

Regular sound change through the lens of exemplar theory

Janet B Pierrehumbert

Dept. of Engineering Science, University of Oxford

The classic theory of sound change distinguishes regular sound changes from analogical changes. Regular sound changes gradually transform the phonetic realisations of phonemes, and have been claimed by many scholars to affect all words simultaneously and equally. Analogical changes are categorical changes in the expressions of morphosyntactic categories, typically bringing rare words into conformity with more common words. This strong distinction rests on strong assumptions about modularity in linguistic systems. These assumptions have given way in the light of detailed experimental studies showing that the cognitive representations of individual words include remarkably detailed phonetic and contextual information. Exemplar theory provides a formal framework for analysing such effects.

This talk will present the empirical evidence for word-specific effects in regular sound change, and also present an exemplar model that can generate them. The model builds on experimental results about the effects of word frequency and typicality in perceiving speech and laying down memory traces. I will argue that success in explaining the range of diachronic patterns observed depends crucially on adopting a hybrid approach, in which lexical, phonological, and phonetic levels all play a role.