What the neogrammarians knew, and what they ignored

The goal of this presentation is to run the neogrammarian record against modern phonological theory, to see which pieces of the modern toolbox they held in hands, and what they had not understood. This then raises the question, in turn, what exactly we have gained, if anything, in reformulating insights from 140 years ago in modern vocabulary.

It is shown item by item that the neogrammarians knew about most things that are relevant today: the phoneme, distributional analysis, sonority, syllable structure, onset maximization, empty nuclei or voice- vs. spread glottis languages. It is argued that they ignored what they ignored for three reasons: the self-imposed limitation to diachronic data, the lack of ambition to build a general theory of language (no search for universals, no notion of "possible process / language", no idea that some may be outright impossible) and a merely mechanistic understanding of language (the ultimate cause of things is only phonetic).

The neogrammarians are also at the origin of the modern view on language as such, which took form in the well-known Saussurian and Chomskyan dichotomies (Langue-Parole, I-language - E-language etc.). They were lucky enough to live in those felicitous times when empiricism was not a thing in science and the pursuit of knowledge was rationalist in kind. In this environment they were influenced by Darwin's work and applied his ideas of evolution to the history of language. The critical idea coming from that, first aired by the neogrammarians as far as I can see, is that language is not an artefact (man-made) but a natural object (Chomsky's language organ). Therefore it must be studied as such, i.e. independently of humans action, of their culture, of their social relations etc. And since language is a natural object, its evolution is lawful, hence the idea of phonetic laws (like in chemistry or biology) and the claim that they are exceptionless (just like chemical and biological laws).

When comparing neogrammarian and modern work, a recurrent observation is that the neogrammarians did things, but did not bother naming for formalizing them. Their insights are written in prose, and there is little specific terminology or methodological principles that were made explicit. Take distributional analysis: every undergraduate class today will explain the methodology that is needed in order to approach an unknown dataset and to safely extract relevant linguistic generalizations. The neogrammarians did distributional analysis, but common sense seemed to be enough among understanding people in order to do what needs to be done: reasoning is expressed in prose without methodological quarrels (which are characteristic of later structuralism). Another example in this context is the phoneme: the neogrammarians practiced it, but did not define it, or made explicit a discovery procedure.

Given this firmly rationalist backdrop, the idea that the neogrammarians are early exemplarists and hence represent empiricist thinking is addressed. They were certainly functionalist to a certain extent (Paul 1880: 32 says that change exists in order to augment the "usefulness" (Zweckmässigkeit) of language, just as biological evolution adapts to environmental demands), but this is no contradiction with rationalist thinking. The ultimate explanation of all phenomena by phonetic grounding, however, is a serious empiricist anchor (and also not functional in kind).

In this context an interesting case where the neogrammarians had a good advance on modern thinking are empty nuclei: these have appeared in modern times only by the early 1980s (Anderson 1982) and are still disputed today by most mainstream representatives who continue to go by the empiricist idea that something which has no phonetic existence cannot be real. Sievers (1901: §534) observes that word-initial #kt, #pt and #s+C are illegal according to what he has independently established regarding syllable structure: syllable-initial clusters must have a rising sonority profile. Committed to rational thinking, he believes in his theory and therefore concludes that the initial consonant of these clusters is part of a secondary syllable (Nebennisilbe), which means that it is preceded (#øptV) or followed (#pøtV) by an empty nucleus (since all syllables have a nucleus).