

Morphophonological deletion in Australian languages

Continuing the quantitative analysis of Australian phonologies in Round (2023a–d), which cover segment inventories; phonotactics; lenition and assimilation; and nasal cluster deletion, here I examine phonological rules of deletion.

The dataset is the AusPhon Alternations database (Round 2003c), and here I report on progress analysing deletion rules, currently based on 310 morphophonological alternations in 73 languages, or around 60% of the total deletion dataset. Though there is still a substantial amount left to analyse, already some interesting results have emerged. In this report I focus mainly on consonant deletion, in part because there is a separate sub-project specifically devoted to the resolution of hiatus (i.e., underlying vowel+vowel sequences) which includes much of what we would think of as vowel deletion. Headline results are as follows.

The five most commonly deleted consonant segments are /j/ (the glide), /ŋ/, /n/, /r/ (the trill), and /w/.

Consonants can delete in various C/V contexts. Simple intervocalic deletion (without a follow-on reduction of V+V) is rare, occurring in 9 languages in the dataset. Deletion adjacent to a vowel and a word boundary occurs in word initial position in 5 doculects and finally in 12 — that is, though Australian languages are noted for their diachronic initial dropping (Blevins 2001), we still find that in synchrony, word final deletion is more common than word initial deletion. When deletion occurs in a two-consonant cluster, this first C deletes in 30 languages and the second C in 42 languages. This reinforces that finding of Round (2023c) that in Australian languages, it is the initial C in a CC cluster (i.e., the coda of a syllable) which is more resistant to change than the final C (i.e., the onset of syllable).

In Australian languages, the phonotactically preferred order in clusters is (glide) > liquid > nasal > stop/glide; and apical > laminal > velar > labial (Round 2023b). A reasonable hypothesis is that deletion is primarily found when underlying clusters would violate these strong phonotactic conditions. However, this is only partly confirmed. Deletion as a response to underlying violation the constraints on *manner* of articulation (but non-violation of place) appear in 24 languages, whereas deletion as a response to underlying violation the constraints on *place* of articulation (but non-violation of manner) appear in just 6. That is, it seems that in Australian languages, violations of *manner* are remedied by deletion and violations of *place* by assimilation (Round 2023c). Nevertheless, most common of all is deletion which is not triggered by either kind of violation: these rules appear in 47 languages.

Deletions across a stem/suffix boundary affect the stem in 17 languages and the suffix in 39, following the pattern found across the world's languages, in which stem segments are better preserved. However, across prefix/stem boundaries the count is even, appearing in 9 languages each, which seems to pick up on the depressed rate at which cluster-initial consonants undergo morphophonological changes in Australian languages.

References

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