THE RELEVANCE OF MORPHEME BOUNDARIES TO NASAL ASSIMILATION IN CANADIAN ENGLISH

Ruth S. Roth

Consider the words lint, sink, blunt, frank, single, uncle and wind; all of which contain the phoneme /n/. Note that lint, blunt and wind differ from the others in the pronunciation of /n/. Sink, frank, single, and uncle all contain an /n/ folowed by a voiceless /k/ and herein lies the difference. It appears that when an /n/ and a /k/ appear together, nasal assimilation occurs, changing the alveolar nasal /n/ to the velar nasal /ŋ/.

Linguists Chomsky and Halle in their book *Sound Patterns of English* (p.419) state informally that "The rule that assimilates point of articulation must be a relatively late rule of the phonology, occuring after the stress rule, since it involves position of stress".

To back up their argument they use such examples as /kɔ́ŋkord/ and /kɔnkɔ́rdəns/, /kɔ́ŋgrɛs/ and /kongrɛ́šənəl/, indicating that the stress rule is applied before the rule of nasal assimilation. That is, that assimilation occurs between the /n/ and the /k/ only when the syllable containing the /n/ takes main stress (1-stress). They claim that concordance and congressional, words in which the next syllable takes the main stress do not have the rule of nasal assimilation applied to them.

It has been noted, however, that this reasoning does not necessarily hold. I, for example, pronounce congressional with an /ŋ/, the same as congress, in spite of the stress. This is not consistent in my dialect however, as concordance is pronounced with an /ŋ/.

Note the following chart (based on my own pronunciation)

Stress on syllable Following /n/		Stress on Syllable Preceding /n/	
uncover	n	longer	ŋ
incompetent	n	singer	ŋ
mongolian	ŋ	mongoloid	ŋ
congressional	ŋ	congress	ŋ
Hungarian	ŋ	Hungary	ŋ
concordance	ŋ	concord	ŋ

Here it can be seen that stress does not allow one to predict nasal assimilation consistently.

There must, therefore, be another way to predict where the rule applies and where it does not. Notice that in words such as uncover, incompetent, and ingrown, it does not apply. In these words the /n/ is part of a negative prefix, a definite separate morpheme from the rest of the word. Note also that in word pairs such as can go, can cut, tin can, and broken gun, an /n/ and a /k/ or /g/ appear together, yet there is no assimilation of the two. Obviously, there are two separate morphemes in each of these pairs. It seems, then, that assimilation

depends upon morpheme boundaries.

The pronunciation of the /n/ as an alveolar or a velar in words such as pancreas, Vancouver, and vanquish, seems to vary from one person to another, regardless of dialect. Nasal assimilation or the lack of it is virtually unpredictable in these words. Perhaps, in Vancouver and vanquish, the van- resembles a prefix, or separate word, as in vanguard, Van Gogh, van Kleek, etc. In words such as congressional, congregation, and conglomerate, in which assimilation is not consistently applied, the con- can also be viewed as a prefix, as it is in such words as confederate and congenial.

In the case of Vancouver, the pronunciation with the velar nasal /ŋ/ seems to be preferred in British Columbia, while elsewhere, e.g., Alberta, the alveolar nasal /n/ predominates.

There is, perhaps, a reanalysis taking place in the grammar of the English language. A child now has the option of interpreting many words cited in this paper as one or two morphemes. Either analysis is consistent with the rest of the morphology of English, and the choice seems to make no difference anywhere else in the grammar. Therefore, the choice made (subconsciously) by each individual acquiring English is random. It makes no difference in intelligibility either, as either way there is the same phonemic form in terms of phonological segments. There also seems to be no real geographical or social correlation as to which choice is made, one or two morphemes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chomsky, Noam, and Morris Halle, Sound Patterns of English, Harper and Row, New York, 1968.