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Phonological Drift and Language Contact

Several language families of northern Europe – Germanic, Celtic, and Uralic – share phonetic and phonological patterns that are typologically unusual. This book demonstrates how we can better understand these convergences: they exemplify the phenomenon of drift. Using the latest advances in theoretical linguistics, the study of sound change, and language variation, it offers insights into the development of these features and what they tell us about past cultural and linguistic contacts. Although the languages are not closely related, an understanding of drift grounded in the theory of the life cycle of phonological patterns reveals the workings of convergent developments. Covering a wide range of vernacular varieties, this book shows how phonological microvariation is illuminated by an approach grounded in the theory of the life cycle and historical sociolinguistics. It is essential reading for historical and theoretical linguists, and anyone with an interest in the cultural and linguistic contacts across northern Europe.

PAVEL IOSAD is Professor of Synchronic and Diachronic Phonology at the University of Edinburgh. His work spans theoretical phonology and historical linguistics, with a focus on Celtic, Germanic, Romance, and Slavic languages. His notable publications include *A Substance-Free Framework for Phonology* (2017).

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The Northwest European Phonological Area

Pavel Iosad
The University of Edinburgh

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

Contents

List of Tables *page* viii
List of Figures x
List of Abbreviations xi
List of Glosses xii
List of Conventions xiii
Acknowledgements xiv
Introduction xvii

1 Setting the Scene 1
1.1 Phonological Features of the Northern European Area 1
1.2 Historical Background of the Languages and Speakers 3
1.3 Summary of Argument 13

2 Research Context 15
2.1 Substrates in Europe 15
2.2 Early Linguistic Typology 17
2.3 The Eurasianists: Trubetzkoy and Jakobson on *Sprachbünde* 18
2.4 The Celtic Scholars on Language Contact 21
2.5 *Nordeuropäische Lautgeographie*: Heinrich Wagner 23
2.6 Growing, and Shrinking, the Phonological Area 25
2.7 Bilateral Contacts Revisited 27
2.8 Areal Phonology in Northern Europe: The State of the Art 28

3 Theoretical Background 31
3.1 Phonological Architecture and the Division of Labour 31
3.2 Areality and Convergence in Phonology 34

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CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-49738-1 — Phonological Drift and Language Contact
Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

3.3 Phonology and Language Contact in the Past 44
3.4 Explaining Convergence as Phonological Drift 48

4 The Synchrony and Diachrony of Preaspiration 59
4.1 The Phonetics and Phonology of Laryngeal Contrast 59
4.2 Defining Preaspiration 64
4.3 The Life Cycle of Preaspiration 70
4.4 Preaspiration and Quantity 74
4.5 Other Related Phenomena 77
4.6 Diagnosing Preaspiration 78

5 North Germanic 80
5.1 Key Preliminaries 80
5.2 Preaspiration in Insular Nordic 84
5.3 Preaspiration in Mainland West Nordic 89
5.4 Preaspiration in East Nordic 98
5.5 Absence of Preaspiration and its Status 102
5.6 Philological Evidence for Preaspiration and its Dating 104
5.7 Evidence for Preaspiration in Proto-Nordic 108
5.8 Preaspiration as a Late Development 111
5.9 The Life Cycle of Preaspiration in North Germanic 119
5.10 The Life Cycle of North Germanic Preaspiration: Summary 150

6 Celtic 152
6.1 General Preliminaries 152
6.2 Preaspiration in the Gaelic Languages 154
6.3 Preaspiration in Brythonic: Welsh 161
6.4 Historical Preliminarieis 161
6.5 The Life Cycle of Preaspiration in Celtic 165
6.6 The Origin of Preaspiration in Celtic and Consonant Quantity 179

7 The Sámi Languages 184
7.1 General Preliminaries 184
7.2 Preaspiration in the Sámi Languages 189
7.3 The Development and Life Cycle of Preaspiration in Sámi 204
7.4 Summary 218

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CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-49738-1 — Phonological Drift and Language Contact
Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

8 Preaspiration and Language Contact 220
8.1 Preaspiration and Contact-Induced Change 220
8.2 Sámi Preaspiration and Language Contact 225
8.3 North Germanic Preaspiration and Language Contact 229
8.4 Celtic Preaspiration and Language Contact 237
8.5 Summary: Contact Explanations and Phonological Drift 250
8.6 Preaspiration as an Areal Feature 252

