

Rule crossing in the variation period and the neogrammarian controversy

The neogrammarians had no access to evidence from ongoing change, which was only adduced since the 1960s by Labov (1963) and subsequent work. Thus they did not know that change may be gradient when spreading through the lexical body (lexical diffusion, which they actually opposed) and always is when spreading through the community of speakers (which gradually implements the innovation depending on age, sex and other social parameters).

Having been able to study ongoing change, we know today that an innovation may be active in a language for several generations, or more than a century, before it is completed, i.e. before it has affected all words concerned and all instances of production of all speakers (variation period). Both the critique of the neogrammarian position (sound laws are not exceptionless, initiated by Curtius 1885 and Schuchardt 1886) and the analytic absurdities that the neogrammarians were driven into because of this position were carried from generation to generation of linguists down to the present day. They may well evaporate when relevant consequences are drawn from the period of intrinsic variation.

Consider the case where during the variation period two rules apply successively in bleeding order: rule 1 has only yet transformed a subset of words that it is competent for when rule 2, freshly innovated, destroys its context of application. Thus in the evolution from Latin to Old French, intervocalic voicing applies to the *t* of *cōg(i)tāre* > *cuidier* (mod. *cuidier*), but not to the *t* of *cōm(i)te* > *comte*. These exceptions are only found when the vowel preceding the voiceless intervocalic obstruent is subject to syncope (indicated by brackets). Application of syncope bleeds voicing since it removes the obstruent from its intervocalic position, freezing its current evolutionary stage in strong post-coda position. Thus what has happened is simply that syncope has acted on a lexical body that was not yet fully affected by voicing. It thus produced a photograph of the ongoing change by freezing its then current state.

Generations of neogrammarian-inspired analysts have tried to hammer the exceptions into the neogrammarian box, to no avail. The full spectrum of neogrammarian tools when facing variation was put to use: analogy, learned vocabulary, loans, dialectal forms. None of these being any plausible, the variation had to be predictable from the environment. Thus a generalization known as Neumann's Law held that pre-tonic syncope (*cōg(i)tāre* > *cuidier*) occurs later than post-tonic syncope (*cōm(i)te* > *comte*) and thus leaves the consonant for a longer time in intervocalic position: consonants in the pre-tonic environment have enough time to undergo voicing (Neumann 1890: 559f). But alas there are as many words conforming to this generalization as there are that contravene: both post-tonic voiced results (*male-hab(i)tu* > *malade*) and pre-tonic voiceless cases (*sub(i)tānu* > *sotain* (mod. *soudain*)) enjoy a massive record. It took decades to conclude that Neumann's Law does not work: examples are just as numerous as counter-examples, and both are randomly distributed (Rheinfelder 1953: §456).

This abuse of neogrammarian tools of course fueled anti-neogrammarian critique: see, they are wrong, sound laws are not exceptionless. The solution based on rule crossing during the variation period makes both the analytic absurdities and their critique pointless: yes, sound laws apply without exception, but they need some time to do that. Their application may be disturbed by other processes that are innovated during the variation period. This period intrinsic to (sound) change was not on the neogrammarian radar, and it seems to me that since we know about it, its consequences for the exceptionlessness debate have not been drawn. In the talk I submit that rule crossing in the variation period may obliterate the neogrammarian controversy altogether (Labov 1981, 1994: 16-25, 472-476 is along the same lines, but for other reasons): when amended with rule crossing, the neogrammarian position is correct. That is, all cases of exceptions to sound laws that cannot be explained by the regular tools (analogy, loans, etc., which of course are real) may be cases of rule crossing. It is shown in the talk that rule crossing is absolutely massive in French diachrony, from which many examples will be drawn (originating in the recently published *Grande Grammaire Historique du Français* GGHF).