

Aditi Lahiri

Phonological grammars: Pertinacious constraints on change

'Not everything goes': a familiar phrase, applicable to phonological and morpho-phonological variation, observable both in synchronic systems and in change. Variability occurs on all levels – segmental, metrical as well as tonal. Critical sources of variation range from differences in vocal tract sizes, regular phonological alternation followed by the attrition of phonological contexts of regular rules and of course loans, leading to the maximal modification of reanalysis.

The level of variation as well as change, we will claim, is however, severely constrained. The hypothesis entertained is the following: phonological opacity may lead to varying choices for native speakers, and the resulting choice is governed by existing phonological preferences. Evidence that the native system plays a constraining influence comes from detailed examination of texts and poetry from Germanic languages (Dutch, English, German, Norwegian, Swedish) and Bengali. Phonological nonesuches (segmental, quantity and tonal) could change the statistical preferences but at each stage the phonological grammar has a restrictive effect.