

Where do new phonemes come from? Explaining the Pama-Nyungan (lack of) sound change

Abstract: Language is a complex dynamic system transmitted indirectly between individuals. It is inherently variable and subject to numerous competing constraints and biases. Such conditions make change over time the norm. This includes the creation and loss of phonemic contrasts, along with changes in their distribution and realization. Why is it, then, that some language families show a great deal of reconstructable changes involving the gain and loss of phonemic contrasts, while others (such as Pama-Nyungan) show very few instances of such changes? In this talk, I review three claims for how sound change (particularly contrast creation) occurs. One involves language contact (contact with different phoneme systems leads to new contrasts). The second is Soshkuthy's (2015) proposal that sound change arises through perturbation of language-specific phonology, such as changes in functional load (which could be -- but need not be -- the result of language contact). The third involves Dresher's (e.g. 2009) claims that phonologization only occurs when contrastive features are active elsewhere in the phonology, and where allophonic variation is predictable and conditioned by environment (cf. Yu 2013 among others). I argue that none of these claims alone is sufficient to explain the range of changes (and non-changes) we see in Pama-Nyungan, and instead sound changes arises through the interaction of primary and secondary (reinforcement) cues to phonemic contrasts. Understanding Pama-Nyungan sound change (or lack thereof) thus gives us insight into how sound change occurs more generally.