

A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF /U/-FRONTING:
THE ROLES OF CONTACT AND INTERNAL FACTORS

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In this talk, I present a comprehensive cross-linguistic analysis of /u/-fronting with a special emphasis on the roles of (i) contact and (ii) internal factors in shaping the distribution of this phenomenon across the languages of the world. /u/-fronting is a sound change whereby a historical high back rounded vowel moves towards the front of the vowel space. I first briefly summarise the diachronic unfolding and phonological conditioning of /u/-fronting in a handful of language varieties for which detailed historical data are available. This summary shows that while /u/-fronting can be linked to language/dialect contact in each of these varieties, it behaves similarly to independent innovations. The second part of the talk is a quantitative cross-linguistic study of /u/-fronting, looking at formant data from close to 200 languages and phoneme inventory data from over 2000 languages. Both types of data provide exceptionally strong evidence for the role of language contact as a catalyst in /u/-fronting, and somewhat weaker evidence for the roles of internal factors such as contrast maintenance and the frequency distributions of neighbouring phonemes. I conclude the talk by arguing that the cross-linguistic frequency of /u/-fronting may result from a combination of language contact and the unique phonetics of high back rounded vowels. An important implication of this work is that language contact may play a key role not only in the spread but also the initiation of sound changes (or, alternatively, that the distinction between initiation and spread may not be clear-cut for a large number of seemingly unremarkable sound changes).