Issues in the Theory of Contrast
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I will consider some issues in the theory of phonological contrast, particularly issues surrounding the contrastive feature hierarchy. I have argued (Dresher 2009) that the contrastive hierarchy is interesting mainly in connection with the Contrastivist Hypothesis (Hall 2007), which holds that "the phonological component of a language L operates only on those features which are necessary to distinguish the phonemes of L from one another." However, the contrastive hierarchy has uses beyond the Contrastivist Hypothesis, and I will review some of them here:

➢ An early application of the feature hierarchy was in terms of providing a measure of the amount of information conveyed by each phoneme in an inventory (Cherry, Halle and Jakobson 1953; Jakobson and Halle 1956; Halle 1959).

➢ Clements (2003a, b, 2009) proposed that phonological inventories tend to display universal tendencies in terms of which features they use, and these tendencies are reflected in the hierarchy of features, which he called the Accessibility Scale, or Robustness Scale.

➢ There are stronger and weaker forms of the Contrastivist Hypothesis, and I will consider some of these with respect to empirical challenges to the hypothesis (cf. Hall, this conference).

➢ The feature hierarchy has phonological interest even apart from the Contrastivist Hypothesis. Some recent analyses fruitfully apply contrastive hierarchies to diachronic developments (cf. Harvey, this conference, and Oxford, this conference; also Dresher and Zhang 2005; Compton and Dresher 2011; Gardner 2012).

➢ The feature hierarchy may have synchronic applications even if the Contrastivist Hypothesis does not hold, as it appears to play a role in synchronic alternations (cf. Mackenzie, this conference; Motut, this conference; St-Amand, this conference).

➢ Finally, feature hierarchies have applications outside phonology. Cowper and Hall (2011) apply variable feature hierarchies to syntax; Nevins (2012) applies feature hierarchies to kinship systems.

The variety of applications of feature hierarchies suggest that they are indeed, as stated by Jakobson, Fant and Halle (1952), "the pivotal principle of the linguistic structure" and a fundamental principle of cognition.