The structural impact of phonetic detail: Italian consonant gemination revisited[*]

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This paper recasts language-specific phonetic detail as structurally significant motifs which combine to form a language's unique phonetic-prosodic template. These motifs sit within the architecture of the sound system, which is taken to be highly differentiated and to have evolved in a particularistic fashion, not subject to structural universals. The role played by these motifs in shaping a language's sound system – through linguistic exaptation and structure dependency – is examined through a study of Italian consonant gemination.

1 INTRODUCTION

Current approaches to phonology are characterised by an emphasis on the human aspect of language in a neurological/cognitive sense, concerned more with how the sound system functions minimally at a particular moment in time, than with the full complexity of the system. How a language changes over time also tends to be considered external to linguistic investigation. In this paper I shall advocate a reintegration of intrinsic (cognitive) and extrinsic (non-cognitive) aspects of sound systems, in recognition of their semi-cognitive, semi-cultural character. Specifically, I shall examine the role that language-specific phonetic detail has in shaping phonology, and seek to formalise this detail into a template of phonetic-prosodic motifs which, I shall argue, form a fundamental part of sound structure. The case of consonant gemination in Italian is considered since it offers fertile ground for the analysis of structural and phonetic complexity within a single recognisable sound feature.

2 SYSTEM EVOLUTION

The mechanisms by which sound change occurs share properties with any dynamic, self-organising system. The system is at once open[1] and subject to its own internal structural constraints. In Saussurian terms, these structural constraints mean that though form may be unpredictable in relation to its meaning, its *attachment* to that meaning is not arbitrary. The unstable nature of this form-meaning relationship, and the tensions this creates, could be thought of as resulting in dialectical propulsion of sound change.

2.1 Language change and exaptation

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[1] In that new 'raw material' can come from outside the system (in the guise of new phonetic forms with structural potential) and in that the system is subject to various external constraints.