

Pertinacity and Control

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We know that **affricates** are not very pertinacious. (Do we?) Well, perhaps /tʃ/ is, but **labiodental** affricates, at any rate, couldn't be more transient, on the evidence available (to me). First, although their distinctive pronunciation and perception is humanly possible, they don't get innovated frequently as ordinary members of phoneme systems. Phonemic /pf/ exists in High German (or rather only in parts of it: see the isogloss configuration known as "Rhenish Fan" reproduced in any handbook of dialectology) and in Beembe (a Bantu language of Congo-Brazzaville, H11: Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996: 91, after Jacquot 1981), though probably nowhere else: so, it must must have been innovated at least twice – assuming it has not been around ever since the origin of language, with only (parts of) German and Beembe retaining this precious possession. (Well, at least for German we **know** that affricates are not retentions!) Second, once innovated, it won't take many generations to again undo labiodental affricates, replacing them by, or changing them into, stops and/or fricatives of corresponding places of articulation. (An eye will have to be kept on imminent developments in Beembe, where – as of the time of writing – labiodental affricates still appear to be thriving, and to make matters worse, also to contrast in aspiration.) As usual, the question is: Why? Is it because affricates are the most complex consonantal segments? Complex articulatorily? Acoustically? In terms of phonological systems? Are labial/labiodental the most complex and dental/ alveolar/palatal the least complex of affricates, as crosslinguistic incidence as well as diachronic stability suggest?

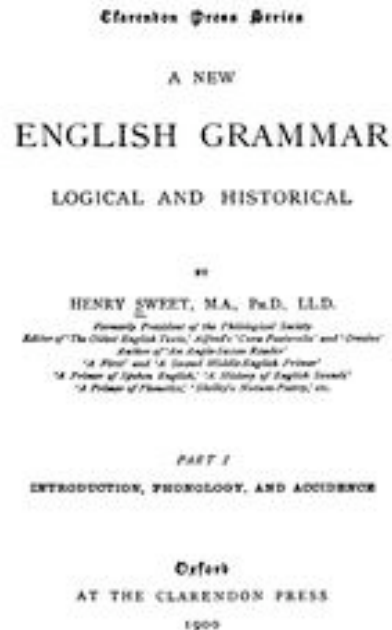
Are **fricatives** transient? Not as such, probably. To look at them differentially by place of articulation, are dental/interdental fricatives, /θ, ð/, less pertinacious than labiodental ones, /f, v/? Probably. Why? Because there would seem to be a diachronic tendency for the former to change into the latter, but not vice versa or at any rate far less frequently – if the change indeed is one of place of articulation. (Is this true? Both directions of change/replacement are documented in Blevins 2004, 2006. On Blevins's evidence such changes occur regardless of whether the phoneme systems concerned have or lack the resulting phoneme prior to the change/replacement.) Thus, if you have both, /f, v/ and /θ, ð/, there is a probability that your children will only have /f, v/, pronouncing your old /θ, ð/-words with /f, v/. (Of course, they might do all kinds of other things with both /θ, ð/ and /f, v/, rather than only neutralising the contrast in favour of /f, v/; most likely, they will defricativise them.) If you only have /f, v/ yourself, your children quite likely won't do anything about it. (At any rate, not systematically change them into or replace them by /θ, ð/.) If you only have /θ, ð/ yourself, your children may be tempted to go for /f, v/ instead. (Provided they don't do something else about them.) So, in the long run, fricative systems with only /f, v/ should be the most stable, and /θ, ð/ should only be found if a fricative system also includes /f, v/. (Which I think is a valid generalisation, on the evidence of all crosslinguistic surveys of phoneme systems I am aware of. Labiodental fricatives themselves, by the way, don't seem anywhere close to being universal, either. And, curiously, they seem to prefer being innovated to being lost: they aren't there everywhere, but once they are there, they like to stay.)

To come to the point that I would like to make here, Henry Sweet added a complication to this sort of story: change, however natural, can be **controlled** (Sweet 1900: 186-187).



Henry Sweet (1845–1912)

(borrowed from The Henry Sweet Society
for the History of Linguistic Ideas)



The source

For Sweet (like just about everybody else), "the most important fact in the history of language is that it is **always changing**" (p176). He considered some changes to be inevitable; but I won't go into the reasons he gave nor into his distinction between inevitable and evitable. (Not convincing in my view.) I would only like to draw attention to what he considered to be within the power of members of speech communities, because, if true, this has potentially great significance for the question of diachronic time-stability, of pertinacity and transience:

the speakers of a language have no power of absolutely preventing changes in it [...] yet they have considerable control over it. In the first place they can resist change , and retard it. [...] every generation can tolerate only a certain amount of

change [or else] the languages of two successive generations would become mutually unintelligible. (Sweet 1900: 186)

This concept of control would seem to imply **intentionality** and **normative authority**; but I'm not sure that is what Sweet had in mind. For him, **awareness** and **ease of corrective action** were crucial; evidently, you can't control (intentionally or otherwise) what you are not aware of. And he was probably thinking of **individual** as much as of **social** control. His example here are the fricatives in English:

Whether the attempt to arrest a certain change is successful or not depends, of course, partly on the ease with which it is controlled. Thus the change of (p) into (f) is easily observed and easily corrected, so although it is begun by thousands of children in every generation, it has never been able to get a permanent footing, while other changes which were less easy of control have established themselves firmly, some of which have been more injurious than that of (p) into (f) would have been. (Sweet 1900: 186-187)

Given this particular example, Sweet's reasoning couldn't be less convincing. Interdental/dental and labiodental fricatives aren't **so** different, articulatorily and especially acoustically, that their distinction would be so much easier to perceive than many other differences that have been wiped out by uncontrolled change – say, the difference between onset clusters and onset singletons (*knight* – *night*, *knot* – *not*, *gnome* – *nomad*, *psalm* – *salmon*, *xero* – *zero*, etc. with the orthographic clusters pronounced until Middle English). On the contrary, this particular contrast among fricatives is the one that is **most easily** confused among all consonants by adults as well as children. (See Miller & Nicely 1955, Eilers & Minifie 1975, and many later studies. For the acoustic similarity of dental/interdental and labiodental fricatives see, among others, Jongman, Wayland, & Wong 2000.) Also, why

should corrective action here be **so** much easier – if you can hardly even perceive the difference?

