

# CONTRAST IN INUIT CONSONANT INVENTORIES\*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The /t/~j/ alternation

In Inuit dialects (and to a lesser extent in Yupik) voiceless stops alternate with voiced continuants (Kaplan 1982, Ulving 1953). Most of these consonant alternations in Inuit dialects appear to involve only voicing and frication/spirantization (North Baffin, Dorais 2003, 98-103):<sup>1</sup>

(1)	/p/~v/:	sinik- <b>p</b> uŋa sleep-INDIC.1SG 'I sleep'	taku- <b>v</b> uŋa see-INDIC.1SG 'I see'
(2)	/k/~γ/:	tikik- <b>k</b> uma arrive-COND.1SG 'if/when I arrive'	taku- <b>γ</b> uma see-COND.1SG 'if/when I see'
(3)	/q/~ʁ/:	ama <b>q</b> qu-t wolf-ABS.PL 'wolves'	ama <b>ʁ</b> uq wolf.ABS.SG 'wolf'

However, the partner of /t/ in this alternation is the glide /j/ in North Baffin and a number of other dialects. This is a more complicated alternation involving more than just a change in voicing and frication.

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\* I would like to thank Elan Dresher, who supervised my General Paper on this topic and provided invaluable guidance; Keren Rice, who was the second reader on that paper and whose comments and questions were very insightful; and Peter Avery, who was third reader and whose questions were similarly helpful. This paper is a much more condensed version of Compton (2008).

<sup>1</sup> The environments and productivity of these alternations vary across dialects. For instance, while in King Island Bering Strait Inupiaq gradation takes place across phonological words after unstressed syllables (Kaplan 1985), in most dialects the alternation is confined to inflectional endings (which are numerous in Inuit) and instances of stem-internal consonant gemination in the formation of duals and plurals. While the latter may be instances of frozen allomorphy, I still take them to be reflective of an earlier synchronic phonological process, such as that of the King Island dialect.

- |     |                 |   |                                      |
|-----|-----------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| (4) | <i>/t~/j/</i> : | sinik-tuᅇa<br>sleep-PART.1SG<br>'I sleep' | taku-juᅇa<br>see-PART.1SG<br>'I see' |
|-----|-----------------|---|--------------------------------------|

Why is there a change of place of articulation (among other feature changes)? The */t~/j/* alternation occurs in the same environments as the other alternations (at morpheme boundaries on suffixes and in stem-internal consonant gemination). How can we unify the alternations as a single phenomenon? It is difficult to imagine a single (plausible) phonological rule for these alternations that would subsume the */t~/j/* alternation.

## 2 Variability of */t/*'s partners across dialects

Another question arising from the */t~/j/* alternation is why there is so much variability in the form of */t/*'s partner across different Inuit dialects. It is realised as [j] in a number of dialects, [ɹ] in several dialects, [z] in Cape Dorset, [ʒ] in some areas of Itivimiut, [ʃ] in West Greenlandic, [l] in East Greenlandic, and [h] in Thule (Polar Greenlandic):

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| (5) | <i>/t~/ɹ/</i> in Uummarmiutun (Dorais, 2003, p. 48)       |
| a)  | tautuk-tuatin<br>see-PART.2SG<br>'you (one) saw'          |
| b)  | niᅇi-juᅇa<br>eat-PART.1SG<br>'I am eating'                |
| (6) | <i>/t~/ɹ/</i> in Natsilingmiutut (p.67)                   |
| a)  | tuhaq-tuᅇa<br>hear-PART.1SG<br>'I hear'                   |
| b)  | niᅇi-juᅇa<br>eat-PART.1SG<br>'I eat'                      |
| (7) | <i>/t~/ʃ/</i> in West Greenlandic (Rischel, 1974, p. 243) |
| a)  | sinit-tuq<br>sleep-PART.3SG<br>'he/she is sleeping'       |
| b)  | aki-ᅇuq<br>answer-PART.3SG<br>'he/she is answering'       |

- (8) /t~/l/ in East Greenlandic (Robbe & Dorais, 1986, p. 13)
- a) tiyit-tuut  
arrive-PART.1PL  
'we coming'
  - b) tayi-luut  
see-PART.1PL  
'we seeing'
- (9) /t~/h/ in Thule/Polar Greenlandic (Fortescue, 1991, p. 56)
- a) tuᵛaaq-tuq  
straight-PART.3SG  
'is straight'
  - b) niuᵛa-huq  
bend-PART.3SG  
'is bent'

Why is there so much variation in the form of /t/'s partner across Inuit dialects? Also, while \*t appears to have alternated with \*ᵛ in Proto-Eskimo (Fortescue, Jacobson, & Kaplan, 1994), and while \*ᵛ has been replaced by a variety of segments in modern dialects, it is curious that no dialect has chosen /d/ or /ᵛ/ as the modern exponent of \*ᵛ. Arguably /d/ would be phonetically closer to \*ᵛ (and to modern /t/) than most of the other modern exponents.

