

Preference Laws for Syllable Structure

Theo Vennemann

**Preference Laws
for Syllable Structure
and the Explanation
of Sound Change**

With Special Reference to German,
Germanic, Italian, and Latin

1988

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York · Amsterdam

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Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vennemann, Theo.

Preference laws for syllable structure and the
explanation of sound change.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Grammar, Comparative and general-Syllable.
2. Grammar, Comparative and general-Phonology.
3. Linguistic change. I. Title.

P236.V46 1988 414 87-31509

ISBN 0-89925411-X (alk. paper)

CIP-Titelaufnahme der Deutschen Bibliothek

Vennemann, Theo:

Preference laws for syllable structure and the explanation of
sound change/Theo Vennemann. – Berlin; New York;
Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988

ISBN 3-11-011375-9

Printed on acid free paper.

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Typesetting and Printing: Tutte Druckerei GmbH, Passau-Salzweg. –
Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin. – Printed in Germany.

For
Terence H. Wilbur,
Germanist, Bascologist, linguist
at UCLA,
homme savant and academician,
my Doktorvater,
a wise and kindly man

Preface

This booklet contains the text, augmented mainly by explanatory notes and an index, of a lecture presented at the University of California, Berkeley, on April 22, 1985. I would like to thank the Department of German, especially Professors Irmengard Rauch, Herbert Penzl, and Thomas Shannon, for their invitation and their hospitality on and around the Berkeley Campus.

I am also grateful to Professors Walburga von Raffler Engel and Alice C. Harris for discussing some of the ideas presented in this lecture during a very pleasant stay at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, April 15–18, 1985.

The first incentive to bring together my ideas on preferred syllable structure and on syllable structure change and to illustrate them with Germanic and Italian examples came with an invitation from Professor Alberto Mioni to discuss this as well as other work with him, his colleagues, and his students at the University of Padua. I will always be grateful for those beautiful, challenging early spring days of 1984 and 1985 which I had the good fortune of spending in the venerable University of Padua, founded 1222, and its 18th century Malduca Palace.

Thanks go to Professor Sang-Oak Lee of Seoul National University for affording the manuscript of my lecture some initial, working paper style distribution in *Papers in Phonology and Morphology III*, ed. by the Phonology Workshop of the Linguistic Society of Korea,

Seoul (Pan Korea Book Corporation), 1985, and for pointing out some errors in that manuscript.

Thanks are due, once again, to Tom Shannon who, in a long discussion between Benicia and Berkeley on April 17, 1986, and by applying and improving the Preference Laws framework in some of his own publications, has persuaded me to present this lecture to a wider audience.

Last but not least, I wish to thank the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk for granting me an Akademie-Stipendium for two semesters, enabling me to find the time to arrange this text for publication.

D-8901 Ried, May 1986

Theo Vennemann

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Introduction

This lecture deals with syllable structure, in particular with changes in syllable structure. It presents preference laws for syllable structure. These laws specify the preferred syllabic patterns of natural languages as well as determine the direction of syllable structure change.

The Concept of Preference Laws

My conception of preference laws¹ differs from most approaches to linguistic naturalness by characterizing linguistic structure not as good or bad (natural or unnatural, unmarked or marked), but as better or worse. It develops a graded concept of linguistic quality relative to a given parameter.² The parameters in this lecture are aspects of syllable structure. It is important to keep this in mind, because what is better relative to one parameter or set of parameters may be worse relative to others. Nothing in the world is good or bad *an sich*. The basic concept of the theory outlined here is 'X is the more preferred in terms of (a given parameter of) syllable structure, the more Y', where X is a phonological pattern and Y a gradable property of X. But the presentation of the laws will be very informal in this lecture.

The correctness of a preference law can be checked as follows. Every change in a language system is a local improvement, i.e. an improvement relative to a certain pa-

parameter. For instance, every syllable structure change is an improvement of syllable structure as defined by some preference law for syllable structure. If a change worsens syllable structure, it is not a syllable structure change, by which I mean a change motivated by syllable structure, but a change on some other parameter which merely happens also to affect syllable structure. This is true, e.g., of diphthongizations, which are paradigmatically rather than syntagmatically motivated changes, and of syncope and apocope, which are manifestations of the preference for briefness. Both diphthongizations and copations by necessity change the syllable structure of the affected items or even of the language system, and indeed always worsen it.³ But they evidently are not syllable structure changes. Since every change is an improvement, a change on a given parameter is motivated by the inherent low degree of linguistic quality of the affected structures relative to that parameter. Even though in principle improvement could start anywhere, with the best structures as well as with the worst or somewhere in the middle, one might venture the hypothesis that in fact remedial measures will not be applied to better structures as long as there are worse ones on the same parameter.

- (1) **Diachronic Maxim:** Linguistic change on a given parameter does not affect a language structure as long as there exist structures in the language system that are less preferred in terms of the relevant preference law.

In other words, linguistic change on a given parameter attacks the worst structures first. I am convinced that this hypothesis is correct, and I can therefore use linguistic change as a testing ground for my preference laws.

Every language system represents a stage in a history