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The phonology of the Latin placeless nasal

In a well-known sound change nasals were lost in pre-fricative and word-final positions in the prehistory of Latin (e.g. Leumann 1977:223–8, Weiss 2009:61–2, cf. Sen 2015:68–9). In this paper it is argued that the diachronic process was not simply one of loss with compensatory lengthening and nasalisation affecting the preceding vowel. What was structurally lost was only the place specification of the nasal in the relevant environments; and the coalescence with preceding vowels remained a low-level implementation process even in Classical Latin (though phonologised in the sense of Bermúdez-Otero 2006). This hypothesis, based on a parsimonious model of the internal structure of phonological segments, explains the morphological behaviour of the two suffixes consisting of the placeless nasal segment (AccSing for nominals and 1Sing for verbs) as well as the contrast between two types of original [m] + coronal stop sequences (*eundem* 'him, the same' < *eum + dem* vs. *emptum* < *em- + tum* 'taken'). It also explains the phonologically odd behaviour of the prefix *con-* 'with', whose nasal consonant assimilates to all stops and nasals except [n] (cf. *cō-nubium* 'marriage') and is deleted before vowels (*co-actus* 'forced'), thereby creating either hiatus or a closed syllable (except with following [n]).

In a more general sense, the paper has two goals. Its analytical goal is to demonstrate that the above mentioned nasal-related phenomena can be given a strict and simple formal explanation that has both diachronic and synchronic relevance. The conceptual goal of the paper is thus to move towards rehabilitating explanatory models based on underspecification and infrasegmental structure, which complement functionally based models.

References

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