

The limits of opaque phonology: Icelandic glide deletion reconsidered

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Opaque interactions between sound patterns remain a difficult challenge for both constraint-based and rule-based models of phonology (McCarthy, 2007; Baković, 2011; Prillop, 2018). Proposed solutions often leave a residue of reported subtypes unaccounted for, making it especially important to confirm the factual basis of individual cases (Zimmermann and Trommer, 2016). Meanwhile, many “parade examples” get recycled from one tertiary source to another, uncritically (and unwittingly) adopting descriptive characterizations and analytical assumptions from much older secondary sources, which may on closer inspection turn out to be disputable.

In this paper I focus on one commonly cited case of opaque phonology, Glide Deletion (GD) in Icelandic and its counterbleeding interaction with Epenthesis (Anderson, 1974; Kiparsky, 1984; Itô, 1988; Karvonen and Sherman, 1997; Riggs, 2011). While GD features prominently in the theoretical literature, it is typically ignored in treatments by Icelandic linguists (Ottósson, 1988; Rögnvaldsson, 1993, 2013; Indriðason, 1994; Árnason, 2005, 2011). I argue, on the basis of often-overlooked facts, augmented with evidence from corpora (e.g. Bjarnadóttir, 2012; Steingrímsson et al., 2018), that GD cannot be maintained as a phonological phenomenon; consequently it should not be counted as an attested case of opaque phonology.

Glide Deletion targets /j, v/ in contexts where these are (ostensibly) unsyllabifiable, namely C_{C,#} (Kiparsky, 1984; Itô, 1988). It appears to overapply before certain [-yr] suffixes (e.g. M.NOM.SG), whose [y] is argued to be due to Epenthesis (/r/ → [-yr]); this opaque (counterbleeding) interaction is traditionally captured by ordering GD before Epenthesis, e.g. ...Cj-r# → ...C-r# → ...C-yr#. Canonical examples of /j/ and /v/ deletion, masc. *bylur* ‘(snow)storm’ (/pɪlj-/) and fem. *ör* ‘arrow’ (/œrv-/), are shown in (1); allophonic vowel length is omitted for clarity.

- (1) NOM.SG [pɪl-yr], ACC.SG [pɪl-Ø] vs. NOM.PL [pɪlj-ɪr], DAT.PL [pɪlj-ym]
 NOM/ACC.SG [œrv-Ø] vs. GEN.SG/NOM.PL [œrv-ar], DAT.PL [œrv-ym]

The empirical basis for /v/ → Ø as a phonological process turns out to be extremely weak. Nearly all words with earlier [v]~Ø alternations have fallen out of use, lost the alternation, or independently require listing of allomorphs. GD analyses also overlook the crucial fact that stem-final /Cv/ clusters in fact routinely retain /v/ in GD contexts (e.g. [θœrv] ‘need’, [koulv] ‘floor’); the culprit here is Icelandic orthography, which renders non-initial /v/ primarily as <f> (*þörf*, *gólf*).

Though [j]~Ø alternations are better attested, the GD analysis does not fare much better there. I focus on two counterarguments, supported by corpus evidence. First, *overapplication* of GD is not limited to situations where opaque interaction can be appealed to. It is systematic before certain V-initial suffixes (e.g. DAT.SG /-ɪ/) and appears to be gaining ground in other morphological contexts. For instance, compounds based on *bylur* (e.g. *felli#bylur* ‘hurricane’) tend to generalize [j]-less [-pɪl-] to all inflected forms except DAT.PL and GEN.PL (e.g. NOM.PL [-pɪlj-ɪr]~[-pɪl-ɪr] vs. consistent DAT.PL [-pɪlj-ym]). Secondly, GD *underapplies* in deverbal (neuter) nouns like [krɛnj]/*[krɛn] ‘bawling’ from [krɛnj-a] ‘to bawl’ (cf. [pɛr]/*[pɛrj] ‘berry’, GEN.PL [pɛrj-a]). While this has been noted before (Orešnik, 1978; Kiparsky, 1984), its significance has been underappreciated. For instance, this word-formation process is less constrained and more productive than previously claimed. Furthermore, Kiparsky’s (1984) attempt to explain away the GD-defying behaviour of such nouns by deriving them in the postlexical component is untenable. Contrary to Kiparsky’s claim, these nouns can take inflection (e.g. DEF.DAT.SG [krɛnj-ɪ#ny] ‘the bawling’).

GD is part of a cluster of sound patterns – together with Epenthesis, U-Umlaut and Syncope – that appear to interact in opaque ways (e.g. U-Umlaut is counterfered by Epenthesis and counterbled by Syncope). I conclude by briefly illustrating how similar counterarguments can be levelled against the standard treatment of these other phenomena as genuinely phonological processes.

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