

Laryngeal Relativism. Why? And what now?

Eugeniusz Cyran, Lublin

Laryngeal phonology is one of the few areas in which some consensus has been reached concerning phonological representation. The dominating view today, known as Laryngeal Realism, is that two-way laryngeal contrast should be expressed privatively, and the division into 'voicing' and 'aspiration' languages is based on different marking, involving different laryngeal categories. In the former, it is the voiced obstruents that are marked, while in the latter, it is the aspirated series. The neutral series typically correspond to voiceless unaspirated items in both systems.

There seems to be less agreement across frameworks as to the phonological status of sonorants with respect to laryngeal specification. Generally, their spontaneous voicing and typical absence of contrasts based on laryngeal distinctions deem them phonologically unmarked in this respect. This in turn should entail neutrality with respect to voicing processes. However, the existence of certain phenomena, such as pre-sonorant voicing in a number of languages, suggests that sonorants may be active phonologically.

A strict theoretical position on sonorant voicing, in which they can never be phonologically marked, leads to an inevitable conclusion that Laryngeal Realism might be wrong. This spawned a line of research which led to Laryngeal Relativism, in which the distinction in 'voicing' and 'aspiration' languages is true only in phonetic and implementational terms. Phonologically speaking a voicing language may possess a representation of an 'aspiration' language, and vice versa. What matters is phonological behaviour and not phonetic shape.

The talk reviews arguments in favour of Laryngeal Relativism but concentrates more on the consequences of this line of research than on its merits, which have already been expressed in the literature. In fact there is one theoretical advantage, namely, Laryngeal Relativism allows for an elegant inclusion of the so called pre-sonorant voicing without resorting to laryngeally active sonorants. On the other hand, the consequences are numerous and rather far-reaching, from the point of view of phonetics-phonology interface, nature of phonological primes, language acquisition, etc.