

TERMS FOR A CHANGE: THE METALANGUAGE OF LINGUISTICS

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For Saussure, at least from the critical year of 1894 onwards, terminology was a central matter in linguistics. Two of his unpublished notes, 13 and 13a (refs in Engler, 1967–1974), are devoted to the question. From the second of these (Engler, *op.cit.*:29) we learn that Saussure saw the uselessness of seeking non-complex terms for a subject as complicated as linguistics, 'L'expression simple sera algébrique ou ne sera pas.' A further light is thrown on his views by the unusually forthright admonition to the students in his first course of general linguistics (reported by Godel 1969:275) to speak of the change of intervocalic *s* → [z]([ʒ]? WAB) → *r*, in such Latin words as *Valesius* > *Valerius*, as "rhotacisation", not as "rhotacisme". Only by such precision of terminology¹ would it remain transparent that what was at issue was a process and not a state.

Saussure's concern about the precision of linguistic terminology was so much in evidence (De Mauro 1976:360 and Note 38, p. 413) that Engler remarked (1966:39) that 'On ne croirait pas avoir affaire à un promoteur du principe de *l'arbitraire du signe*.' But it is obvious why metalanguage should be above confusion in dealing with the polyvalency and vagueness of ordinary human language. This is, of course, an ideal. It is not clear why Saussure dropped the term *idiosynchronie* between the second course, when he proposed it (cf this term, Godel 1969:264), and the third course when he used *synchronie*, although the reasons can be guessed at.² But we might have had the clearer term *signologie* for semiology if Saussure had been sure his preferred label would not have caused French speakers (and others) pronunciation problems (Note 24a, in Engler, 1967–1974:48). In reality metalanguage shares the

¹ Yet a good recent textbook for historical linguistics (Jeffers and Lehiste 1979:184) gives only "rhotacism" as the term for this process.

² By Course III Saussure's interest in particular languages ("les langues") for which he intended the prefix *idio-* had given way to a basic concern with universal language ("langage").

formal constraints of language, and shares the role and group-defining power of ordinary language. The jargon of any profession, and linguists are not immune to its charms, has an important obfuscating function, excluding those from nearby disciplines or simply hangers-on, qualifying true acolytes.

Against these values of terminology must be set the likely damage to our subject of persisting with terms that are outmoded or obscurantist. Firstly, there is the fact that we may well qualify our apprentices by requiring their learning of a set of lexemes; but we may thereby prevent them from discovering what the subject is really about. Secondly, and not unrelated to our teaching of undergraduates, there is the lack of a mnemonic for our own continuing understanding of what our life's interest is. Finally, there is the absence of the all-important explicitness on which our discussions can build.

I will take for illustration the apparently innocent term *assimilation*. Descriptively, of course, in terms of *phonemes*, the reference is clear. If the normal pronunciation of French *absurde* is (in essentials for this discussion) [ps...], while *abord* is [b...], then we can say that, in the first of these words, the *b* changes because of the immediately following *s*. But the variation is allophonic, however embarrassing the realisation of the allophone is for phonemic analysis. In this case the feature of *voice* is lost, in a *voiceless phonetic context*. Thus "assimilation" is here a cover term for *feature alignment*. But no great harm is done. When we compare English *absurd*, [bz...] we note that the same thing appears to have happened, but this time the influence has been in the opposite direction, it is the *s* which has assimilated to a preceding *b*. Again there has been an alignment of features, this time by the addition of *voice*. The traditional term for the French case is *regressive assimilation*, while the English case is termed *progressive assimilation*. These terms are quite opaque. How can we explain to the student what regresses in the French case? The term gives a highly misleading picture of what is involved. The alternative terminology, *anticipatory assimilation*, goes some way to clarify matters. But its contrast with the fully obscured *progressive assimilation*, and the use of the blanket term *assimilation*, ensures its persistent failure to offer our students illumination or to offer us a psycho-physical basis for discussion. I would suggest that we 'come clean' by replacing these terms with, for the French case, *anticipatory feature alignment*³ and, for the English case, *consequential feature alignment*.³

There are further terminological benefits to be gained from such a change. But it requires first the removal of a persistently obdurate obstacle to the naming for explanation in phonology and phonetics. I refer to the easy division of vowels and consonants which linguists share with the primary school child. Our understanding of sound change and variation might be less flawed if we

³ Instead of *alignment* perhaps the Prague School "correlation" might be revived.

spoke more often of *occlusiveness*, and were reminded that there are few satisfying "consonants" and even fewer "vowels" which physically conform to the notion of breath-stream constrained only by the vocal cords. For the present discussion the relevance of this flaw is that it leaves a fault between "assimilation" and such matters as "vowel harmony", a schism driven into our subject by our ready acceptance of the traditional distinction of "consonant" and "vowel". It might be argued that "vowel harmony" and "umlaut" operate at distance, while the cases of "assimilation" I have instanced were between adjacent items. Yet there are cases of "distant assimilation": for example, instead of French *chercher* [ʃ.ʃ.] we would have had *sercher* [s.ʃ.] but for the inroads of "assimilation" over a stretch of phonic substances (Pope 1952: sect. 128).

