

Phonology in the Twentieth Century

Preface to the Chinese Edition

The appearance of this Chinese edition of *Phonology in the Twentieth Century* gives me great pleasure, as it makes the work more accessible to an increasingly important audience within our field. In recent years I have become aware of the large number of extremely serious linguists in China, and of the interesting work being done on a wide range of topics and languages by these scholars. I hope that the availability of this book will help to increase familiarity in China with the major themes of Western research in the area of sound structure, and thereby contribute to a greater mutual understanding between the Chinese and Western linguistic communities.

It was surely very naive of me to publish a book with the present title in 1985, since the twentieth century was far from over at that point. In fact, the early 1980s had already seen a considerable degree of turnover in opinions regarding basic issues in phonology, some of which is surveyed briefly in the final chapter of the book. Nonetheless, it was quite difficult at that point to envision the massive changes the field would soon undergo.

These began innocuously enough, as sketched in chapter 13, with a shift of attention in the mid to late 1970s from the classical concerns articulated by Chomsky & Halle (1968) with the nature and content of rules, moving to proposals about richer notions of phonological representation centering on non-linear notions of phonological structure. Following the Autosegmental proposals of Goldsmith (1976, 1979) and the emergence of Metrical Phonology in the work of Liberman (1975; cf. also Liberman & Prince 1977), phonologists largely abandoned questions of the detailed formulation of rules, their abstractness, and similar issues for a focus on the nature of the representations these rules manipulated. This redirection of research effort was further accentuated by the emergence of the program of Feature Geometry in the work of Clements (1985), Sagey (1990) and others.

In the context of the present work, this attention to enhanced notions of representation did not abandon a view of phonological structure as involving in essential ways both rules and representations: it was simply based on the idea that formally based explanation should rely primarily on restrictive theories of the latter. As McCarthy (1988: 84) formulated the point, “primary emphasis should be placed on studying phonological representations rather than rules. Simply put, if the representations are right, then the rules will follow.”

In 1993, however, Alan Prince and Paul Smolensky circulated a manuscript (later appearing as Prince & Smolensky 2004) that outlined a radically different program for phonology. This work advocated the wholesale replacement of classical rule systems with a very different approach based on systems of simultaneous ranked violable constraints — the approach known as Optimality Theory.

Optimality Theory dispenses altogether with specific rules relating phonological to phonetic form. In their place, the theory assumes a set of constraints on surface forms, falling into two classes: Markedness constraints, requiring that forms meet conditions of naturalness grounded in their phonetic substance, and Faithfulness constraints, requiring that properties of underlying or lexical forms be preserved

in the output. Obviously these are typically in conflict, and the description of a language consists of a set of rankings determining how such conflicts are to be resolved.

Within this theory, there is no longer such a thing as a derivation of surface forms. Instead, a function GEN provides a broad range of possible surface correspondents to a given underlying form, and another function EVAL chooses the one among these that provides the best (“optimal”) resolution in terms of the system of constraints operative in the language.

The constraints in such a system are quite similar in spirit to proposals made in a variety of previous frameworks: for example, the regularities of surface form suggested below to constitute Saussure’s (unarticulated) view of a Fully Specified Surface Variant view of phonological structure, or the “conspiracies” proposed by generative phonologists in the 1970s. Where these theories tended to founder on the fact that however compelling a regularity a constraint may represent, it is quite rare for it to lack exceptions altogether. The ranking of constraints in Optimality Theory allows for them to be violated (exactly when necessary to satisfy some higher ranked constraint), and thus avoids this problem.

Within a few years after Prince and Smolensky proposed this model of phonological description, it had come to dominate (in various forms, and with inevitable evolution) discussion and teaching of phonology in nearly all venues in North America and Europe. More recently, as I write this in 2014, I have the impression that a small set of fundamental problems centering on the notion of ‘opacity’ are rapidly leading to further shifts. These include both the re-introduction of rule-like notions and derivational structure of the sort that characterized phonology in the 1960s and 70s, and the abandonment in some quarters of the research program of Optimality Theory in favor of other approaches, but it is surely too soon to forecast this sort of thing with any certainty. What is clear is that the 1990s and the initial decade of the 21st century saw a major re-orientation of phonological research in the terms of the ‘rules *vs.* representations’ typology of theories presented below.

When the original edition of this book was published in 1985, then, there were still extremely important developments yet to come in the century it proposed to describe. It did document developments over more than a century from the mid-1870’s, but not one that was coextensive with the scope of “phonology in the twentieth century.”

Despite this inaccuracy in its title, though, I believe the work has stood the test of time over the past 30 years. The opposition between a focus on the nature of phonological representations and close attention to the properties of a system of rules that relate these to phonetic form seems a productive way to trace developments in thinking about how views of sound structure develop and change over time. Furthermore, I believe that the views associated with the historical figures considered here are both accurately presented and significant for our more general understanding of phonological form. History structured around a few “great men” sometimes risks distorting reality by ignoring the much broader canvas on which it actually plays out, but in the case of a rather small field like linguistics, with comparatively few players apart from the major figures, it is rather easier to defend such an approach.

This is not to suggest that everything here should be regarded as the last word on the subject, even within the temporal limits of its actual coverage. More recent scholarship has provided us with a wealth of details, especially concerning the lives of the scholars portrayed here, that would need to be incorporated to provide anything like a comprehensive picture.

For instance, Joseph (2012) has recently surveyed a vast amount of material about the rather complex life of Ferdinand de Saussure and the relation between events in his life and his thought about language. A large quantity of Saussure’s unpublished notes have also appeared in recent years, though the interpretation (and even the dating) of this material is far from settled at this point. Toman (1995) provides many illuminating observations about the dominant figures in the Linguistic Circle of Prague

from its earliest days through World War II, on the basis of archival material not available to me in 1985. Darnell's (1990) account of the life of Edward Sapir similarly helps us to understand the life of this major figure in the emergence of the field in the U.S. A variety of material published around the centennial in 1987 of the birth of Leonard Bloomfield gives a clearer picture of his life and thought, and his relation to other scholars of his time. And so on, and on and on: hardly a single important historical figure discussed in this book has not been the subject of specialized books and articles that have amplified and clarified what we know about his (and given the sociology of the field until comparatively recently, it is nearly always **his**) life and work.

While the additional information these subsequent studies provide is very valuable and helps to complete the biographical pictures of the major figures in the development of phonological thought, it does not seem to me to compromise the presentation below of the theoretical positions they developed or to require major revisions in what is said here. As a result, I think the book retains its value for students of linguistics generally, and of phonology in particular. I hope that the present edition will be found valuable for Chinese scholars as well.

Stephen R. Anderson
Guilford, Connecticut
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