

The “real” and “relative” typology of binary laryngeal systems

Katalin Balogné Bérces and Bálint Huszthy

Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest/Piliscsaba

The present paper aims to show how binary laryngeal obstruent systems (i.e., phonological systems exhibiting a distinction between two sets of obstruents) are represented in a model based on unary subsegmental primes. The claim is that the insights of both “laryngeal realism” and “laryngeal relativism” are necessary for a proper account of the full attested laryngeal typology.

Two-way laryngeal systems have recently been classified by what is known as “laryngeal realism” (e.g., Honeybone 2005, Iverson & Salmons 2008) into [voice] languages and [spread glottis] ([sg]; or aspiration) languages. The idea is that the apparently phonetic difference between these two language types is of phonological relevance as it has serious consequences for the patterning of the whole system of obstruents.

Element Theory, the subtheory of melodic representations in Government Phonology, has long made such a distinction: Harris (1994), for instance, claims that in languages like Romance (the “[voice] languages”) the element L (for low tone in vowels and active voice in obstruents) is active in the lenis series and the fortis set is unmarked; while in languages like English or German (the “[sg] languages”) the element H (for high tone in vowels and voicelessness or aspiration in obstruents) marks fortis, and lenis is unmarked.

More recently, Cyran (various publications, e.g., 2014) has proposed what he refers to as “laryngeal relativism”, i.e., the idea that as long as a sufficient phonetic distance is kept between the two sets of obstruents to maintain phonological contrast, both the marked and the unmarked sets may receive any (more or less arbitrary) phonetic interpretation. His example is Polish, whose two major dialect groups, Warsaw Polish and Cracow Polish, differ phonologically but are phonetically identical in terms of laryngeal features. Namely, while Warsaw Polish represents the “classical” [voice] system (analysed as an “L-system” by Cyran), the phonetically identical system of Cracow Polish is an “H-system”, with phonologically active H rather than L.

However, analysing all [sg] languages as such H-systems would fail to explain why in their “classical” version, e.g., in (standard) English and German, no laryngeal activity in the form of any kind of spreading is attested, which rather suggests the absence of any laryngeal element. Moreover, Element Theory with its two laryngeal primes, H and L, has always predicted the existence of as many as three subtypes of binary laryngeal systems:

(a) the absence of a source element, which is the phonological representation for (true) [sg] languages like English and German. In such languages, the fortis and lenis sets differ in structural aspects (namely, fortisness/aspiration is dominant obstruency dependent on licensing, i.e., on prosodic position). In addition, “laryngeal relativism”, predicting languages in which the lenis series is phonetically voiced, is able to account for the long-time riddle of Swedish.

(b) L in the marked series of obstruents, which is the phonological representation for (true) [voice] languages/L-systems like Warsaw Polish or (Standard) Hungarian, in harmony with Cyran.

(c) H in the marked series of obstruents, which is the phonological representation for Cyran’s H-systems, i.e., languages like Cracow Polish, with H-spreading only, typically exhibiting apparent cross-word “pre-sonorant voicing”. In addition, this category is able to accommodate “simple” devoicing assimilation systems, e.g., North-of-England English varieties displaying what has been dubbed “Yorkshire assimilation”.

The present paper claims that this is indeed the full attested typology of binary laryngeal systems.

References

- Cyran, E. 2014. Between phonology and phonetics: Polish voicing. *Studies in Generative Grammar* 118. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Harris, J. 1994. *English sound structure*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Honeybone, P. 2005. Diachronic evidence in segmental phonology: the case of obstruent laryngeal specifications. In van Oostendorp, M. & van de Weijer, J. (eds.) *The internal organization of phonological segments*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 319-354.
- Iverson, G. K. & J. C. Salmons. 2008. Germanic aspiration: phonetic enhancement and language contact. *Sprachwissenschaft* 33. 257-278.