

Consonant Gradation in Southern Scandinavia – A Sound Law and its Outcome

Camilla Søballe Horslund¹, Rasmus Puggaard-Rode² and Henrik Jørgensen¹

1: University of Aarhus, Denmark, 2: University of Leiden, the Netherlands

The Consonant Gradation is one of the central sound laws in the constitution of the Southern Scandinavian dialects, turning Old Norse post-nuclear hard consonants [ptk] into weaker ones and finally shifting them into semivowels or nothing, with fricatives as a presumed middle step. We prefer the term ‘Southern Scandinavia’ to the conventional form ‘Danish’ in this context, since the Consonant Gradation also seized areas that were never considered linguistically ‘Danish’ (like Southern Norway) or today are outside the present Danish nation (like Scania and Schleswick). The dialects of Northern Scandinavia never participated in this change. Therefore the retained sounds in Standard Swedish, the [t], the [p], and the [k] in *gata*, *köpa*, and *kaka*, correspond to an array of different consonant sounds in the Southern varieties: in more conservative dialects [ð], [ɣ], [v] and [b], and at an intermediate step [i̯] and [u̯], following a reduction of the actual phonemes in this position from 3 to 2. In the final step, the consonant element is completely eliminated in these positions: *gata* => [ˈgɛːɛ] and *kaka* = [ˈkɛːɛ] (Skautrup 1944-70, vol I, 228-232; Hjørth et al. (eds.) 2018: 159). Although the sounds changed radically, the written language covering these dialects, Standard Danish, never ventured beyond the substitution of *bdg* for *ptk*, causing some special interpretations of *bdg* as written forms of semivowels or as ‘mute letters’ (Jørgensen 2018: 153-157). The Southern Scandinavian dialects may be seen as direct continuations of older stages of the spoken language. They display a remarkable variation, but it is characteristic of the situation that with the exception of /b/, no dialectologist seems to have heard any true plosives in any Southern Scandinavian dialects in these positions, cp. Skautrup 1944-70 vol. I, 230-232; <https://dialekt.ku.dk/dialektkort/>, maps 12, 13, and 14. In some places, the sound law has taken the weakening quite far, even to the ultimate consequence that the relevant segment has vanished. In other areas, the development within the dialects had progressed to a level with a mixture of semivowels and weak fricatives.

The present-day picture of the outcome of this sound law in Modern Danish spoken standard is remarkable. As a standard variety, it draws its origin from several sources, merging older local standards with reminiscences of dialectal forms. Therefore, the Modern spoken standard is a hotch-potch of conservative forms and advanced forms, and there may be a considerable amount of variation. The standard, as it is developing these days, also seems to involve some retrograde movement of the sound law, causing speakers to replace semivowels or even deletions with consonant-like pronunciation forms. Furthermore, the actual spectrum of variation seems to be narrowing down, mostly with the effect that the advanced states of the sound law are eliminated.

In our paper, we want to draw up a picture of the dialectal variation as it may be documented through the dialectological research in the area. From this, we will move on to the actual pronunciation forms in the present-day Standard language and discuss the tendencies in the developments that we have observed. Our point will be that the force of the sound law is curtailed and the emerging standard form is cutting the connection to the sound law. A clear indication of this loss of connection may be seen in the synchronic fact that the classical attempt to interpret the non-plosive sound forms as manifestations of /ptk bdg/ phonemes is difficult to maintain in an analysis the Modern Danish standard usage, cp. Horslund, Puggaard and Jørgensen (2020; submitted).

References

Hjørth, Ebba, Henrik Galberg Jacobsen, Bent Jørgensen, Birgitte Jacobsen, Merete Korvenius Jørgensen & Lurids Kristian Fahl (eds.) (2018). *Ord for ord for ord. Dansk sprogshistorie bd. 2*. Aarhus & København: Aarhus Universitetsforlag & Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab

- Horslund, Camilla, Rasmus Puggaard and Henrik Jørgensen (2020). En alternativ, fonetisk baseret fonemanalyse af det danske konsonantsystem. Goldshtein Yonatan, Inger Schoonderbeek Hansen og Tina Thode Hougaard: *18. møde om udforskningen af dansk sprog (MUDS)*, 251-268
- Horslund, Camilla, Rasmus Puggaard and Henrik Jørgensen (Submitted). A phonetically-based phoneme analysis of the Danish consonant system. Submitted to *Acta linguistica hafniensia*.
- Jørgensen, Henrik (2018). The Four Troublemakers in Danish Orthography. Nyvad, Anne Mette, Michaela Hejná, Anders Højen, Anna Bothe Jespersen & Mette Hjortshøj Sørensen (eds.): *A Sound Approach to Language Matters. In Honour of Ocke-Schwen Bohn*. Department of English, School of Communication, Aarhus University, 151-166.
- Skautrup, Peter (1944-70). *Det danske Sprogs Historie*. Vol I-V. København: DSL & Gyldendal