

Title: *Intersection of phonetics, phonology and morphology in language change: the case of diachronic nasal insertion in early Indic*

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Abstract: For well over a century, historical linguists have puzzled over the existence of etymologically unexpected nasals in a handful of derivational and inflectional morphemes in Sanskrit, all of which involve a sequence */-V:ms#* (Brugman 1879; Thumb and Hauschild 1958; Jamison 1991; Gotō 2013). These nasals elude explanation using the standard techniques of historical linguistics; they can neither be predicted via a carefully-framed phonological rule or constraint nor convincingly accounted for via inter- or intra-paradigmatic analogy or leveling. This seemingly small, language-specific problem takes on outsized importance when one considers the methodological implications of the fact that standard frameworks have repeatedly failed to account for the actual language data.

The current paper will approach this vexed problem from an entirely new angle. Making use of advances in our understanding of phonetics, phonology and dialectology, I propose that speakers of early Indic produced a phonetically-motivated gradient realization of underlying */-V:ms#* that ranged from *[-V:s#]* to *[-V:ms#]*. This created a situation where *[-V:s#]* was phonologically ambiguous between underlying */-V:s#* and */-V:ms#*, leading to diachronic reinterpretation at the morpheme level based on structural considerations and morpho-semantic overlap.

While the conceptualization of linguistics in terms of primary domains and their interfaces is widely accepted in linguistic theory, the concepts of interface and overlap are rarely applied in practice in historical linguistic analyses. The current case study underscores the important role that cross-domain phenomena can have in language change, a natural result of the fact that language learners, when presented with noisy and complex phonetic input, are bound to vary in their determination of where phonetics stop, where phonology starts, and how speech sounds interact with the morphemes that they constitute.