

Systematic versus lexical explanations for Old French voicing of onset /k/

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ABSTRACT

I propose here a regular sound change as a unified systematic explanation for the voicing of onset /k/ in Old French (“Velar Onset Voicing”, or VOV) of 13 reflexes of inherited Latin etyma and 4 reflexes of Germanic borrowings, which were each given separate lexically-specific explanations in past literature. Namely, the proposed rule operated in the twelfth century, and changes /k/ to /g/ before a sequence of /l/ or /r/, followed by /a/, and is supported by an exhaustive examination of the evidence of outcomes of etyma with s/#kla/ and /#kra/ onsets. The dating and conditioning of this sound change appear consistent with both the philological evidence, and the chronological evidence of the dating of interacting sound changes that *feed*, *bleed*, and *counterbleed* it by determining the presence or absence of the proposed conditioning context.

The ultimate origins of this regular Old French velar onset voicing are most likely attributable as the long-term result of a much older process in Romance of post-vocalic pre-sonorant voicing. Due to well-known earlier developments, this process became no longer productive word-internally; in Proto-Gallo-Romance, I propose, the formerly solely phonetically conditioned post-vocalic and pre-sonorant stop voicing was retained, in a progressively modified form, at the word onset, much as the same process survives in a modified form at the coda as *liaison*. I present various points of evidence from related Romance varieties that are consistent with the evolution of such a system in Romance, and evidence of similarly conditioned voicing phenomena in both Romance and beyond to demonstrate further typological precedents.

All exceptions to this proposed rule can also be accounted for systematically, using the two main explanations used in the classical Neogrammarian approach: a couple of words with the “sharp” sensory meanings that are known elsewhere to associate with a phonosemantic pattern favoring voiceless stop onsets, and three identifiable and quite routine analogical classes. Each of these analogical classes corresponds to a highly derivationally productive word family, in which the root retained /k/ at the onset due to being affected by previously described *bleeding rules*. Thus, what happened seems close to a textbook example of a classically Neogrammarian scenario, and yet to date it appears to have been missed in favor of a plethora of separate lexeme-focused accounts. The proposed regular sound law and its proposed dating generates predictions that are consistent with both the attested outcomes and the interactions (feeding, bleeding, counterbleeding) predicted by its timing relative to other well-known phenomena. Meanwhile, all its exceptions can be accounted for by recourse to phonosemantics and analogy within three word families, motivated by the regular outcome of the root lexeme of each of the three families.

Although French diachrony has no lack of meticulous past study, previous treatments of the words in question considered each in isolation with the regular sound change proposed not even considered as a possibility, so this study shows the potential of the Neogrammarian approach to yield new insights, even in such a well-studied language. I do not deny that there are cases where Gillieron’s maxim “*chaque mot a son propre histoire*” is apt, but rather I maintain that a unified and predictive (thus, relatively falsifiable) account in terms of systematic phenomena is preferable to giving each relevant etymon its own isolated, non-predictive, and non-falsifiable hypothesis, which can risk “*missing the forest for the trees*”. Accordingly, VOV underscores how the lexically-focused approach and the phonology and morphology-focused systematic Neogrammarian approach are necessarily complementary companions in diachronic analysis.