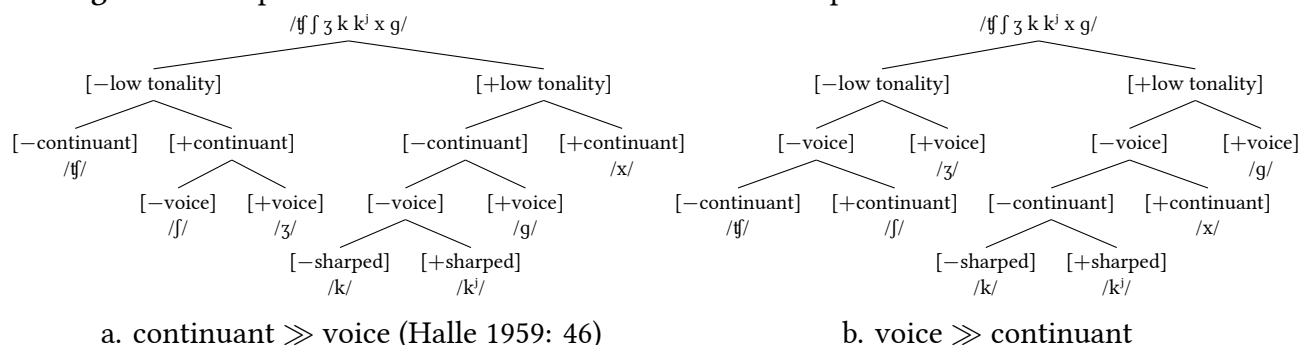


The contrastive hierarchy in Russian: Voicing versus continuancy

In arguing against the structuralist conception of the phoneme, Halle (1957, 1959) pointed out that Russian regressive voicing assimilation (RVA) creates some surface segments that are not underlyingly contrastive. Although /ts tʃ x/ do not have underlying voiced counterparts */dʒ dʒ ʎ/, they both trigger and undergo RVA. These facts argued against the structuralist phoneme, because RVA would have to apply in the morphophonemic component, converting morpho-phonemes (e.g., //ʃ//) into phonemes (/ʒ/), and then again in the component that converts phonemes (/x/) into allophones ([ʎ]).

In Halle's analysis, the unpaired voiceless obstruents are underlyingly not specified for [voice]; features are assigned according to the hierarchy (partially) shown in Figure 1a. Accordingly, [−voice] must be filled in on /ts tʃ x/ by a rule that applies before RVA.

Figure 1: Two possible contrastive hierarchies for Russian palatal and velar obstruents



Suppose instead that underspecification persists through (some well-defined part of) the derivation (Dresher 2009). To trigger RVA, /ts tʃ x/ must be underlyingly specified as [−voice]. This can only be accomplished by changing the scope of the features, resulting in some other underspecification elsewhere. Figure 1b shows what happens if [voice] is given scope over [continuant]: /ts tʃ x/ are now [−voice], but /g/ and /ʒ/ are unspecified for [continuant] (there being no */ʎ dʒ/). Strikingly, this revised hierarchy produces good results. In some varieties of Russian, /g/ is realized phonetically as [ɣ] or [ɦ], consistent with (though not entailing) that it is unspecified for [±continuant]. In morphophonological velar–palatal alternations, underlying continuancy is preserved in the pairs /x/~/ʃ/ and /k/~/tʃ/, but /g/ alternates with /ʒ/, as in the positive/comparative pairs in (1) and the 3PL/3SG pairs in (2) (Lightner 1965):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(1) a. tʲix-ij tʲif-e ‘quiet(er)’</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">b. ʒark-ij ʒartʃ-e ‘hot(ter)’</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">c. dorog-oj doroz-e ‘dear(er)’</p> | <p>(2) a. max-ut maʃ-et ‘wave(s)’</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">b. pek-ut peʃ-et ‘bake(s)’</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">c. strig-ut striʒ-et ‘shear(s)’</p> |
|---|--|

These considerations thus reveal another path illuminated by Halle's famous argument, one that was not taken at the time.

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