TOPICS IN WEST GREENLANDIC PHONOLOGY

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Abstract:

This is a brief presentation of the contents of
the author's monograph (Rischel 1974).

1. Data and descriptive goals

In writing this monograph, I had two purposes in mind,
viz. to contribute to the current debate about phonological
theory, and to add to the available knowledge about Central
West Greenlandic. I shall deal with the second point first
(in section 2 below); the general phonological issues will be
surveyed afterwards (section 3).

2. Information on West Greenlandic

The language under study is a dialect (or rather: a group
of very closely related dialects) of Eastern Eskimo. It is
spoken in part of West Greenland, and branches into Central West
Greenlandic (henceforth CWG) and the more northerly dialect of
the Disko Bay (and Uummannaq) area.[1] CWG is the norm stated in
grammars, dictionaries, and textbooks, and moreover, it was
available to me in the form of tape recordings and interviews
with CWG speakers in Denmark. The phonology of the Disko Bay
dialect was studied by the author on two field-work trips to
Greenland in 1972. Both of these varieties of West Greenlandic:
CWG and Disko Bay are referred to in the monograph, though the
former is mostly used as the frame of reference (this is advan-
tageous, firstly because CWG is more conservative on some points,

1) For a more precise listing of Greenlandic dialects, cf. my
   paper in this volume of ARIPUC (p. 1 ff).

and secondly, because readers will most often come across that
variety in consulting the scholarly literature).

The information on West Greenlandic phonology in a broad
sense (from phonetics to morphophonemics or morphology proper)
is very uneven in the previous literature. My monograph (Rischel
1974, henceforth: TIWGrPh) attempts to present an assembly of the
available knowledge about CWG phonology. Regularities are gener-
ally stated in much more detail than in previous sources, and
various misconceptions prevailing in the scholarly literature are
corrected. It may be mentioned that there is information on
allophonic variation of vowels and consonants (mainly Part I,
§§ 2.5 and 2.6), segment inventories (Part I, §§ 1 and 3; Part
III, § 2), assimilatory phenomena and phenomena associated with
syllabification (Part I: most of § 2), morphophonemic alterna-
tion (Part II), and morphological classification (Part III: § 3).

As far as prosodic phenomena are concerned, the information
given in TIWGrPh (Part I, §§ 2.4.1 and 3.2) is partly new, partly
based on quite recent studies by Robert Petersen, Hideo Mase,
and the present author.[1] The information on prosody in the ear-
lier literature is most fragmentary, and even in TIWGrPh this
subject is treated only to the extent that it is relevant to
segmental phonology. We are still vary far from possessing an
adequate knowledge about Eskimo prosody.

Since it has become almost a tradition among American
scholars to refer to Kleinschmidt's type of West Greenlandic in
an alleged phonemicization of his 19th century orthography, I
have devoted a good deal of space to an explication of the nature
of that orthography. It is demonstrated (Part I, §§ 1.2.2, 2.1.2,
and 2.3 p. 76-77) that Kleinschmidt himself worked on a certain
level of phonological abstraction, and hence the linguist who
thinks of his orthographical forms as a kind of raw-data on which
one can freely build a superstructure of phonological abstraction,
is involved in self-deception; the orthography itself represents
a sophisticated linguistic analysis (p. 8).

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1) See references in TIWGrPh p. 462.

There are especially two respects in which the monograph attempts to contribute to the solution of practical problems.

Firstly, there is a good deal of emphasis on systematic phonetic transcription (cf. Part I, §§ 1 and 3; Part III, § 1.1). The question of designing a phonologically adequate and at the same time versatile notation is a live issue in Eskimology, and it has come into focus in connection with the introduction of a new orthography for Greenlandic.

Secondly, morphological classification is approached with the intention of achieving both a simplification and a more rigorous treatment compared to earlier presentations. Formatives (morphemes) or formative clusters are viewed from two angles:

(I) Suffixes in the widest sense (i.e. postbases and endings) are characterized in terms of the behaviour of the segment stretch occurring at the transition from a stem to a suffix: there may be a deletion of material in the final part of the stem before the suffix in question; there may be a fusion of material from the stem and the suffix; there may be a simplification of suffix initial clusters under certain conditions, etc. (see Part II, § 1). These phenomena are (at least in part) idiosyncratic properties associated with individual suffixes (in my terminology: "left-hand properties", see TIWGrPh p. 405), and each suffix must be provided with appropriate labelling from which the morphophonemic behaviour of the suffix can be predicted. This was done by Kleinschmidt in his pioneer work[1] on Greenlandic grammar and lexicography, but later dictionary makers have skipped this information. Recently, the interest in this aspect has been revived on a scholarly level.[2]

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1) 1851, and 1873; references in TIWGrPh p. 462.
2) Most recently by Aagesen 1973; reference in TIWGrPh p. 460.

