Guylaine Brun-Trigaud
Tobias Scheer
Université de Nice - Sophia Antipolis, CNRS 6039

Lenition of Latin branching Onsets: Celtic, Gorgia Toscana, Gallo-Romance (dialectal evidence from the ALF)

In its development represented by the Coda Mirror (Ségéral & Scheer 2001, 2008), the phonological theory that we are working in (so-called CVCV, Lowenstamm 2996, Scheer 2004) makes predictions regarding the lenition of consonants in all positions, except for branching onsets (i.e. obstruent-liquid clusters, henceforth TR). Also, the representation of TR clusters is non-local in the syntactic sense (Relativized Minimality Rizzi 1990).

There is thus good reason to modify the treatment of TR clusters, and this is done according to the principles of locality: two objects of the same kind (onsets and nuclei in our case) may not contract a relation over another object of the same kind. We show that this move makes a precise prediction regarding TR clusters: positional conditions being equal, all consonants involved in TR clusters behave exactly like if they occurred without an adjacent consonant. In other words: for any consonant of a TR cluster, the other consonant behaves as if it were not there.

Branching onsets are typologically rare (the "extreme" option in the implicational hierarchy of syllable complexity), and even rarer are cases where appropriate languages offer a diagnostic for the behaviour of TR clusters. On this background, the above prediction is run against four empirical records. It appears to be correct for example in the evolution of obstruents from Latin to French: 1) V__V ca**p**ra (> chèvre) = ri**p**a (> rive), pe**t**ra (> pierre) = vi**t**a (> vie), pour la dentale; 2) strong position {#,C}__ **p**runa = **p**orta, **t**res = **t**ela, com**p**rend(e)re = tal**p**a, capis**t**ru = can**t**are.

We show that this equivalence also holds true for two other cases where the behaviour of TR clusters in regard of lenition is documented (Celtic, Gorgia Toscana). Finally, we use the dialects of the ALF (Atlas Linguistique de la France) as a testing ground for our hypothesis. Given dialectal variation, the prediction is that whatever the treatment of TR clusters and consonants in isolation in a particular system, all dialects will produce the same result for the same consonant when it is involved in a TR cluster and when it occurs in isolation. We show that this is by and large true.

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