Still, the question remains: **Why** have dental/interdental fricatives in (mainstream) adult English been so time-stable over many generations – remaining essentially unchanged since common Germanic times? (Where their Indo-European source, incidentally, was /t/ and /dh/, not /f, v/.) It **is** true that in first language acquisition children frequently have /f, v/ instead of /θ, ð/ – and probably had for ages. And it has been observed that such changes/replacements (especially in prosodically light function words) are an individual, somewhat foppish peculiarity of certain upper class speakers. It is also to be noted, attesting to the general instability of /θ, ð/, that West Germanic languages other than English **have** given up phonemic /θ, ð/ – although they did not change them into /f, v/, but rather into plosives of the same place of articulation. All the same, such changes/replacements – *fings* for *things*, *free* for *three*, *paf* for *path*, *norf* for *north*, *faver* for *father*, *vis* for *this*, *wiv* for *with* etc. – do not seem to be salient or pervasive features of contemporary English dialects, let alone Standard English in its British, American, or other manifestations. In the 19th century, /f, v/ for /θ, ð/ seems to have been more widespread in Northern English dialects; but the same dialects have been described as having reinstated /θ, ð/ by the end of the century. It is probably only Cockney where /f, v/ for /θ, ð/ seems currently to be thriving. Other regional varieties sometimes mentioned as showing /f, v/ for /θ, ð/ include Newfoundland English and Liberian and perhaps other African and African American Englishes, as well as incipiently middle class Estuary English and working class Glaswegian English. (See Wells 1982. For a historical sketch see Horn & Lehnert 1954: 769-782. Horn & Lehnert have an ease-of-articulation story, considering /f, v/ for /θ, ð/ to be "lässigere Artikulation", as yielded to in particular in high-frequency words and in prosodically weak positions.)



Actor Simon Pegg,
from Wikipedia, s.v. Th-fronting



from The Advertising Archives
Hear <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eg-Ycc-yKqY>

So, are we dealing here with a case of successful self-control and/or social control in the English speech communities after all, prescribing one pronunciation ("careful") as better than another ("careless"), though hard to hear apart from it, but as supported/demanded by conventional orthography – against the laws of natural change/replacement as manifesting themselves in untutored L1 acquisition? But then, how could onset clusters ever get simplified in English? Isn't *night* for *knight* etc. equally more careless and equally at odds with spelling? How could self-control or social control fail here, but succeed with /θ, ð/? What is it about onset clusters that renders them more vulnerable than interdental/dental fricatives, inherently or control-wise?



Sir Gawain (inside hut) and the Greene Night
above Juoksengi, Sverige, on the Arctic Circle

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/billvision/304542236/in/photostream/>



Cephalophores also make many appearances in literature, most notably in Dante's *Inferno* (8th Circle, Bertrand) and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. But none I think appear on a title page of a book earlier than this 1500 example of *St. Denis*.

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To generalise the question [since this our central overall concern in the Collaborative Research Centre that we are planning]: Is there a chance to ever be certain for **any** development or non-development – phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic – that it is a matter of transience or pertinacity for **structural** reasons? How to tease apart the structural and the social? Is **control** à la Sweet, in a social or an individual sense, sometimes a relevant consideration and sometimes not? And why the difference?

Perhaps the difference is a matter of whether what is going on, or is not going on, is really CHANGE or rather REPLACEMENT – a distinction so far glossed over. Presumably, both "changing to" and "replacing by" can be Neogrammarian (that is, "ausnahmslos" rather than diffusional). Replacements would perforce seem abrupt, a matter of exchanging lexical representations. Changes can be gradual, pertaining to the phonetic realisation of lexical representations which as such remain constant; though probably changes can be abrupt, too. So, what **is** the difference? Perhaps it is that replacements are what can be controlled (self or social), while change is what can't. /θ, ð/ > /f, v/ is replacement, occasioned by the difficulty of perceptual discrimination; simplification of onset clusters, in the interest of ease of articulation, is change (with, e.g., [nɔɪt] continuingly represented as /knɔɪt/). What is undergoing change will therefore be more pertinacious (because it remains, even if only as lexical form); what can be replaced is always in danger of complete obliteration. (An interesting question is how long lexical representations are maintained when their realisations are changing. Is [nɔɪt] perhaps still /knɪxt/ in contemporary English? But abstractness is really a different issue.)

Yes, since very little is really diachronically sacrosanct about the lexicon and grammar, about representations and rules/constraints, it is harder to explain why change (or replacement) does **not** occur than why it sometimes **does**. I can't be the first to have noticed. Well, Henry Sweet did, invoking control for the purpose. Universal Grammar is another explanatory straw to

clutch at (the suggestion of Lahiri 1982, who also noticed). But as things are, is this more than a straw in the wind?

(Thanks, Aditi, Allison, Allard, Larry, for feedback.)

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