Reexamining the Less Sonorous /w/ in Early West Germanic and Positing the Language-Internal Difference of the Ordering

Whereas classical phonology established the universal ranking of sonority, Hankamer and Aissen (1974) posited sonority conversion according to which the ordering of the loudness differs in individual language. Suzuki (1989, 1996) argues that in Early West Germanic (EWG) /w/ is less sonorous than the rhotic and the lateral (/w/ > Rhotic > Lateral in the general ranking). The present paper posits the internal difference between English and German: in Early English (EE), Rhotic > Lateral > /w/ > Nasal and in Early German (EG), Rhotic > Lateral > Nasal > /w/.

Relevantly, the argument has been recursively made that the apparently consistent sound changes among EWG languages have the different phonological processes. Murray (1991) argues that syllable structures differ in each of them. Open Syllable Lengthening, as Dresher and Lahiri (1995) claim, take an internal process in the phonologies of EE, EG, Early Dutch. By making use of Ohala's notion on speaker and listener, EE and Early Dutch are shown to have a different process on Open Syllable Lengthening (Page 2006).

Earlier works (Hankamer and Aissen, Steriade 1982, as well as Suzuki) confined sonority conversion within /w/ and liquids. Recent works, however, show the ones between a rhotic and the lateral, nasals in American English, and between TURNED V (mid central) and high peripheral vowels in standards/variaties of English. Sonority conversion is therefore implied to have more possibility than the earlier expectation, although it occurs within the range of specific conditionings.

Looking back on the history on each language, the labio-velar semivowel underwent a different fortition process; in EG, the phoneme itself was replaced by /v/; in EE, it shifted to /b/ or /v/ in the onset of stressed syllables and, on the whole, continues to have a phonemic status. Historically, the smaller sonority scale in EG than in EE, but not vice versa, assumably occurs.

Phonetically, the articulation of /w/ is typically the closest to that of fricatives due to the double articulation. It readily gives rise to turbulent air flow, on account of which the voiceless counterpart [ʍ] is classified as a fricative (Ball and Rahilly 1999). The strong feature of the semivowel is attributed not to articulatory energy, but to the postures of the back of tongue and the lips. In relation with the assumably correct ranking on EG, the less sonorous /w/ than nasals is expected to be ordered.

The following adduce the three sorts of evidence in favor of the internal difference. The gemination (from VC.RV to VC.CRV) where C is /w/ occurs in EG, but not in EE. The Syllable Contact Law gives the general assumption in EWG that the less sonorous the candidate C, the more affective the gemination. The blocking in EE and the affection in EG regarding the geminated /w/ lead to the smaller sonority in the latter.

The case in which R is /w/ gives the same outcome. Given the Syllable Contact Law, more sonorous sonorant consonants render the germination affective. In OE, R is /j/ or /r/ for the majority of the cases. In EG, nasals more commonly induce the gemination than /w/ following /j/ and liquids. The fact in EG may give the ranking I suggest.

Among the shared onset clusters /hw-, hn-, hl-, hr-/, EG affected the deletion of /hw-/ earliest and that of others later. By contrast, EE had the deletion of /hn-, hl-, hr-/. In the underlying /hw-/ of ME, the initial may or may not be deleted and the phoneme existed continuously (Crisma 2007). Taking the sonority-based analysis into account, the lower-valued SonC is omitted. The cases lead to the least sonority scale on EG /w/.