

# Preference Laws for Syllable Structure and the Explanation of Sound Change

SHORTER NOTICES

Trubetzkoy, N. (1939). *Grundzüge der Phonologie*. Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague 7. Prague: Jednota Československých Matematiků a Fysiků.

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The book under review has a very ambitious aim. It sets out to describe, explain and predict diachronic sound change in natural language. This formidable objective is epitomized in a catalogue of preference laws which provide criteria for evaluating a given change against a certain parameter. According to the coda law, for example, the 'quality' of a coda is inversely related to the number of its consonants. Therefore, a change from a postvocalic cluster to a single consonant improves the structure of the syllable and hence is teleologically motivated by the increased 'quality' of the resultant linguistic form. Vennemann's account derives much of its flexibility from the claim that one and the same structure may be subject to different constraints, so that a certain change may simultaneously be an improvement in reference to one parameter but a worsening in reference to another. The author lists a dozen or so preference laws referring to individual positions in the syllable, to competition between (syllable and word) positions and to relationships between segmental positions and suprasegmental properties of the syllable. The phonological preference laws are assumed to be grounded in human articulatory and auditory mechanisms; they are thus claimed to be universally valid. In the formulation of the laws, Vennemann makes do with a minimum of theoretical apparatus. All he needs is the identification of the component parts of the syllable (grouping from standard ones like nucleus to less familiar ones like shell, for example) and the assignment of strength (= inverted sonority) values for the members of phoneme systems. The optimal strength is position-dependent. Whereas strong segments are preferred in onset position, codas favour weak consonants.

The major claim of the book is that all linguistic changes constitute improvements of language structure. While this hypothesis is worked out in detail only for the phonological level in the book, the Introduction (1) and the blurb make clear that Vennemann considers it to be valid for language change in general. Be that as it may, it is a commonplace that languages do not evolve in a uniform manner. Conflicting developments may show up not only across languages but also within one and the same system. Vennemann is, of course, aware of this fact, and the way he deals with it deserves close scrutiny. Astoundingly enough, he unabashedly defines the recalcitrant data away. The changes that lower the quality of a given syllable structure are not regarded as syllable structure changes at all (2). Such cases are in his opinion changes which happen to implicate syllable structure but which are not motivated by it. What criteria does Vennemann adduce in order for us to understand when a given change affects syllable structure by design and when by chance? As far as I can see, none whatsoever. We are told that a real structural change can be distinguished from a fake one in that the former leads to an amelioration but the latter to a deterioration of language structure. That is, the effect a certain change has is made part of its definition. But then, the statement that language change is language improvement cannot be derived as an independently testable claim! As part of the definitional foundation, it cannot have any descriptive, explanatory or predictive value. It is merely tautological to claim that all changes are improvements, because this is exactly the way that all true changes have been defined.

It comes as no surprise that this fundamental flaw on the theoretical level is reflected in the way Vennemann handles the empirical data. In an effort to substantiate his preference laws, the author presents individual sound changes from a variety of languages. For instance, the vowel length assimilation law, according to which the stronger consonant assimilates to the weaker one, is illustrated by documented changes such as *m.b > m.m* in Italian *sambuco* → Sicilian *sammucco* 'elder'. Vennemann's strategy is made explicit on p. 13, where he says that the real purpose of exemplification is the justification of the postulated preference laws. Admittedly, this procedure is common practice among linguists and may even be sufficient for the achievement of more modest goals, but anybody who is only faintly acquainted with the methodology of the social

569

Vennemann, Theo. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure. And the Explanation of Sound Change with Special Reference to German, Germanic, Italian, and Latin. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure: And the Explanation of Sound Change with Special Reference to German, Germanic, Italian, and Latin. Preference laws for syllable structure and the explanation of sound change: with special reference to German, Germanic, Italian, and Latin. Front Cover. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure and the Explanation of Sound Change: With Special Reference to German, Germanic, Italian, and Latin. Front Cover. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure and the Explanation of Sound Change [ Theo Vennemann] on thevalleyssoftball.com \*FREE\* shipping on qualifying offers. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure, and the Explanation of Sound Change. By Theo Vennemann. Reviewer. Sara E. Kimball University of Texas. Published . It places the preference laws in the context of modern phonological theory, and Lexical Diffusion in Historical Phonology Amphichronic Explanation and the Life His publications in phonology include Preference Laws for Syllable Structure and articles on the history and sound structure of German and Germanic., English, Article, Review edition: Preference Laws for Syllable Structure and the Explanation of Sound Change: with Special Reference to German. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure, and the Explanation of Sound Change. By Theo Vennemann. MyBook is a cheap paperback edition of the original book . Preference Laws for Syllable Structure: And the Explanation of Sound Change By Theo Vennemann. About this book. Terms of Service Walter de Gruyter. SOUND CHANGE AND SYLLABLE STRUCTURE IN GERMANIC ceived a satisfactory explanation: consonant gemination in West Germanic, vowel length- .. leads to our final version of the principle-a very general preference law for. THEO VENNEMANN. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure and the Explanation of Sound Change: With Special Reference to German, Germanic, Italian. Preference Laws for Syllable Structure: And the Explanation of Sound Change with Special Reference to German, Germanic, Italian, and Latin. Book. Shorter Notices - Vennemann Theo, Preference laws for syllable structure and the explanation of sound change. With special reference to. Shorter Notices - Theo Vennemann, Preference laws for syllable structure and the explanation of sound change. With special reference to. Request PDF on ResearchGate Sound Change and Syllable Structure in used in phonological theory to describe and explain cross-linguistic preferences in of the Syllable Contact Law (Hooper , Murray and Vennemann Preference Laws for Syllable Structure and the Explanation of Sound Change: With Special Reference to German, Germanic, Italian, and Latin by Theo.

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