

Umlaut is not phonological in Swiss German

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The phonological or non-phonological nature of umlaut has been subject of much debate for some time already (cf. Wiese 1996 and references therein for a small sample), but recent publications (Hermans & van Oostendorp 2008, Trommer 2009 and others) show that the debate is not closed yet.

Umlaut was prominently featured in the debate about the necessity of rule ordering: According to Kiparsky (1968), only the reversed ordering of the rules of umlaut and lowering in the dialects of Schaffhausen (SH) and Kesswil (KW) respectively can account for the difference between the two dialects. According to rule 1 a vowel is fronted in an umlaut-inducing environment (**R1**), while rule 2 states that a back mid vowel (*o*) will be lowered (to *ɔ*) before a coronal (**R2**). R1 bleeds R2 in SH, and the umlauted vowel is not lowered, whereas both R2 and R1 apply in KW (in that order), resulting in a lowered umlauted vowel. (cf. E1 overleaf) Koutsoudas et al. (1974) argued that no ordering is necessary, as dialect-specific constraints on possible surface forms can explain the differences. However, there is a much deeper rooted problem: I claim that neither umlaut nor lowering are phonological.

The debate around the (phonological) status of umlaut heavily depends on the question of what constitutes a phonological process (henceforth PP) – a question that is crucial for every phonologist. It is easy to exclude non-linguistic phenomena like gravity or blood pressure, but very often the edges seem fuzzy, rather than clear cut. However, a good phonological theory – one that is reasonably restricted – has to make clear statements about its edges, and define clearly what belongs in, and what should be treated by a different part of the language faculty.

This presentation is couched in the framework of Government Phonology (Kaye 1995, 2000, Kaye et al. 1985, 1990, and many more), which poses severe restrictions on PPs – they have to adhere to two basic conditions: The Minimality Hypothesis (**C1**) that states that “processes apply whenever the conditions that trigger them are satisfied” (Kaye 1995: 290), and the Non-Arbitrariness Principle (**C2**), according to which “[t]here is a direct connection between a phonological process and the context in which it occurs” (Kaye et al. 1990: 194). It is further claimed that all PPs, but only PPs are expressible by the theory.

The theory thus makes the following predictions: **P1**: A PP is exceptionless. **P2**: A PP has a local trigger. **P3**: Inexpressible phenomena are not PPs (i.e. do not adhere to C1 and C2).

I will show that neither P1 nor P2 is borne out by the facts, and claim that, in accordance with P3, neither umlaut nor lowering are phonological in Swiss German.

In most ‘umlaut-inducing’ environments both umlauted forms and forms without umlaut occur, (cf. E2), contra P1. The same holds true for lowering environments (cf. E3): both *o* and *ɔ* occur before coronals. Additionally, *ɔ* occurs before non-coronals. As far as P2 is concerned, there is no common phonological trait in the umlaut-inducing environments that could trigger umlaut, just as there is nothing in a coronal that could cause lowering.

Neither umlaut nor lowering are expressible under the circumstances given, in accordance with P3 I will therefore conclude that neither umlaut nor lowering are phonological processes in Swiss German.

EXAMPLES					
E1	Schaffhausen			Kesswil	
	underlying	boge	bode	underlying	boge bode
	R1	böge	böde	R2	– bode
	R2	–	–	R1	böge böde
	surface	böge	böde	surface	böge böde
E2	xuE ~ xüeli	‘cow ~ id.-Dim.’	bubi ~ bubEli	‘infantile ~ id.-Dim.’	
	patə ~ petələ	‘to bathe ~ id.-Dim.’	štak:ə ~ štak:ələ	‘to stutter ~ id.’	
	fat:ɔ(r) ~ fət:ɔrlə	‘father ~ play father’ ¹	mat:ɔ(r) ~ mat:ɔrlə	‘do sth like a Matter’	
	hunt ~ hünt-Ø	‘dog Sg. ~ Pl.’	štunt ~ štunt-Ø	‘hour Sg. ~ Pl.’	
E3	ɔrtə	‘order’	rək:ə	‘rye’	
	oraŋʃ	‘orange (adj)’	trɔf: ə	‘hit-PastPart.’	
	plos	‘only, just’	nɔp: ə	‘knop’	
	hɔsə	‘trousers’	ɔxs	‘ox’	
	oštə	‘east’			
	p:ɔštə	‘to shop’			

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1 as in *müat:ɔrlə unt fət:ɔrlə* ‘to play house’