

Two theories of one sound change: Slavic Postvelar Fronting
Lev Blumenfeld, Carleton University

The role of perceptual factors in grammar is one of the unsolved problems of current phonology. In this talk I present an empirical investigation of a Slavic sound change that has recently figured in the debate between formal and functional approaches.

Several Slavic languages have undergone a peculiar change of *postvelar fronting* (PVF). The vowel [ɨ] fronted to [i] after velars in Russian and most other Slavic languages.

There are two competing explanations for this process. The account by Jakobson (1929), revived by Dresher (2009), uses featural markedness. On this view, PVF results from the contrastive status of the velars and the vowels, i.e. a formal property of the inventory.

The competing account by Padgett (2003) uses perceptual dispersion. After an earlier sound change converted velar + *i* sequences into palatals ($ki > \check{c}i$), a hole was left in the inventory. PVF served to fill that hole. The driver of fronting was the insufficient contrast between [kɨ] and [ku]; the resulting contrast between [ki] and [ku] is perceptually superior.

The debate between Dresher and Padgett has been limited to conceptual issues, because the standard facts of PVF underdetermine the choice of the analysis. In this talk I bring dialectal data to bear on the debate, in particular the facts of the Old Novgorod dialect (Zalizniak 1995), which help distinguish the theories. I show that the Novgorod facts are only compatible with the feature markedness, not the dispersion view of PVF.