

THEORY RECYCLING: THE CASE OF *I*-UMLAUT

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1. Introduction

Historical linguistics in general is a very conservative field. New linguistic theories have to wait for years until they are applied to diachronic research and even then are viewed with certain suspicion by the majority of scholars still not familiar enough with recent theoretical developments.

There are obvious arguments in favour of taking such a cautious attitude. After all every new hypothesis has to undergo a period of verification and critical discussion, a kind of quarantine, before it can be applied to specific research problems. Moreover, a new paradigm need not be a panacea for all linguistic ailments. Typically it serves a particular purpose, usually emerging as a counteraction to the accepted framework, thus in a way mirroring all its shortcomings.

These reservations lead to a common tendency in linguistic research, that of theory recycling. When there is no new framework for data analysis, the temptation to resurrect an old hypothesis and reformulate it in the linguistic jargon of the day is particularly strong. There is nothing wrong with the very idea of returning to past hypotheses and verifying them with new data and theoretical apparatuses. However, one should be very careful to account for existing criticism of the theories being revived, otherwise the force of one's arguments will be drastically diminished.

2. The case of *i*-umlaut

One such case, in which both the need for a radically new approach and the practice of theory recycling are clearly observable, is the question of Germanic

i-umlaut. Roughly speaking,¹ this change consisted in fronting originally non-front stressed vowels before [i i: j] in the following syllable. It operated in all North and West Germanic languages, more likely in the individual languages rather than in the period of their linguistic unity. East Germanic languages show no trace of the change, which argues strongly against its common Proto-Germanic origin.

i-umlaut has often been quoted as one of specifically Germanic processes, and, consequently, much effort has been devoted to understanding its nature. During the last two hundred years a number of theories have been formulated, each of them attempting to solve the mystery of *i*-umlaut in a slightly different way. Among the more popular ones the following could be enumerated:

- (1) the *mouillierung* theory: the change progressed via the intervening consonants, palatalising them *before* affecting the target vowel,
- (2) the epenthesis theory: the change involved a diphthongisation of the target vowel and the subsequent monophthongisation of the diphthong,
- (3) the distant assimilation theory: the change occurred because of anticipation of the pronunciation of the inducing vowels by articulators (mechanical assimilation) or the mind of the speaker (mental assimilation),
- (4) the vowel harmony theory: the change is a result of a tendency to harmonise all the vowels of a word with respect to frontness,
- (5) the contact theory: the change was either a Germanic development caused by a linguistic contact with speakers of a non-Germanic language (Celtic, Finno-Ugric) or a direct borrowing from one of these languages.

3. The minority theories and their recent revival

Generally speaking, for the last fifty years the only widely accepted theory of *i*-umlaut has been the distant assimilation one. All the other theories have been decisively disproved,² and it would seem that the consensus reached in the 1950s would finally end the discussion about the nature and origin of *i*-umlaut. However, over the last ten years a number of prominent scholars have resuscitated virtually all of the discarded approaches, sometimes as a continuation of the previous scholarship, and sometimes under a guise of a new theory. The following is a short synopsis of these, together with appropriate passages from older authors, showing their typological relationship.

The palatalisation theory, which term can be used to cover both the *mouillierung* and epenthesis theories, was first formulated by two German scholars,

¹ An extensive discussion of the origin, causes, and progression of the change is not of primary importance for this paper; those interested should refer to standard grammars of Old English for a detailed treatment of the subject.

² A detailed presentation of the scholarship on the subject and criticism of the minority approaches can be found in Antonsen (1961) and Buccini (1992).

