

Colloquium report Phonlex conference, Toulouse, September 8th-10th 2010.

Roland Noske

The conference was organized by the Phonlex project (From Phonology to the Lexicon: liaison and cognition in contemporary French). This project brings together 4 linguistic and psycholinguistic research teams, in Toulouse, Grenoble and Paris. These teams have been investigating various dimensions of French liaison: phonological and phonetic aspects, regional variation, the synchronic and diachronic dimension, oral developmental issues as well as liaison in written production. These topics constituted the core of the conference. Because French liaison is not an isolated sandhi phenomenon within the languages of the world, papers on other languages which discuss the wider issue of word-segmentation and adjustments at word-boundaries were presented.

The conference program can be found on:

http://phonlex.free.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13&Itemid=34&lang=en

The reactions to my paper, “The History of French Liaison in View of the Typology of Syllable vs. Word Languages”, were very positive and interesting. In it, I drew the attention to the fact that the typology of syllable languages vs. word languages (Auer 1993, 1994, 2001, Auer & Uhmann 1998) is relatively young and little known, especially outside of the German speaking area. Its basic idea is that in some languages, the syllable is the most prominent prosodic category, whereas in other languages it is the phonological word.

I showed the evolution of French liaison can analyzed in the light of the general evolution of Old French (OF) to Modern French (MF), viz. that of a word language to a syllable language (in the opposite direction of the evolution in High German). For instance, while final devoicing and intervocalic voicing of fricatives were processes of OF, and typical of a word language, their remnants now only survive in a liaison context (gran[t]ami, vou[z]êtes). Liaison started when the role of the syllable as a prosodic category was on the increase. Products of final devoicing that were not included the newly formed liaison, however, disappeared together with the word language character of the language.

I also showed that the above analysis is corroborated by the behaviour of schwa. In the evolution from OF to MF, this product of historical vowel reduction (a feature of a word language), kept its deletability, but is now deleted for reasons of syllable structure optimization (a process typical of a syllable language), while in OF this happened under the influence of stress (a process typical of a word language).

This point of view gave rise to a lively discussion.

There was a curious incident at the beginning of conference. The main organizer, Jacques Durand, was reprimanded by an official person of Toulouse 2 University for being so courteous as to speak English in his welcoming address. According to the university official in question, he should have spoken French, despite the fact that this was an international conference and that several participants could not understand French.