Laryngeal specification in Present Day and Historical English

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It is a well-established fact that there are two sets of languages with respect to the surface manifestations of laryngeal features. The first set, represented by, e.g. Standard German, is characterised by the presence of aspiration in what are traditionally called the 'voiceless' stops /p, t, k/ when they occur initially in a word or a stressed syllable and by the absence of vocal fold vibration in what are traditionally called the 'voiced' stops /b, d, g/ in all environments, except a syllable medial sonorant 'passive voicing' context. In the second set of languages represented by, e.g. Polish, aspiration of the voiceless stops does not occur and the voiced stops are fully voiced in all positions.

Two traditions have arisen from the ongoing debate on how these differences should be represented phonologically. Tradition (i), the 'standard' approach, argues that all languages employ the same underlying contrast between voiceless unspecified obstruents and voiced obstruents specified for the feature |voice|. The different realisational facts are purely phonetically governed. Tradition (ii) argues that the difference is phonological, i.e. the two sets of languages have different underlying laryngeal representations. In German 'voiceless' obstruents carry the specification |spread|, and 'voiced' stops are unspecified. In Polish the voiceless obstruents are unspecified and the voiced ones are specified for |voice|. Evidence for this can be found crucially in the active participation of a specification in processes like assimilation. Tradition (ii) has been labelled Laryngeal Realism in Honeybone (2005) and Iverson & Salmons (2006)

In this paper I argue that tradition (ii) describes the representation of laryngeal contrasts in Present Day English (PDE) more adequately than tradition (i), and I investigate how far back the laryngeal representation of English can be traced. Synchronic surface facts like aspiration in the stop series, e.g. [pʰ]*in, a*[tʰ]*ack,* and absence of vocal fold vibration in the 'voiced' obstruents, except in 'passive voicing' contexts, e.g. [b̥]*in, li*[d̥], *a*[b]*ey*, provide evidence for a tradition (ii) analysis. In addition, asymmetric voicing assimilation in PDE in favour of assimilation to voicelessness seems to suggest a phonologically active |spread| feature and therefore argues for tradition (ii), e.g. morphonological 'devoicing' of /-z/ and /-d/, e.g. *cats* /t+z/→[ts], *sacked* /k+d/→[kt], and assimilation across morpheme boundaries, e.g. *collected stamps* /d+s/→/ts/.

Importantly, there is evidence that such asymmetry in assimilation has existed throughout the history of English. Evidence from Luick (1964: 1071) suggests that the assimilation pattern has existed since the 14th or 15th century. Additionally, spelling evidence exists for a pre-Old English assimilation process in clusters. This process seems to show only assimilation to voicelessness, e.g. /pd/ > /pt/ *cēpte* 'kept', /td/ > /tt/ *mētte* 'met', /kd/ > /kt/ *īecte* 'increased', /fd/ > /ft/ *pyfte* 'puffed', /sd/ > /st/ *cyste* 'kissed'(e.g., Luick (1964), Hogg (1992), Quirk & Wrenn (1963), Campbell (1959), Wardale (1960), Brook (1955) and Sievers (1899)). This seems to unambiguously support the view that English has been a |spread| language since its very beginning.

Additional support for a tradition (ii) analysis of English comes from a process which took place in late Middle English and seems to show final obstruent voicing in unstressed words like *is* and *was,* unstressed suffixes like –*es,* e.g. *man's, houses, lives,* and unstressed syllables in words like *knowledge.* Final voicing (i.e. the acquisition of |voice| by an unspecified segment in tradition (i)) is generally seen as a highly marked process (e.g. Hyman 1975: 17-18). However, tradition (ii) can deal with this seemingly bizarre process simply by recognising that it consists of the removal of the feature |spread| in the marked series of obstruents.

All these facts suggest that Laryngeal Realism offers the best analysis for both the synchronic and the diachronic facts of English.