Wilhelm Scherer (1868) and Eduard Sievers (1873). Until the end of the 19th century it was accepted as the correct interpretation of *i*-umlaut. In the 1950s it was laid to rest using both experimental phonetics and theoretical linguistics. A number of recent publications attempt at reviving this theory. Hans Basbøll (1993)³ offered an explanation strikingly similar to that proposed by Alois Walde (1900)⁴ over a hundred years earlier. Jerzy Welna (1987)⁵ concludes the relevant section of his critical survey of Karl Luick's "Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache" (1914-1940)⁶ with the statement that Luick's interpretation of *i*-umlaut is a theoretical possibility. Finally, Anatoly Liberman (1991)⁷ leans heavily towards epenthesis as an explanation of *i*-umlaut, accepting the data and their interpretations first formulated by Wilhelm Braune (1877).⁸

The contact theory was first postulated in the 1920s in the United States by Eduard Prokosch (1921)⁹ and Claude M. Lotspeich (1918). It never gained widespread acceptance and was apparently abandoned in the late 1940s. In the late 1980s it was revived with new force by Herbert Penzl (1988), who attributed much of the *i*-umlaut process in Old English to Celtic influence.

Finally, some scholars, beginning with Wilhelm Viëtor (1890), postulated the identity of *i*-umlaut with vowel harmony, basing this interpretation on certain superficial similarities between Finno-Ugric and Germanic languages. More recent scholarship, using advances in linguistic theory of the last hundred years, proved these two processes to be structurally different and mutually exclusive. More recently, Richard Hogg treats *i*-umlaut as vowel harmony in his most

³ "a C is palatalized before a tautosyllabic i ...; and: a segment is palatalized before a palatal(ized) C." (Basbøll 1993: 42).

⁴ "bei *stað-i* wurde i mit neuem Einsatze gesprochen, und während und nach der Reduktion des i war daher keine Möglichkeit zu Verbindung mit der vorhergehenden Silbe gegeben. Dagegen in **algi*, **dömiðo* war eine solche Verbindung von jeher vorhanden" (Walde 1900: 191).

⁵ (referring to Luick's account, cf. fn. 6 - MK) "The above phonetic explanation of *i*-mutation can hardly be refuted since velar consonants [k, g] in intervocalic position must have been influenced by the mutation-causing segments ..." (Welna 1987: 60).

⁶ "Die Einwirkung eines i oder j auf den Vokal der vorangehenden Silbe haben wir uns so vorzustellen, daß zunächst die dazwischenstehenden Konsonanten durch Voraussnahme der spezifischen *i*-Artikulation palatale Färbung erhielten, dann der Gleitlaut vom Tonvokal zum Konsonanten dasselbe Schicksal erfuhr und hierauf eine Ausgleichung zwischen dem Vokal und dem palatalen Gleitlaut eintrat" (Luick 1914-1940: 185).

⁷ "There is sufficient historical and dialectal evidence that umlaut also passed through the diphthongal stage, and a diphthong is a proper basis to accommodate two morae in place of one" (Liberman 1991: 132).

⁸ "Es wird niemandem zweifelhaft sein, dass wir ihn darin zu sehen haben, dass die laute h, l, r dem i widerstand leisteten, weil sie den dunklen vocalen näher lagen, indem sie entweder weit hinten im munde artikuliert wurden und so der vom i geforderten palatalen articulation sich nicht anbequemten (so das h), oder mit dem tiefen vocalischen u-timbre gesprochen wurden, was bei r und der fall war" (Braune 1877: 552).

⁹ "Phonetically, it seems to have been of Celtic origin" (Prokosch 1921: 474).

recent "A grammar of Old English" (1992),¹⁰ and Charles Jones (1989) discusses the change under the caption "Palatal/frontness vowel harmony", although in this case it might be more of a terminological confusion rather than a theoretical stance.

4. Conclusions

This summary overview of selected recent publications on *i*-umlaut constitutes a reminder of how much of current thinking on the history of English is deeply embedded in the scholarship of the past. It also shows that what seems a new and innovative approach often turns out to be a reiteration of a hypothesis previously formulated in a different theoretical framework.¹¹ Finally, it might serve as a warning against drawing hasty conclusions without consulting existing publications on the subject. Such a practice inevitably leads to lack of originality, and circularity has always been a major fault in linguistic research.

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¹⁰ "There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that we are dealing here with anything other than a type of vowel harmony" (Hogg 1992: 121).

¹¹ This issue in itself is not a new one. Criticism of a similar nature was directed, e.g., by Anttila (1974) against the transformational-generative approach towards historical linguistics.

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