9 Conclusion 255
9.1 Parallel Changes: Drift and Contact 255
9.2 Looking for Phonological Areality 257
9.3 Phonological Areas in Northern Europe: *Sprachlandschaft* After All? 259

References 263
Index of Topics 307
Index of Persons 313
Index of Languages 316

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CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-49738-1 — Phonological Drift and Language Contact
Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

Tables

3.1 Possible scenarios for contact-induced change in phonology *page* 49
4.1 Cross-linguistic variation in stop systems 61
5.1 Stops and fricatives in Proto-Nordic 81
5.2 Reflexes of quantitative distinctions in present-day North Germanic 83
5.3 Relative chronology of preaspiration and quantity shift in Härjedalen 115
5.4 Lenition and preaspiration in North Germanic after Steblin-Kamenskij (1974) 116
5.5 The development of neutralizing lenition 135
5.6 Variation in Faroese stops after a long vowel 136
5.7 Foot-sensitive lenition in Norwegian 139
5.8 Lenition in Danish dialects 143
6.1 Postvocalic stops in Celtic 164
6.2 Examples of quantity-sensitive preaspiration distributions 176
6.3 Proposed reconstruction of lenition and preaspiration oralization in Scottish Gaelic 177
7.1 Proto-Uralic consonant inventory 185
7.2 Rhythmic and syllabic gradation 186
7.3 Rhythmic gradation in Northern Sámi 186
7.4 Three degrees of quantity in Northern Sámi 187
7.5 Consonant gradation after closed syllables in Sámi 188
7.6 Consonant gradation in Kola Sámi 193
7.7 Stop gradation in Kildin Sámi after E. Itkonen (1946) 194
7.8 Consonant gradation in Sámi stops 203
7.9 The four-way distinction in Northern Tärna Ume Sámi 206
7.10 Preaspiration and ternary contrasts in Common Sámi (Bye 2001) 209
7.11 Analysis of the four-way distinction in Northern Tärna Ume Sámi 216

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CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-49738-1 — Phonological Drift and Language Contact
Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

7.12 Preaspiration of strong-grade singletons and the Q2 merger in stops 216
7.13 Preaspiration and quantitative developments across the Sámi languages 217
8.1 Laryngeal contrast in selected Turkic languages 253

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CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-49738-1 — Phonological Drift and Language Contact
Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

Figures

1.1	Map of key locations in north-western Europe	*page* 3
3.1	The life cycle of phonological processes	50
4.1	Preaspiration and breathy voice: South Uist Gaelic	66
4.2	Duration of breathy-voiced and voiceless preaspiration by stop quantity in Northern Norwegian	68
5.1	Preaspiration patterns in Härjedalen	113
5.2	Duration of preaspiration in Northern Norwegian	125
5.3	Locations with lenition in Trøndelag and Helgeland	129
5.4	Preaspiration in Southern Helgeland Norwegian	130
6.1	Preaspiration patterns in Scottish Gaelic	156
6.2	The diachronic typology of preaspiration in the Gaelic languages	173
6.3	Preaspiration after long vowels in selected varieties of Scottish Gaelic	175
7.1	Traditional territories of the Sámi languages, and locations mentioned	190
7.2	The diachronic typology of preaspiration in the Sámi languages	213
8.1	Map of locations in the Gaelic-speaking world mentioned in the text	240

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CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-49738-1 — Phonological Drift and Language Contact
Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

Abbreviations

Da Danish
Fi Finnish
LSS(G) Linguistic Survey of Scotland (Gaelic)
ME Middle English
MLG Middle Low German
ODa Old Danish
OE Old English
OHG Old High German
OIr Old Irish
ON Old Norse
OSw Old Swedish

PCelt Proto-Celtic
PGmc Proto-Germanic
PSaa Proto-Sámi
PSl Proto-Slavic
Ru Russian
s. v. sub voce
SaaI Aanaar (Inari) Sámi
SaaK Kildin Sámi
SaaL Lule Sámi
SaaN Northern Sámi
SaaP Pite Sámi
SaaS Southern Sámi
SaaSk Skolt Sámi
SaaU Ume Sámi
SED Survey of English Dialects (Orton & Dieth 1962–1971)
SGDS Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland (Ó Dochartaigh 1994–1997)