(II) Bases, postbases, and complex stems are, of course, considered in terms of the inflectional paradigms they belong to (in my terminology: "right-hand properties" of formatives, see TIWGrPh p. 406 ff). This approach is anything but new in itself: a variety of inflectional classes were distinguished already in the earliest Greenlandic grammars of the eighteenth century. However, my point is that all previous systematizations suffer from the defect that they fail to distinguish rigidly between morphophonemic phenomena which are automatically triggered by the segmental structure of the stems (bases, postbases), and phenomena which must be accounted for in terms of an abstract class-membership. And moreover, there is traditionally an undue emphasis on segment distinctions which are of very minor importance from the point of view of morphological class-membership. The classification I propose, involves three verb classes (with a sub-classification of the first two classes). - As for nouns, traditional grammar fails to understand the paradigmatic interplay of phenomena such as consonant gemination, consonant truncation, metathesis, and vowel epenthesis or syncope, and the whole systematization has been hopelessly involved. The most important step towards an understanding of the nature of these phenomena was made by Knut Bergsland in his mimeographed grammar.[1] As a continuation of this trend I have arrived at what seems to me a meaningful organization (viz. two main classes of nouns, the first of which has two subclasses, and the second three subclasses).

3. Phonological theory

The whole approach is based on the assumption that it is a legitimate goal of phonological description to organize observations about wordforms in terms of regularities or "rules" (in a very general sense). There is no postulate about "psychological

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1) 1955; reference in TIWGrPh p. 460.

reality" involved in this. In my book I express the opinion that it is a very interesting and important goal to try to describe internalized grammar, but it is necessary - in my opinion - to discover and state the regularities that are common to speakers of a certain dialect before one can ask interesting questions about the way in which individuals master their language. Therefore, the book is neither intended to be an alternative to a psychological approach, nor a substitute for one, but possibly a prerequisite.

I have attempted not to commit myself as to "psychological reality" (except that I repeatedly point out that there are probably great differences among the representations of a dialect that are internalized by different individuals). - I attempt to characterize alternations in terms of their generality, but I do not measure "productivity",[1] and many issues are left open-ended for possible testing. Terms such as "productivity" and "lexicalization" are thus used in a quite provisional manner.

However, in the book I emphasize that it is the goal of a linguistic description to state the linguistically significant generalizations. I understand this to mean: regularities which may be relevant to the way in which speakers of the language master it. This is not tantamount to saying: the internalized rules of the informants employed. The descriptive linguist may strive to state a maximum set of regularities which meet some general criterion of linguistic significance (unfortunately, we do not have a theory defining such a criterion yet), but even if he should succeed in doing so, he still would not be describing what is inside the heads of individual speakers.

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1) Some pilot attempts which I made in 1970 to test the prognostic validity of certain rules in the speech of Greenlandic school-children, were methodologically too primitive, and I skipped the approach at that time.

In the book surveyed here, I have attempted to delimit an "interesting" set of regularities in a different manner, viz. by (immanent) functional considerations. I claim that there is a set of phonological rules which jointly adjust the wordforms to meet certain well-formedness conditions. The pervading tendency here is simplification of surface phonotactics: preferred sylla-bification, co-occurrence restrictions, generalization of certain types of segments in final position. The rules in question, to-gether with the phonotactic generalizations involved in the well-formedness conditions, are supposed to form a functional core of West Greenlandic phonology. In describing this component one automatically bridges the gap between structural and generative approaches. I have employed the terminology of transformational generative phonology in stating the rules etc., but it is empha-sized that this is essentially a choice of format of description, not a manifestation of "belief" in the current descriptive frame-work as such.

There are several morphophonemic regularities which fall outside the functional core of West Greenlandic phonology. It is interesting to notice that these allegedly more peripheral regu-larities include some of the phenomena which are much discussed in the current literature (e.g. "gemination", which is often discussed as if it were a productive mechanism in West Greenlandic, although it is clearly on its retreat in modern language).

There is a certain time perspective in the distinction be-tween rules inside and outside the functional core in contemporary West Greenlandic: the former are largely regularities which have come into force after an orthographical tradition was established in Greenland in the 18th century, and which are still only on the point of entering the northenmost dialect of Greenland (examples in Part I, § 2), whereas the latter are phenomena belonging to a relatively old stratum.