### 3 Analysis

#### 3.1 Contrast

Following Dresher (2002), Dresher & Zhang (2004), and Dresher, Piggott, & Rice (1994) (*inter alia*) I propose an analysis that employs the Successive Division Algorithm (SDA). Dresher (2002) presents the following informal version of the SDA:

- (10) Successive Division Algorithm (SDA) (informal version)
- a) Begin with no feature specifications: assume all sounds are allophones of a single undifferentiated phoneme.
  - b) If the primordial allophonic soup is found to consist of more than one contrasting member, select a feature and divide the set into as many subsets as the feature allows for. (With binary features, it becomes the Successive Binary Algorithm.)
  - c) Repeat step (b) in each subset: keep dividing up the inventory into sets, applying successive features in turn, until every set has only one member.

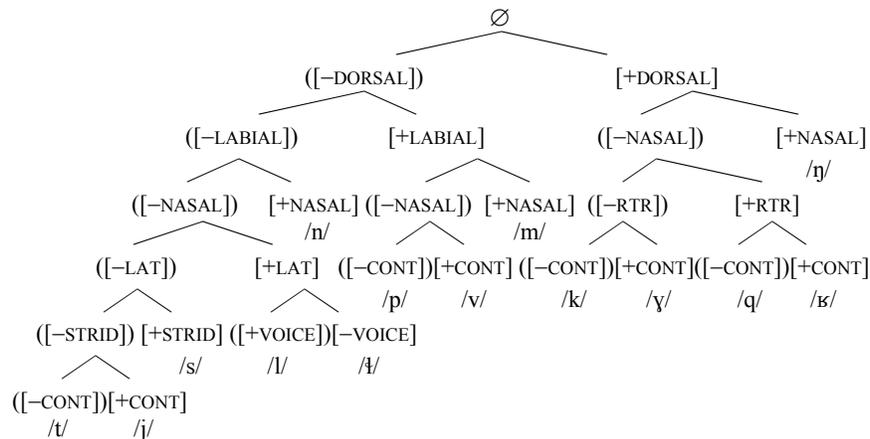
The SDA has the effect of creating *contrastive* feature specifications for each phoneme. The scope of the features in an inventory (as applied by the SDA) can be represented in feature hierarchies. (Additional *redundant* features which provide full specification are added post-lexically.)

In particular, all the alternations (including the /t~/j/ alternation and the alternation of /t/ with the other exponents of \*ð) involve a change of continuance. I propose that all the stops in question differ only from their alternants by the *contrastive* feature [+CONTINUANT]. If we assume that phonology computes only contrastive features, all the alternations can be characterized as the insertion/spread or deletion/delinking of the contrastive feature [+CONTINUANT].

The order in which features are applied varies cross-linguistically and cross-dialectally. Accordingly, phonetically identical segments may have different contrastive feature-specifications in different dialects.

Below is the contrastive hierarchy I propose for North Baffin (Compton 2008, p.69):<sup>2</sup>

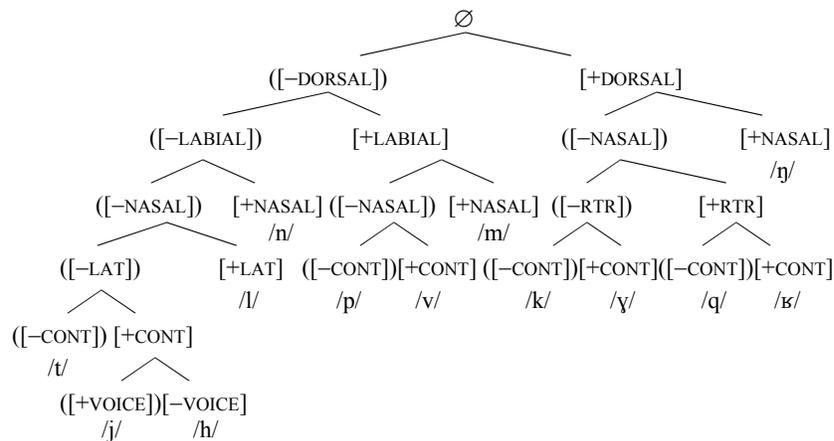
(11) Contrastive feature hierarchy for North Baffin consonants



Given this contrastive feature hierarchy for North Baffin, /t/ and /j/ differ only in terms of the feature continuant. Also, the relationship between /t/ and /j/ is now entirely parallel to that between /p/ and /v/, /k/ and /ç/, and /q/ and /ʎ/. Thus, we can characterize all the alternations above in terms of the feature [+CONTINUANT]:

<sup>2</sup> In Compton (2008) I propose contrastive feature hierarchies for sixteen dialects of Inuit and three dialects of Yupik based on the phonological inventories and activity in each dialect.