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

Glosses

1 first person
2 second person
3 third person
ACC accusative
CAUS causative
COMP complementizer
DAT dative
DEF definite
DIM diminutive
ESS essive
FUT future
GEN genitive
ILL illative
IMP imperative
INF infinitive
LOC locative
M masculine
N neuter
NMLZ nominalizer
NOM nominative
PART partitive
PL plural
POSS possessive
POT potential
PRS present
PST past
PTCP participle
SG singular

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Pavel Iosad
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Conventions

/slashes/	phonological underlying representations
[square brackets]	phonological surface representations
⟦white brackets⟧	phonetic representations
|pipes|	featural representations
<angle brackets>	orthographic representations

I use <angle brackets> when the spelling itself is at issue, for instance where the precise interpretation is not obvious or the subject of discussion. I follow the normal convention of *italics* 'gloss' when citing forms in standardized spellings, and forms in spelling-derived dialect alphabets such as Norvegia. When citing Norwegian forms without further qualification, I follow the current *nynorsk* standard. Cyrillic spellings are given unaltered; the bibliography follows British Standard 2979:1958 to transliterate Cyrillic.

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

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Writing a book like this is not possible without academic libraries: I have benefitted in particular from access to Edinburgh University Library, the National Library of Scotland, and the Humanities and Social Sciences Library at the University of Tromsø, in addition to Glasgow University Library, Ulster University Library, the McClay Library at Queen's University Belfast, and St Andrews University Library. Special acknowledgement must go to the National Library of Norway for facilitating online access to its collections, which has made working on this book so much easier.

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

The biggest thanks go to my family, who have unfailingly carried me through difficult, and often outright dark times: my brother Alexander, my mother Nadezhda, and Rina, Dina, and Úna: thank you for everything.

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

Introduction

In 1929, Nikolai Trubetzkoy – widely considered one of the founding fathers of modern Western phonology – formulated his 'Proposition 16' at the International Congress of Linguists, introducing the concept of a *language area*. It is worth revisiting the quote in detail:

> Gruppen, bestehend aus Sprachen, die eine grosse Ähnlichkeit in syntaktischer Hinsicht, eine Ähnlichkeit in den Grundsätzen des morphologischen Baus aufweisen, und eine grosse Anzahl gemeinsamer Kulturwörter bieten, *manchmal auch äussere Ähnlichkeit im Bestande der Lautsysteme*, – dabei aber keine gemeinsame Elementarwörter besitzen – solche Sprachgrupper nennen wir Sprachbünde[1] (Trubetzkoy 1930)

Whilst Trubetzkoy downgraded phonological criteria in the identification of language areas, Roman Jakobson soon proposed that they could also be diagnostic for *Sprachbünde*. He had discussed this possibility previously in his foundational study of Slavic historical phonology (Jakobson 1929). In later works devoted specifically to 'phonological language areas' (Jakobson 1931a,1931b) he suggested several (quite large) language areas on the basis of phonological properties. Jakobson especially pinpointed two phonological phenomena: 'tonality' (*Polytonie*, as opposed to *Monotonie*) and the presence of secondary articulations ('timbre differences') on consonants (*Eigentonkorrelation*). The focus here is on the Eurasian *Sprachbund* (unsurprisingly, given Jakobson's and Trubetzkoy's involvement with the ideology of 'Eurasianism'), but Jakobson also lists some areas defined by the presence of tone: South-East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of the Americas. He then goes on to say:

> Ebenso bilden die Sprachen des Baltikums einen Sprachbund, den die Polytonie kennzeichnet; hierher gehören: das Schwedische, das Norwegische mit Ausnahme der nordwestlichen Mundarten, die meisten dänischen Dialekte, einige norddeutsche Mundarten,

[1] 'Groups consisting of languages that show substantial syntactical similarity and fundamental similarities of a morphological nature, as well as share a large portion of cultural vocabulary – *and sometimes a superficial similarity in the make-up of their sound system* – without, however, sharing core vocabulary, are called language areas [Sprachbünde].' This translation and all translations in footnotes are mine.

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

das Nordkaschubische, das Litauische und Lettische, das Livische und Estnische. In den meisten Sprachen und Mundarten dieses Bundes ist die Tonverlaufkorrelation und in den übrigen ihre Abänderung, die Tonbruchkorrelation, vorhanden. *In allen Sprachen des baltischen Bundes, mit Ausnahme der litauisch-lettischen Familie, ist die Polytonie eine Neubildung*[2] (Jakobson 1931b)

The idea of a 'Eurasian' phonological *Sprachbund* never gained much traction. By contrast, many scholars since then have discussed phonological features shared by languages spoken in the north-west of the European continent. Apart from the use of tone to implement lexical contrasts, they include preaspiration, various kinds of 'consonant gradation', 'excrescent' ('svarabhakti') vowels in sonorant-consonant clusters, and initial 'dynamic' stress.

