LINGUISTICS 407 **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, the French linguist André Martinet, attempted to give an answer to this question.

Martinet proposed two mechanisms:

1. **DRAG CHAIN**

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A form of sound shift in which a sound changes to fill a gap in the sound system, and another sound begins to change in order to fill the gap created by the earlier change:
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.

2. **PUSH CHAIN**

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A form of sound shift in which a change in one phoneme appears to cause a change in the same direction in another phoneme, so that merger may be avoided:
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.

CHAIN SHIFT: PUSH CHAINS OR DRAG CHAINS?

Consider two well-known cases:

1. Grimm's Law

   (See the Handout)

2. Great Vowel Shift (English)

   (See the Handout)

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).

An example of *drag chain* occurs in German, around AD 500 – Second Consonant Shift (second, because Grimm's Law is being considered as the first shift):

[θ] > [d]
[d] > [t]
[p] > [p͡f]
[t] > [t͡s]
[k] > [k͡x]

Chronology: [p] [t] [k] were the first to change (around AD 500); [d] changed in the 7th century, filling the empty space left by [t]. Some time after [θ] moved into the space left by [d].

The German Second Consonant Shift is a clear example of a *drag chain*, with sounds dragged into filling gaps in the system.

(See the Handout)

Drag chain involving vowels: Yiddish dialect in Northern Poland.

(See the Handout)

An example of *push chain*: Great Vowel Shift of Late Middle Chinese (began in the 8th century AD).

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

(See the Handout)

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.*