessness’. For the first time, we extend this here to historical data, too, and argue that there is, in fact, a long-standing asymmetry throughout the recorded history of English, in terms of the types of such laryngeal assimilation — it is recurrently assimilation to ‘voicelessness’, as exemplified in (2).

(1) Laryngeal assimilation in current English
(a) postlexical sonorant ‘devoicing’
   plan [plæn], treat [triːt], crowd [k्रɔud]
(b) morphonological ‘devoicing’ of /-z/ and /-d/
   cat+s /kæt+z/ → [kæt$]
   sack+ed /sæk+ed/ → [sæk$t]

(2) Past laryngeal assimilations indicated by such spellings (Luick 1914-1940) as...
   bleʃian (< bledsian) ‘bless’
   miːlʃian (< milkisan) ‘pity’
   anʃum (< angsum) ‘troubled’
   lengb(u) (<*langiō) ‘length’
   bringb (<*bringiŋ) ‘brings’

All of these assimilations are, we argue, assimilation to [spread], and this asymmetry in consonant-to-consonant contact assimilation is predicted under Laryngeal Realism, as only phonological active features may spread, and the only active feature in the obstruent laryngeal phonology of English is [spread] (as we show, with comparative evidence, has been the case since late Proto-Germanic). We show further that this model can make sense of otherwise baffling data from the history of English such as (3) what seems like typologically-bizarre final voicing in words such as knowledge (cf Middle English spellings such as knowlche), cabbage (ME caboche), sausage (ME sausich), and (4) the ‘Southern Fricative Voicing’ (compare current English father, from, sin, sword with ME spellings such as vader, vram, zenne, zuord) [all data here from Luick, 1914-1940, Jordan, 1925, Dobson, 1968]. These changes can, in fact, be unified as cases of delaryngealisation, which is an expected type of change — the loss of a laryngeal specification (here, [spread]) and the opposite of the better-known process-type debuccalisation.

This paper thus provides a coherent picture of ‘voicing’ and allied laryngeal concerns throughout the history of English. The other side of this coin is that, for the first time, we bring data from phonological change in English to bear on a major debate in the area of laryngeal phonology — whether or not the Laryngeal Realism hypothesis is correct. We argue that the data that we consider here, and the absence of disconfirmatory evidence, indicate that Laryngeal Realism is on the right lines.