Introduction: ‘Elsewhere’ in the ‘Richness of the Base’ in English Phonology

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Looking back upon the history of English phonology in the generative framework, we can unanimously say that a vast variety of detailed analyses were proposed from the rudimentary period of the 60’s to the mature period of the 80’s, based on such wide and deep frameworks as SPE, Natural Phonology, Lexical Phonology, Feature Geometry Theory, Underspecification Theory, Metrical Phonology, and so on. However, since the 2000’s we have witnessed largely very few journal articles and books that show full-fledged or full-scale formal analyses of Present-Day English phonology (except for only a few exceptions), although several textbooks may have been published. This poor situation may result from the fact that main concerns in the 90’s have focused on cross-linguistic applications of theories, and the trend has been especially enhanced by the advent of Optimality Theory whose architecture is typologically oriented in nature. If the historical view just sketched is true, then English phonology, especially its core frame, might appear to be dug out and exhausted already. However, the present special issue claims that there should still remain much room for enlightening other covert and hidden areas as well, and hence that English phonology has not entered into its declining period yet.

Now that Optimality Theory encounters its 20th anniversary in the year 2013 and various types of grand-scale database for typological or lexical properties are developed, this special issue aims at rethinking what phonologists can say about English phonology and at digging out further mines from its rich soil. Specifically, we have the following four goals: 1) to uncover new facts and data that have remained undocumented in the literature so far, 2) to offer new and fresh interpretations of facts which are only possible in the present mature period, 3) to offer new solutions to old problems that have remained unsolved so far or to solve new problems that have arisen recently but had once been solved in old theories, and of course 4) to draw significant implications for phonological theory in general from achieving the goals in 1)-3).

Considering the width and depth of 20-year-old Optimality Theory and other related or descendent frameworks, it may be the best opportunity now for phonologists to switch from an extensive, divergent perspective to an intensive, convergent one and to deeply rethink the richness of grammar of a particular language like English. There are three articles devoted to the special issue that adopt these lines of inquiry.

The paper entitled “Where American English Meets German: Devoicing in Pennsylvania Dutchified English” by Vicki Anderson and Stuart Davis sheds new light on Pennsylvania Dutchified English (PDE), on which almost no research exists in the literature. They neatly show that traditional PDE witnesses obstruent devoicing resembling German’s, but that a close examination of the pattern reveals differences from German’s and the actual pattern reflects aspects of American English. Based on this observation, they devise an optimality-theoretic analysis and draw its implications.

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for formal theory. This paper is particularly revealing in its fairly new facts and data and in its significant implications for the theory of laryngeal features and the string-based theory of phonotactics.

Michael Hammond’s paper “Input Optimization in English” is also revealing in interpretations and theoretical implications. By invoking well-known phenomena such as the Rhythm Rule, nasal assimilation on the adjectival prefix in-, voicing assimilation and epenthesis on the past-tense suffix -ed and the plural suffix -(e)s, he demonstrates that input representations are skewed so as to minimize constraint violations in the phonology as a kind of lexicon optimization. His arguments are based on lexical frequency and make it possible to solve long-standing problems of whether the underlying form is /t/ or /d/ for the past tense and /s/ or /z/ for the plural. These consequences may have a great impact on formal theory and acquisition.


Beyond Optimality Theory, the perspective of “from divergent to convergent” is also essential now to typological studies that have matured and accumulated fruitful databases and findings for these 20 years (e.g., the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS)) in tandem with the development of formal theory. It is precisely time to concentrate our attention on English from a rich and extensive viewpoint of typology.

Hisao Tokizaki’s work “Stress Location and Comparative Forms in English” exactly pays attention to this point, providing a fairly new discovery to the effect that the choice of the two ways of comparatives, i.e., synthetic (like the English *more*) is interrelated to the canonical stress location of general simplex words in a language, unlike the traditional claim that it depends on the specific phonology of adjectives themselves. In particular, he argues that languages with rightward stress have synthetic comparatives while languages with leftward stress have analytic comparatives and then that English has both forms because as a Germanic language with the rich Latinate vocabulary, its stress has a hybrid nature. He also convincingly explains why this is so, deriving valuable implications for formal theory.

Last but not least, the development of technologies related to electronic or on-line dictionaries has also been remarkable for these 20 years. Now it is time to look into the fine-grained details of English phonology through those media that were not available before.

In his article “Trochaic Clusters in English,” Takeru Honma focuses on the English trochaic clusters /ft/, /sp/, and /sk/ in *after*, *gospel*, and *Oscar*, which are defined as those intervocalic clusters appearing within a trochaic foot, and argues that they are exhaustively syllabified into the coda position of a preceding syllable and hence tautosyllabic. His groundings for this claim come from the statistically solid observations based on the CMU Pronouncing Dictionary, to which Hammond’s present work is also indebted. That is, as he demonstrates, the phonotactic restriction that the clusters only co-occur with preceding monophthongal vowels (and not with diphthongal vowels) word-finally exactly holds true foot-internally as well. He also accounts for why only particular monophthongal vowels can co-occur with these clusters, utilizing Charles Cairns’s Markedness Theory of Syllable Structure. As a consequence, his findings may raise an important question with Hammond’s (1999) Decomposition Theorem.

In conclusion, we really hope that all through these five articles, readers will witness and realize the fact that there actually still remain further precious mines in the rich soil of English phonology. Phonology should still have abundant ‘elsewhere’ waiting to be dug out from ‘the richness of the English base.’