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Right at the Left Edge:

Initial Consonant Mutations in the World's Languages

Initial consonant mutations (henceforth ICM) are commonly assumed to be a rare type of alternation: commonly cited are the Celtic ones ([Ball and Müller 1992], [Stewart 2004], [Green 2003]) and those which are found in the Atlantic languages of Western Africa (Fula [Arnott 1970]; Seereer [McLaughlin 2000]). However, a closer look at the problem reveals that they are somewhat more widespread: one has to include Nivkh (Gilyak; [Mattissen 2003]) and the Indonesian language Nias Selatan ([Brown 2001]), as well as other instances such as Italian ([Rohlfs 1966], [Loporcaro 1997]), the Viet-Muong language Ruc ([Solntsev et al. 2001]), the Mande languages of Africa such as Mende ([Crosby 1944]), the Papuan language Skou ([Donohue 2004]) and the Australian (non-Pama-Nyungan) Iwaidja ([Evans 1998]). This contribution presents a brief overview of ICM in the world's languages, sketches a few parameters for their typological classification and outlines some of the challenges (and solutions) they present for linguistic theory.

Before sketching the typology, a proper definition of ICM vis-à-vis, on the one hand, purely phonological sandhi which happen to cross a word's left boundary (such as the Italian *gorgia toscana* ([Nespor and Vogel 1986]), and on the other hand pure prefix allomorphy involving initial consonants, a situation which obtains, for instance, in Tagalog, is in order.

Different types of ICM appear to come into consideration. One dimension of the classification involves the origin of ICM: in most instances they go back to grammaticalization of sandhi phenomena, however, Ruc presents a case of ICM which stems from the inherently weak phonological position of the first syllable of polysyllabic words which is set against principles constraining "free" variation ([Solntsev et al. 2001]). The origin of the first kind of ICM is a puzzle in itself: how does the grammaticalization of ICM come about, and what are the principles which guide their development afterwards (cf. [Comrie 2000])? Even in well-studied phyla like Celtic and Romance this continues to present considerable problems. I suggest that this evolution may be due to emergent properties of ICM not necessarily in straightforward connection with their origins.

A second classification axis involves the nature of ICM's conditioning. While purely surface-phonological conditioning automatically precludes an alternation's being a true ICM, the role of phonology can be important. In languages like Italian, ICM is triggered phonologically in some contexts but by other components of grammar in others ([Rohlfs 1966], [Loporcaro 1997]). Nivkh presents a case of phonological and morphological conditions being *simultaneously* required for ICM to be triggered ([Mattissen 2003]). Welsh (and, to a lesser extent, Mende) shows examples of ICM triggered by, *inter alia*, lexical items and syntax along with morphosyntactic categories (sometimes conjunction of such triggers is also required) [Ball and Müller 1992], [Roberts 2005]). A clearer case of syntactic ICM is to be seen in Nias Selatan ([Brown 2001]). This raises problems relevant to both the theoretical status of the ICM themselves and the nature of triggering mechanisms active on different levels of grammar or between them.

The next point of interest is the phonological exponence of ICM. While some cases can be straightforwardly subsumed under the rubric of "featural affixation" ([Akinlabi 1996]) or addition of a consonantal mora, and some quirky theoretical devices can account for other instances ([Gnanadesikan 1997]), several ICM types remain quite difficult to account for under current phonological and/or morphological theories. Such ICM instances pose the question of the "naturalness" of the process, as well as another, already mentioned problem: what level of representation do the ICM belong to? Most scholars end up considering them as phonology, with notable exceptions for Celtic in general ([Green 2003]) and Scottish Gaelic in particular ([Stewart 2004]), while others propose ICM as a purely syntactic phenomenon. However, each of these approaches poses its own problems, which are also reviewed in the contribution.

The proposed contribution gives a sketch of the data, discusses all of the aforementioned points, as well as some subsidiary ones, and finally proposes (admittedly, tentative) solutions for the problems presented by ICM, these exceptionally interesting rara.

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