(14) Contrastive feature hierarchy for Inuinnaqtun consonant inventory

Notice that in terms of *contrastive* features, /j/ and /h/ differ only by the feature [VOICE]. However, /t/ is contrastively underspecified for voicing. While I argue that the /t~/j/ alternation is due to the feature [+CONTINUANT], by adding this feature to /t/ we actually don't arrive at any segment in the Inuinnaqtun inventory:

(15)	/t/	→	?	cf.	/j/	/h/
	[-CONT] <sup>3</sup>		[+CONT]		[+CONT]	[+CONT]
	...		...		[+VOICE]	[-VOICE]
					...	...

Alternatively, by treating one value of each contrastive feature as marked (and the other as default), we can explain why /t/ alternates with /j/, despite the fact that /h/ appears equally underspecified for place.

<sup>3</sup> Here I ignore the contrastive features that all three segments (/t/, /j/, and /h/) share.



- (19) [u~~xx~~uq]<sup>4</sup> (cf. Siglitun: uqsuq)  
/uqhuq/  
'blubber'
- (20) [pitixxik]<sup>5</sup> (cf. Siglitun: pitiksivialuk)  
/pitikhik/  
'bow'
- (21) [piffi] (cf. Siglitun: pipsi)  
/piphi/  
'dried fish'

Furthermore, the contrastive features on /h/ [+CONTINUANT] and [-VOICE] (and only those features) spread to the preceding consonant:

- (22) / p h / → [ f f ]  
 [+LABIAL] [+CONT] [-VOICE]      [+LABIAL] [+CONT] [-VOICE] [+LABIAL]  
 [+LABIAL] [-VOICE]      [+LABIAL] [-VOICE]
- 

Thus, by using contrastive underspecification we can begin to explain why /h/ spreads its continuance but not its place of articulation and furthermore why it is susceptible to the place of articulation of an adjacent consonant but not to its continuance (i.e. it doesn't become a stop).

#### 4 Benefits of this analysis

##### 4.1 A single rule for all the alternations

All the alternations at each of the four places of articulation can now be explained with a single simple rule (although the environments vary across dialects). In each case stops become their marked contrastively [+CONTINUANT] partners.

##### 4.2 Encompasses all dialects

This analysis also applies to all the various alternants of /t/ across dialects. Notably, [+CONTINUANT] is virtually the only feature shared by the various

<sup>4</sup> This form also appears to contain a morpheme boundary between /q/ and /h/. In the Aivilik dialect: *u~~ks~~uq* 'fat, oil, grease'; *u~~ks~~i~~st~~uq* 'it is oiled, lubricated with grease or oil' (Spalding, 1998, p.191).

<sup>5</sup> This form also appears to contain a morpheme boundary between /k/ and /h/. In the Aivilik dialect: *pi~~ks~~it* 'bow (of an arrow)'; *pi~~ks~~a~~st~~uq* 'he suddenly let go of it' (Spalding, 1998, p.97).

exponents of PE \*ð and the only feature that can reasonably differentiate them as a class from /t/.

### 4.3 Explains Proto-Eskimo Alternations

This analysis also accounts for the reconstructed alternation between \*t and \*ð in Proto-Eskimo. According to entries in Fortescue, Jacobson, & Kaplan (1994)'s *Comparative Eskimo Dictionary*, \*t and \*ð alternated at morpheme boundaries. Once again, despite a change in place of articulation (coronal/apical to interdental) this change can also be characterized as involving the contrastive feature [+CONTINUANT].

### 4.4 Explains the behaviour of /h/ in Inuinnaqtun

Positing that /h/ is specified as [+CONTINUANT, –VOICE] and unmarked for place in Inuinnaqtun explains its behaviour in assimilation; assimilating to the place of an adjacent consonant while spreading its continuance to that consonant.

## 5 Potential area of future research

An interesting, albeit speculative, possibility related to the stop-continuant alternation is that stops and continuants were merely allophones at an earlier stage of Proto-Eskimo (i.e. pre-Proto-Eskimo). This could explain the origin of the alternations (as allophones in complementary distribution) as well as the limited phonotactic distribution of the continuants (not occurring word-initially or word-finally). The allophonic [+CONTINUANT] contrast could have emerged into the current phonemic contrast at a later stage of Proto-Eskimo.

## 6 Conclusion

The contrastive feature approach unifies the alternations synchronically, within each dialect and between modern dialects, as well as diachronically with Proto-Eskimo. Differences between dialects are due to redundant features which are essentially invisible to the alternation phenomenon. An approach employing full feature-specification would not be able to achieve the same result without considerable complication.

Furthermore, such an approach can help us begin to explain the behaviour of segments like /h/ in Inuinnaqtun and Natsilingmiutut; while phonetically glottal, /h/ in these dialects appears underspecified for place. Conversely, some dialects possess [h] as an allophone of /q/. Such dialects would arguably have a very different feature specification for [h]; differences that are easily accommodated by the contrastive feature approach.

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