Tantalizingly, some of these features are fairly rare in the European context, and indeed in a wider cross-linguistic pespective. Even more tantalizingly, the languages in question – Germanic, Celtic, Baltic, and Uralic – are either unrelated, or related at a time depth too great to allow the possibility of common inheritance. Moreover, in many cases the rise of the shared features clearly postdates the break-up of the languages' common ancestors. With inheritance seemingly ruled out, how could one explain these similarities?

This book addresses the nature and history of this northern European *Sprachlandschaft*, or 'philological province' (Tolkien 1963). We will trace the ebb and flow of explanations of these tantalizing similarities in their sound patterns, from grand theories positing large-scale 'landscapes' and unknown substrates, the pendulum swung towards relative oblivion, and then back to an emphasis on language contact, in light of the renewed interest in contact-driven change.

Much recent work has reaffirmed the importance of language contact. It is a necessary corrective to an over-emphasis on endogenous explanations for language change, which all too often plays on tropes of purity and contamination that obscure the past and present of the languages and their users. Still, we must be able to convincingly place contact-based accounts in an appropriate context, reconciling 'internal' (structural) and 'external' (sociohistorical) evidence. My focus in this book is in developing a more sophisticated approach to the structural analysis of phonological phenomena that incorporates current understandings in both theoretical phonology and historical sociolinguistics.

A theoretically informed approach will allow us to better understand if the phenomena are as unusual and as uniform as previously thought, and to develop better reconstructions of their historical development. My chief contention is

[2] 'Also the languages of the Baltic form a language area characterized by tonality. The following languages belong to it: Swedish, Norwegian with the exception of north-western dialects, most dialects of Danish, some northern German dialects, northern Kashubian, Latvian and Lithuanian, Livonian and Estonian. In most languages and dialects of this area we find a tone trajectory contrast, and in the other we find its further development, a tonal break contrast. *In all languages of the Baltic area, except the Latvian-Lithuanian group, the tonality is an innovation*.' [translation and emphasis mine]

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Pavel Iosad
Frontmatter
More Information

that an understanding of phonological change as arising from the pool of variation within a community, now standard in accounts of actuation of sound change, also holds the key to the study of parallel and convergent developments. In particular, a more realistic view of the systems that were in contact in the past must hold that systematic variation was part of the contact situation, not least in the kind of settler or diaspora scenario common in the linguistic history of northern Europe. It is to the nature of this variation and its consequences for future developments that we must turn in order to understand areal developments in phonology.

I use this approach to re-evaluate the case for contact and conclude that the case for contact-induced genesis of many relevant sound changes, whilst difficult to conclusively reject, is significantly weaker than previously considered. The body of the book concentrates on preaspiration of 'voiceless' stops; the extra chapter, available online, offers a shorter case study of the 'preocclusion' of sonorant consonants. In both cases, I argue that the observed convergences are caused by the confluence of two independent factors. The first is pre-existing similarities in the languages' phonologies, and in particular the prominent role of metrical structure, especially moraic trochaic feet. The second is the regular course of phonological change, which I frame within the model of the *life cycle of phonological processes*. I argue that, given similar initial states, the life cycle creates a kind of 'path dependency', which accounts for convergent developments. The overall effect is reminiscent of 'drift' in the sense of Sapir (1921), even though it occurs in unrelated languages.

In Chapter 1 I present some potentially areal phenomena in northern European phonological systems and discuss the sociohistorical background, highlighting the history of contact. Chapter 2 contains a survey of earlier work on language contact and areality in northern Europe, with a focus on phonology. I then describe the theoretical and conceptual background to the study in Chapter 3.

An extended study of stop preaspiration makes up Part II. Chapter 4 offers a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, which has often been considered something of a northern European 'specialty'. Chapters 5 to 7 contain the detailed case studies of preaspiration in the North Germanic, Celtic, and Sámi languages, and Chapter 8 evaluates the arguments for its contact-based origins. Chapter 9 offers a brief conclusion and some prospects. Finally, chapter O1, available online, considers a different phenomenon – the 'preocclusion' or 'prestopping' of sonorant consonants – in the same theoretical framework.

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