Apophony: a theory of regular context-free vocalic alternations

This course will be concerned with the collection and interpretation of data that are traditionally referred to as "Ablaut". The word "Ablaut" has been created by J. Grimm in the last century, making reference to vocalic alternations in Germanic languages, e.g. engl. sIng - sAng - sUng.

Since then, the term - or its translation *apophony* - has been adopted by descriptive grammars of all languages that show similar phenomena.

A first task will be to separate what possibly falls under the scope of a putative theory that views Ablaut-systems as instances of an invariable pattern accomodated by language-specific parameters. In order to do so, we shall briefly review previous generalizations concerning Ablaut. Ablaut being central in Indo-European but having remained a mystery up to now, the most prominent theory comes from the Indo-Europeanist Kuryłowicz (1956). It will turn out that in the light of modern phonological theory, only a part of what has been viewed as Ablaut can be covered by a general theory (e.g., vowel-length and vowel colour contrasts are two different things). This leads to the definition of the object of our interest: regular alternations of vowel-colours that are related to different grammatical categories (e.g. present - preterite - past participle in English) and free from any contextual influence.

In a second step, we will consider the apophonic system of verbs in Classical Arabic (Active Form I). The analysis presented (Guerssel/Lowenstamm 1996) accounts for the observed alternations by means of the Apophonic Path (AP): ø=>i=>a=>u=>u. The AP satisfies certain formal requirements: it is applicative (for one input, one and only one output), directional (two vowels, say *i* and *a*, can be related by a derivational link in one direction only) and substantially restricted (not any two vowels can contract a derivational relation). Hence the AP makes rather concise and falsifyable predictions. In the remainder of the course, we will try to falsify these predictions by examining other languages exhibiting Ablaut.

Within Afro-Asiatic, the apophonic systems of Kabyle Berber, Ge'ez (=Classical Ethiopic), Cushitic (Somali) and other morphological sites of Classical Arabic (weak verbs) will be looked at in detail. Il will appear that apophony can be exploited in order to give a material expression to any grammatical opposition, e.g. perf.-impf., sg-pl, active-passive, masc-fem.

However, the crucial challenge comes from non-Afro-Asiatic languages such as German. Given the highly complex vocalic system of German, how can a theory deal with objects that are unknown in its definition? The AP knowing only the cardinal vowels *ø,i,a,u*, how is a verb like *hEben* interpreted? This question as well as other features of the highly complex and heterogenious system of German strong verbs will be discussed in extension. After an excursion to Old English, it will be shown that Apophony has an identical behaviour in Indo-European (the reconstructed language, not the family) and Classical Arabic when neighbouring a guttural environment: apophony is inhibited when it is contact with a guttural consonant. It is possible to view this behaviour as a consequence of a genetic kinship (Nostratic). However, under the assumption of a general apophonic theory, the Ablaut-inhibiting property of gutturals is to be taken as non-related to a specific family. Rather, the prediction is made that gutturals have a disturbing effect in any language they meet apophony.

The guttural example illustrates the lines apophonic theory follows: the apophonic Path is universal, whereas the presence of gutturals or non-cardinal vowels is a language-specific parameter. All of the mentioned systems are reputed to be entirely lexicalized. Speakers are said to learn their patterns by heart. It is the goal of the theory to show that among the alternating vowels, only one is lexically recorded. All of the alternating vowels are related by a derivational link that is universal, i.e. the AP.

Everybody is invited to look out for ablauting systems I ignore, preferrably in non-Indo-European and non-Afro-Asiatic languages. And to dress a list of onomatopoeia of any language that can be accessed: is Engl. *tIc-tAc*, French *pIf-pAf-pUf*, German *rI-rA-rUtsch*, *der bI-bA-bUtzemann* a

particular or a general pattern?

Guerssel, Mohand & Jean Lowenstamm 1996: Ablaut in Classical Arabic measure I active verbal forms. In: Lecarme, J., J. Lowenstamm, U. Shlonsky (eds): Studies in Afroasiatic Grammar, 123-134. The Hague: Holland Academic Graphics.