

The University of Pittsburgh ~ Department of Linguistics
Colloquium Series *Presents:*

**“A Marked Structure is Born: The Emergence of
Obstruents and the Motivations for Sound Change”**

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There is a long-standing debate about the motivation for sound change (and linguistic innovations generally). Some scholars have argued that sound changes are driven by pressures to improve the phonological system of a language--to reduce articulatory complexity and to increase contrastiveness. Other linguists have contended that sound change is not inherently optimizing--that, while sound changes may be ameliorative in the sense that teleological theories of change suggest, these salutary effects are epiphenomenal. Instead, according to this view, sound change is motivated either by automatic mechanical factors or irregularities in transmission.

While the latter (non-teleological) position has held sway in mainstream historical linguistics for much of the last century, recent theoretical developments in phonetics and phonology have led to a resurgence of interest in theories of the former type and even stronger claims about the functional motivations for sound change. These teleological theories face a great difficulty, though, in the form of sound changes whose nature is not inherently optimizing and whose distribution cannot be predicted from purely functional factors.

I examine one class of sound change from this category: the emergence of obstruents following high vowels, a development that is attested in a surprising number of languages but that has received little attention in the literature on sound change. I survey a number of cases of this phenomenon, including a newly discovered case in the Tibeto-Burman language Huishu, and argue that both the change itself and its distribution cannot be explained in terms of commonly recognized functional teleologies. I then present a non-teleological account of these developments in which variation introduced into the speech signal by aerodynamic factors is misinterpreted by speakers, who--as a result--posit the existence of obstruent segments where they did not exist previously. I show that this account is able to explain both why such changes exist and why they occur in the phonological environments that they do, in contrast to teleological theories of change. Findings of this type, I contend, support a view of language change in which developments are driven by factors in learning and speaker inference, rather than by pressures to improve language in some way.

Wednesday September 27, 2006 @ 3:00 p.m.
Room 144 ~ Cathedral of Learning