LINGUISTICS 407
Historical Linguistics   LECTURE #13

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Both the American structuralists and the Neogrammarians failed to pose one crucial question:

Why do only certain sound changes occur to the exclusion of others, and why at one time rather than at any other?

Prague School of structuralists: EVERYTHING CONCERNING LANGUAGE MUST BE CONSIDERED FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF *FUNCTION*.

The question they asked: What is the function of linguistic change?

For *conditioned* sound change, Paul's "ease of articulation" had become the widely accepted answer to that question.

However, no answer has been given as explanation of *unconditioned* sound change. The

Prague School of structuralists -- above all, André Martinet, attempted to give an answer

to this question. He coined the terms *drag chain* and *push chain*.

CHAIN SHIFT: DRAG CHAINS OR PUSH CHAINS?

Consider three well-known cases:

1.   Grimm's Law (First Consonant Shift: Lecture #4)

        500 AD : High German or Second Consonant Shift

        [p] [t] [k] -- first changes around 500 AD
        [d] changed in the 7th century, filling the empty space left by [t]; then, [θ] moved
        to the space left by [d].

$$[\theta] \ > \ [d]$$
$$[d] \ > \ [t]$$
$$[p] \ > \ [\widehat{pf}]$$
$$[t] \ > \ [\widehat{ts}]$$
$$[k] \ > \ [\widehat{kx}]$$

(See the Handout)

2.   Great Vowel Shift (English)

It started around the 15th century; all the long vowels changed places – uncertain, however, which vowel started the shift.

(See the Handout)

3.   Yiddish dialect in Poland

(See the Handout)

[u:] > [i:], followed by [o:] > [u:]

Drag chain: one sound moves from its original place, and leaves a gap which an existing sound will fill, whose place in turn filled by another, and so on.

Consider a well-known case of push chain: the Great Vowel Shift of Late Middle Chinese (began in the 8th century AD).

(Study the Handout)

 There is firm evidence that the changes occurred in the sequence shown in the figure.

Push chain: one sound moves into the territory of another and the original moves away before the two sounds merge into one. The evicted sound in turn evicts another, and so on.

Question: how and why these shifts occur?

The biggest problem with any chain shift, is finding out where it starts.

Were most of the sounds dragged or pushed?

It is difficult to state whether the two shift were examples of *drag chain* or *push chain* (Grimm's Law was already completed before the first written records of the Germanic branch of Indo-European, and as far as the Great Vowel Shift is concerned, there have been so many fluctuations in the vowel system since 1500 onwards, that the exact chronological order is disputed).

Problem with Martinet's hypothesis: these functional explanations refer to sound changes that are themselves *secondary*.

In the case of "push chain," for example, what activates the initial change?
In the case of "drag chain," if phonological systems tend toward symmetry, how might there arise gaps that the sound shift serves to repair?

Conclusion:	no universally accepted explanation for the actualization of sound change has as yet been found.

Study   15.68, p. 363
15.73, p. 366