Typology driven change or change driven typology?

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The typology of syllable vs. word languages (Auer 1993, 2001) has been successfully applied in the explanation of linguistic change by various authors (e.g. Nübling & Schrampke 2004, Szczepaniak 2007), and the participants of a recently held workshop on this subject at FRIAS in Freiburg.[1] Nevertheless, this typology remains relatively unknown outside of the German speaking area.

The typology is rooted in the theory of Prosodic Phonology (Nespor & Vogel 1986, [2]2007) and postulates two prototypes of language: *syllable languages,* in which the syllable is the most important prosodic category, and *word languages*, in which the prosodic word is the most important prosodic category. In syllable languages, the ease of articulation seems to come first, by the optimization of syllable structure, often at the expense of a clear marking of morphological structure (e.g. due to resyllabification across morphological boundaries), and hence at the expense of the ease of morphological recognition. By contrast, in a word language, processes leading to a complex and irregular syllable structure are quite common, but morphological structure is clearly phonologically marked.

In a detailed study of the evolution of High German, Szczepaniak (2007) shows that there was a typological evolution from a relative syllable language in Old High German (OHG) to a clear word language in New High German (NHG). The diachronic processes in question include final devoicing, vowel reduction, vowel syncope, loss of epenthesis, consonant insertion, vowel shortening and lengthening, degemination, changes in foot structure.

In this contribution, I will give of a small synopsis if this and I will also briefly show that in the history of French, there was an opposite development. While Old French was a word language, Modern French is a clear syllable language. This evolution involves the disappearance of final devoicing, the disappearance of synchronic vowel reduction, a change of the character of vowel deletion from being stress determined to being syllable determined, a proliferation of cliticization and resyllabification, the development of unbounded feet, the loss of word accent.

The fact that for both languages, there seems to be bundle of interrelated developments toward a certain prototype, raises the question whether a change or a couple of changes into one direction on the syllable language - word language scale may entail further changes into this direction. I will argue that this is indeed the case, and that there must be a constant interaction between the changes in question and elements in the prosodic hierarchy, which may then induce further changes.

However, factors such as language contact may intervene. In the evolution from Latin to Modern French, one witnesses two reversals of the direction of the typological change. This, of course, calls for an explanation, which needs still to be given. This brings us back to the general question of the conditioning nature of language typology in linguistic change.

References:

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[1] see http://www.frias.uni-freiburg.de/lang_and_lit/veranstaltungen/phonological-work-lili/view?set_language=en