Markedness and Epenthesis

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De Lacy and Kingston (forthcoming), building on claims of de Lacy (2006). propose a role for markedness in grammar, based on competence, rather than performance, factors (de Lacy's c-markedness), a move which we applaud in principle. However, even once reasonable scholars agree that the domain for useful explorations of a possible role for markedness in grammars resides in UG itself, the question of what precise claims for a role for markedness should be adopted remains open for discussion. In this paper we explore an argument offered up in de Lacy and Kingston (forthcoming) for a UG-based ban on the epenthesis of velars (such as [k]). The argument has a general appeal, in that it also appears to provide a specific mechanism for diachronic argumentation in the exploration of grammar-based markedness. The argument runs like this: (1) Maori has a rule of [t]-epenthesis to break up (certain, presumably illicit) vowel hiatuses; (2) closely related Eastern Polynesian sister Hawaiian shows a change of *t to k; (3) one might therefore expect Hawaiian to show [k]-epenthesis (which would be the regular phonological reflex of Eastern Polynesian [t]-epenthesis); (4) Hawaiian doesn't, showing [ʔ]-epenthesis instead; (5) this is because velar epenthesis is absolutely blocked by UG for all human languages, so when Hawaiian *should have* ended up with it, it *had* to revert to epenthesis of the less-marked glottal stop instead.

We argue in this paper that (1), (3), (4), and (5) are all empirically false, and that the diachronic story offered by de Lacy and Kingston fails under any sensible notion of "language change" (e.g., that offered in Hale 2007). We briefly consider related empirical problems faced by their approach (Telugu u-epenthesis, broadly attested neutralization to ŋ), arguing that their attempts to sidestep these counterexamples are equally unsatisfying.