Neutralization and epenthesis: is there markedness in the absence of contrast?
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Perhaps the most frequent phonological diagnostics used to determine whether a feature is marked or unmarked are emergence-of-the-unmarked diagnostics, including neutralization and epenthesis. In this talk I present a cross-linguistic study of neutralization and epenthesis, focusing on place of articulation and laryngeal qualities of consonants in neutralization positions and on place and height of epenthetic vowels.

Consider first neutralization of consonantal place of articulation in word-final position. While it is often claimed that coronal or laryngeal place of articulation are what one finds in positions of neutralization (e.g., Lombardi 2002, although this is focused on epenthesis), in fact in languages in which no contrast exists between places of articulation in a word-final position, that place of articulation can be (using stops as an example) coronal (e.g., Finnish) or laryngeal (e.g., Yagaria), but it can also be labial (e.g., Nimburan) or velar (e.g., Fuzhou). In languages which contrast two places of articulation in this position, the following contrasts are possible (taking into account only languages with labial, coronal, velar distinction): coronal-labial (e.g., Kiowa), coronal-velar (e.g., some Chinese dialects), labial-velar (e.g., some Vietnamese dialects). All possible combinations of two places of articulation thus are found. Focusing on languages with multiple coronals, while it is often the case that a dental/alveolar is the coronal in a position of neutralization, languages show other possibilities.

Laryngeal qualities are similar. In the stops, one expects to find voiceless unaspirated stops in neutralization positions (see, for instance, Lombardi 1991/1994). Again taking word-final position as a neutralization position, the full range of possibilities is found. Looking at languages with only a single laryngeal quality allowed word-finally, languages can have stops that are voiceless unaspirated (e.g., Sekani), voiceless aspirated (e.g., Klamath), voiceless constricted (e.g., Limbu), or voiced (e.g., Somali).

A study of epenthesis reveals something similar. It is often claimed that epenthetic vowels are non-salient in some way, and several have stressed that round vowels do not occur as epenthetic (e.g., Steriade 1995, de Lacy 2002). However, a study of epenthetic vowels cross-linguistically reveals that epenthetic vowels, while often central or front unrounded, can also be front rounded (e.g., French) or back rounded (e.g., Seediq).

Thus, a study of neutralization and epenthesis shows that these are not very helpful diagnostics in assessing phonological markedness, as cross-linguistically there is a range of features that can appear in neutralization positions. One must ask why emergence-of-the-unmarked diagnostics do not yield information about markedness. One sees a basic principle at work here: in the absence of contrast, the phonetic realization is phonologically indeterminate. With epenthesis in particular, epenthetic segments do not enter into correspondence relationships as they are not present in the lexical entry; they are thus free of the system of lexical contrasts and are free to vary, with no faithfulness constraints to ground them. Neutralization is similar: neutralization positions are freed from correspondence, with other factors determining their content. It is not phonological markedness which determines the content of neutralization and epenthetic positions; emergence-of-the-unmarked phenomena instead reveal that a number of different factors including articulation, perception, social factors, and language history play important roles in determining the output of neutralization and epenthesis.