In general terms, I argue that morphophonemic phenomena which are "unnecessary" from the point of view of the complex

surface conspiracy, are doomed to end up, sooner or later, as morphological and lexical idiosyncracies. In Part III, § 1 it is suggested that some observed regularities of this kind are statable as rules which apply restrictedly (to forms marked for their application) but have the formal properties of replacement or deletion rules, whereas others are handled more adequately in terms of alternations (which are often statable in terms of "ambivalent" morphophonemes, p. 342-353). Both kinds of rules are "morphophonemic", in contradistinction to the functional core of phonological rules.

As for the issue of rule ordering, my focus on clearly functional rules makes it superfluous to posit considerable depths of mutual ordering or cyclical rule application. I propose (Part III, § 1.2.1) a distinction between phonological rules (for which I assume a version of the "local ordering" hypothesis, although I do not take a very definite stand on this issue) and phonetic rules.

Phonetic rules are supposed to be "anywhere rules" which just state how a given form is to be interpreted phonetically (i.e., allophonic rules, or manifestation rules, of a rather traditional kind). There is, according to this conception of phonetic rules, a phonetic interpretation associated with a form, no matter whether the form in question is supposed to be "underlying" in respect to some other representation, or not. This, together with the contention (Part III, § 2.2) that there is no difference in principle between "underlying" and "surface" segments (except for ambiguous morphophonemes), more or less eliminates the compartmentalization prevalent in much of modern phonology.[1] For example, the plain and pharyngealized (uvularized)

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1) There is a graph on p. 364 which might convey a different impression, since it fails to bring out my contention that representations have a phonetic interpretation no matter whether they are more or less abstract.

varieties of /i/ are supposed to be united by a pattern of re-
versible phonetic rules. In a formative final stretch /iq/ the
vowel is pharyngealized, but if /q/ is deleted the vowel is re-
interpreted phonetically in accordance with the new environments.
Similarly, formative-final /i/ is non-pharyngealized, but if it
comes to stand before (suffixal) /q/, it is automatically re-
interpreted as a pharyngealized vowel. Thus, phonetic rules are
recessive in relation to other mechanisms such as segment deletion
rules.

Altogether, my analysis of West Greenlandic phonology does
not lend support to claims about the necessity for fancy machinery,
as long as one keeps to the rules which have to do with the ful-
fillment of well-formedness conditions on phonological strings.
The emphasis, I claim (Part III, § 4), must be on the observation
of constraints. The question whether complex endings, for in-
stance, can be generated from simpler formatives (in more or less
agreement with the diachronic development by which they were
amalgamated) is synchronically of marginal interest, except if
there is some more general phonological motivation for the rules
that one must posit in order to generate the forms in question.

As mentioned earlier, the analysis is essentially immanent,
i.e., the results are not generally verified by external evidence
such as psychological experiments, observation of children's
language, or linguistic change, although evidence of these kinds
is occasionally referred to. It is crucial to confront such a
description with substantial evidence. In particular, I empha-
size that it is interesting to study the processes by which loan-
words have been accomodated to the constraints of the Greenlandic
language. One notices that firstly the accomodation of loanwords
involves processes which are not motivated in statements about
native forms, and, secondly, there is nothing in the behaviour of
forms made up of native formatives which matches the fact that
loanwords now enter the language with less modification than they
did a century ago. Some constraints have been slackened vis-à-vis

loanwords, though they are still valid for wordforms made up of native formatives. This question of dynamic versus static regularities is a crucial issue for contemporary phonological theory. The monograph ends with a statement to that effect (p. 437).[1]

Acknowledgements:

References:

Rischel, Jørgen 1974: Topics in West Greenlandic Phonology (Akademisk Forlag, Copenhagen). 478 pp.

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1) I wish to add now that the matter is more involved than indicated in my book. Consonant assimilation of /kt/ to [tt], for example, is absolutely valid at formative boundaries, but loanwords are admitted nowadays without assimilation of internal clusters such as /kt/. Altogether, foreign formatives tend to escape the rules operating on the native vocabulary by obeying rules of their own. Since /immuk+tu^{r}ppuq/ 'milk-drinks' has assimilation of /k+t/ to [tt], one might expect the same from a construction involving the base 'ammoniac' plus /tu^{r}ppuq/ 'drinks'. However, the base is borrowed in the form /amuni^{j}akki/ (although /amuni^{j}ak/ would be structurally possible), and thus escapes the assimilation rule. This strange interplay of rules for native formatives and adaptation rules for foreign formatives is indeed a crucial issue.