

The History of /pf/ in New Braunfels German: Another Case of Rule Inversion?

The status of rule inversion, i.e. “reversal of the input and output of a rule and complementation of the environment” (McCarthy 1991: 194), as a mechanism of language change remains controversial. While scholars like Vennemann (1972) have argued that it is a relatively common process, others, like McCarthy (1991), have contended that rule inversion is at best very rare. Additional examples of rule inversion would help resolve this controversy. This paper therefore addresses another potential example of rule inversion, involving the history of the affricate /pf/ in New Braunfels German (NBG), a critically endangered New World variety of German. According to Eikel (1954), which is based on data collected in the 1940s and 1950s, /pf/ did not appear word-initially in NBG, meaning that words beginning with [pf] in Standard German, e.g. *Pferd* ‘horse’, *Pfeffer* ‘pepper’, and *Pfirsich* ‘peach’, began with [f] in NBG. It did, however, appear word-medially and word-finally, e.g. in *Topf* ‘pot’. In light of the numerous similarities between Standard German phonology and NBG phonology discussed by Eikel, this situation indicates that a sound change from /pf/ to /f/ (deaffrication) had taken place.

The situation soon changed: Gilbert (1972: Map 103), which is based on data collected in the 1960s, notes that his informants pronounced words like *Pferd* with an initial [pf] (e.g. 100% of his informants produced an initial [pf] in *Pferd*). In other positions within the word, Gilbert’s informants used both [pf] and [f]. This indicates that the earlier sound change had been undone, as /f/ had been affricated in word-initial position to [pf].

In the data collected by members of the Texas German Dialect Project (TGDP; www.tgdp.org) since 2001, the situation has changed again. According to Boas (2009), only 8% of his informants pronounced words like *Pferd* with an initial [pf]. This shows that the affrication process indicated by the Gilbert data has largely been undone, i.e. that /pf/ has again been deaffricated to /f/.

I argue that the best account of the NBG facts is a relatively straightforward sequence of sound changes, /pf/ > /f/ > /pf/. This account outperforms other possible analyses of the Texas German data, like the model of new dialect formation proposed by Trudgill (2004), which can account for the differences between the Eikel data and the Gilbert data, but not for the differences between the Gilbert data and the TGDP data (Boas 2009). These changes admittedly do not correspond precisely to the classical definition of rule inversion, since they take place in the same environment, and do not involve the “complementation of the environment,” as true rule inversion does, but they do involve the “reversal of the input and output of a rule.” While this particular development may therefore not be a clear-cut example of rule inversion, the reasoning here could be extended to cover other phonological phenomena in Texas German (e.g. the unexpected occurrence of front rounded vowels in some contexts), which may yet reveal such examples of rule inversion in Texas German.

References

- Boas, Hans C. 2009. *The life and death of Texas German*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press.
Eikel, Fred. 1954. *The New Braunfels German dialect*. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins.
Gilbert, Glenn. 1972. *The linguistic atlas of Texas German*. Austin: UT Press.
Trudgill, Peter. 2004. *New-dialect formation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press.
Vennemann, Theo. 1972. Rule inversion. *Lingua* 29: 209-242.