It might be assumed, particularly by our students, that "vowel harmony" only occurs between two vowels which are at a distance from each other. The term is usually reserved for what would be called "progressive" if consonants were involved. The Turkish words (from discussion in Schane 1973:52) *evim*, *gözüm*, *gulum*, *kolum* show feature alignment which matches suffix vowel to stem: fronting, rounding, or both. The adjustment is subphonemic, wrongly described by a term which suggests the matching of whole vowel phonemes. Similarly the "umlaut" which characterises German would be termed "regressive" if the "assimilation" were affecting consonants rather than vowels. It is the stem vowel of words like *Hündin*, *Gräfin*, *Röte* which has modified in anticipation of the coming suffix vowel. Now, if we will give up our intuitive drive to assert professionally as well as colloquially that there is a great divide between vowels and consonants, then we will not here have to continue with more terms than there are phenomena. *Consequential* and *anticipatory feature alignment* apply as well to vowel sequences as they do to multiples of consonants.

It would appear quite a jump to a discussion of *monophthongisation*⁴. But such changes as those which occurred in the evolution of French, principally

- (a) *eu* → /ø/, as in the spelling of, say, *ceux* and its contemporary pronunciation⁵ /ø/;
- (b) *ou* → /u/, as in *fou* and its contemporary pronunciation⁵ /u/,

give as much evidence of feature alignment, and that alone, as any cases of "assimilation" that we have so far considered. In (a) the features [+front] and

⁴ Pope (1952: 546), under the index heading "assimilation", referred the reader to chapters on the "levelling of diphthongs", on "nasalisation" and on "velarisation", as well as on a number of other topics which would be properly subsumed under *feature alignment* if they weren't kept apart in less perceptive books.

⁵ Again I am marking only the essentials to the present discussion. The -x of such words is a matter of some contention; and I am ignoring the regular alternation of close/open mid vowel /ø/.

[+round] combined to produce a phoneme in the new front rounded (often opaquely termed "central") vowel series; in (b) no new feature came about, since both items were rounded ("back"). The sole difference between these cases and those considered earlier lies in the absence of a direction of influence. Previous cases have resolved feature conflicts (e.g. [\pm voice], [\pm round], [\pm front]) "progressively" or "regressively". In (a) and (b) the conflict is that of vowel "height", resolved in the light of the asymmetry brought about by the earlier "spontaneous" fronting of /u/ to /ü/.⁶ The *feature alignment* here is *mutual*, and there remains no reason for hiding generalisations under discrete terms. I have argued elsewhere (Bennett 1980) that damage is done to our explanation of variation and change by our insistence on separating by name French *liaison*, *nasalisation*, and "loss" of final consonants.

I would now add to this list the "vocalisation of /l/ between vowel and consonant" which has given us such modern French plurals as *chevaux* (against the singular *cheval*), and was the source of the *u* in cases (a) and (b) above.⁷ Because /l/ frequently disappeared from spelling in the move from *chevals* to *chevaux*⁸, it has been held that *u* is a remnant of *l*. Less easily argued for *n*, where the scribal employment of this symbol to note the nasal quality of the immediately preceding vowel is a reminder of the "assimilation" which preceded the loss of final *n*. "Nasalisation" in French is a case of *anticipatory feature alignment*. The first *n* of such words as *donne*, *prennent* is a hangover from the scribal notation of [+nasality] (now lost by the open syllable) in the vowel, and as such merely an alternative for the *tilde* which earlier scribes used to mark the additional feature (and which has been retained for phonetic notation, of course). There has been a ready assumption that spellings *au*, *eu*, *ou* represented true diphthongs when they may have been no more than *a*, *e*, *o* marked for the additional feature of [+velar]⁹. This view would allow us to understand such spellings as *chevaux*, *veult* or *coulp*, not as resulting from scribal carelessness but as akin to the stage of nasality in the history of French noted by *femme*. There is much to be gained by a clarification of our terminology. We shall be able to show our students, to remind ourselves, of the community between such apparently disparate variations as "assimilation", "vowel

⁶ Structuralist accounts acknowledge the human intuitive need for patterning. The fronting of /u/ to /ü/ left a gap at high rounded. This gap was filled by the rounded vowel resulting from case (b). The new series headed by /ü/ was completed by the front rounded vowel resulting from (a).

⁷ I take it that *ø* fronted, coinciding with the development from case (a). Readers will note that terminology forces me to an equivocation. The pairs *eu* and *ou* no more "monophthongised" than did those vowels which altered in quality under the influence of the [+nasal] feature.

⁸ Words with *u* as the reflex of [+velar] regularly now have *-x* for *-s*. I would argue the origin of *-x* as the representation of *velar L+s*.

⁹ Similarly, for *ai*, *ei*, *oi*, *ui* as the notation of an additional feature, [+dental].

harmony", "monophthongisation"; and "umlaut", to extend it easily to "dissimilation" and "diphthongisation"; we shall be able to argue the consistency between these events and final consonant *occlusion* (or "loss") in French, or the *devoicing* which occurs in similar position in German.

If we note that an identical event was taking place in French "nasalisation" and "vocalisation of L", and that these events were in no essential different from those that I have classed as deserving to be termed *feature alignment*, we shall better understand that the scribes who wrote *donne* and *aulx* were not being fanciful or free with the consonant graphemes. They were doing their best with limited resources to represent additional features. Their fidget with *tilde* and *n* for nasality was clearly because there was no such sound already distinctly represented in Latin; they were more favoured by velarity, for *u* carried a closely similar sound. An understanding of what the scribes were doing will increase the value of manuscript data.

There are thus a number of advantages to the reformulation of our terms which I am proposing. It is not easy to learn new names. The only real disadvantage that I can see in my suggestions is the small increase in length new terms represent. But lengthiness is always the price we pay for the power of explicitness. And there is a beguiling simplicity about consistency.

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