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Topics in Nivkh phonology

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis discussed two topics from the phonology of WSN: laryngeal phonology and Consonant Mutation. These were discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively. For each of the topics, I drew the following conclusions: 1) Nivkh is an aspiration language, and 2) Consonant Mutation is a perceptually motivated process.

In Chapter 3, I argued that Nivkh is an aspiration language. This implies that Nivkh has the laryngeal feature [spread glottis] as the contrastive feature in both plosives and fricatives. In the past, many works overlooked the fact that aspirated plosives and voiceless fricatives pattern together in the laryngeal phonology of Nivkh, and that there is an asymmetry between the members of the contrast. Notably, aspirated plosives and voiceless fricatives are the obstruent series which exhibit dimensional invariance, which means that they exhibit stable acoustic/auditory cues in a large number of contexts. This is unlike the opposite members of the contrast, the non-aspirated plosives and the voiced fricatives, which are susceptible to influences from surrounding segments. This asymmetry is captured by the classification of Nivkh obstruents into fortis and lenis (Austerlitz 1956, Jakobson 1957, Hattori 1962). In the current analysis, it is captured by feature specifications: aspirated plosives and voiceless fricatives are the obstruent types which are specified for a laryngeal feature at the underlying level (by [spread glottis]), whereas non-aspirated plosives and voiced fricatives are unspecified.

In the subsequent discussions, it was made clear that voicing plays no role in the lexical phonology of Nivkh. A process in which voicing is apparently involved, Final Fricative Voicing, was identified with an instance of contextual voicing, which we described as a phonetic interpolation from the surrounding voiced segments to a segment which lacks underlying laryngeal specifications. In addition to contextual voicing, voicing was also involved in enhancement, a phonetic operation which over-differentiates segmental contrasts at the surface level. We concluded that in WSN, contextual voicing and enhancement are the main sources of voicing. Accordingly, we maintain the hypothesis that WSN has an asymmetric laryngeal contrast with [spread glottis] as the only active feature.

Another topic of this thesis, Consonant Mutation was discussed in Chapter 4. Consonant Mutation exhibits a number of characteristics which make it difficult to capture it as a phonological process at first glance. For instance, Spirantization applies after plosives, which is known to be the most unlikely context for a synchronic process of spirantization to apply cross-linguistically (e.g. Ségéral and Scheer, to appear). In addition, Spirantization targets morpheme-initial segments to the exclusion of medial and final segments. Again, this is not in agreement with the cross-linguistic tendency that spirantization targets prosodically weak positions to the exclusion of prosodically strong positions. These peculiarities led many of the previous authors to conclude that CM is a primarily syntactically motivated process, which is not associated with synchronic phonology (e.g. Kreinovich 1937). Other authors gave up on analyzing Spirantization as a unified phenomenon, and divided it into distinct processes of assimilation and dissimilation (e.g. Mattissen 2003).

In this chapter, however, I argued that CM is a synchronic phonological process, and presented new data, which I collected in fieldwork, in support of this view. Notably, CM is sensitive to pause insertion (section 4.4.1). This constitutes a crucial difference with consonant mutation in languages such as Irish, which is not sensitive to pause insertions (Rotenberg 1978). The current thesis correctly captures this difference by claiming that CM is a primarily a phonologically motivated process.

The current thesis captures another characteristic of CM which was often overlooked in previous works: the conspiracy of Spirantization and Hardening. Spirantization applies in contexts where Hardening does not, and Hardening applies in contexts where Spirantization does not. The current thesis captures this conspiracy by analyzing CM as an interaction of a local and a non-local process which are motivated on perceptual grounds. In particular, I argued that Spirantization is a non-local (non-assimilatory) process: a perceptually motivated instance of lenition (e.g. Harris 2005). A perceptually motivated lenition applies in order to create informational asymmetry between segments in a specific domain (Harris and Urua 2001, Harris 2005). On the other hand, I argued that Hardening, and the failure of Spirantization in the same context, should be regarded as a result of a local demand, which disfavors specific sequences of segments for perceptual reasons. This is in contrast to the non-local process of Spirantization, which is not triggered by specific types of segments. The current thesis regards CM as an interaction of non-local process of Spirantization and locally induced segmental alternations, such as Hardening and the blocking of Spirantization.

While I focused on only two phonological topics in this thesis, there are many other interesting topics which are worth discussing in separate papers. I usually encountered such interesting data when listening to recordings, but occasionally also

when I was in the fortunate position to listen ‘live’ to the conversation of the language consultants. Some of these interesting processes were introduced in Chapter 2. In the future, I would like to examine such phonological events in more detail and test the hypotheses on more data.

At the same time, it is of special importance to facilitate access to the linguistic data, especially with respect to a relatively undocumented language such as Nivkh. The publication of sound recordings makes it easier to check the hypotheses advanced in this thesis and elsewhere. Such an effort also contributes to document an endangered language which has only 477 speakers left and to provide feedback to the local community (Chapter 1).

The discussions in chapters 3 and 4 benefited greatly from new data which I recorded from the contemporary speakers of WSN. These discussions demonstrate how valuable such information can be in a proper understanding of linguistic phenomena. In this respect, fieldwork remains an inevitable part of the linguistic enterprise also in the future.

