Comparing English and Korean
Consonantal Deletions:
A Perceptual Perspective*

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Lee, Ponghyung. 2005. Comparing English and Korean Consonantal Deletions: A Perceptual Perspective. The Journal of Studies in Language 21-2. 25-51. Regarding what they have in common in Korean and English consonant deletions, I claim that listeners' perception is at the heart of determining factors. For Korean, this rationale departs from the previous analyses relying upon syllabification directions (Whitman 1985, Cho 1990), feature priorities (Ahn 1985, Oh 1994), and the sonority-oriented constraints (Iverson and Lee 1995). For English, it also objects to the traditional study of t/d-deletion represented by Labov (1997) and Guy (1997) to identify phonological conditions like sonority and syllabification. Next, I claim that the disparity between the two languages derives from the effect of surface constraints motivated by perceptual reasons: For one thing, the requirement of consonants to be adjacent to vowels operates to prohibit triple- or word-final double consonants. For another, postvocalic obstruents are unreleased. In Korean both constraints outrank others, whereas in English they are lower ranked. On the thorniest issue of variation, it is proposed that in Korean it derives from the narrow margins between the inherent perceptibility of the contending segments. Meanwhile, for English, the floating nature of faithfulness of input w.r.t. the magnitude of syntagmatic similarity accounts for the optionality. (Daejeon University)

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1. Introduction

The question of how many consonants, or in what order they are

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allowed to cluster together within a word belongs to a matter of phonotactics. Particularly, considering that, by and large, the shapes of margins of syllable and word are not distinct, it is not surprising that phonotactics is, for the most part, a matter of syllable structure condition. Among the approaches in favor of phonotactics-as-syllable structure-condition, the one sticking to the sonority of involved segments would be a favorite, e.g., Syllable Contact Law (SCL) (Murray and Vennemann 1983), Sonority Sequencing Principle (SSP), Minimal Distance Constraint (MDC) (Clements 1990). For instance, owing to SCL, the trans-syllabic sequence /kl/ in Korean, /toklip/ `independence’ gets realized as [ŋn] (Davis and Shin 2001). On the other hand, SSP and MDC concern intrasyllabic sequences, e.g., the initial /p/ in Greek-origin psychology is unlicensed by SSP, and under the conditioning of MDC, /bl-/ is legal, whereas /bn-/ is not.

However, as a growing body of proposals like Steriade (1997, 2002), Boersma (1997), Blevins (2003), and Jun (1995, 2004) point out, syllable proves not to work for some part of phonotactics. Above all, the syllable approaches are unable to predict what segments are stable, as far as the concerned sequences satisfy the requirements on sonority like SSP, MDC, etc. What it means by stability is that segments prone to change are unstable, while invariant ones are stable. In other words, the constraints embracing syllable or sonority are inappropriate to single out the site vulnerable to delete from the opposite position. It would be common to come across the problem in the matter of variation in particular. As will be discussed in detail in what follows, i- deletion in Korean, e.g., talk ‘chicken,’ palpta- ‘to tread on,’ etc. shows inter- and intra-speaker variation [tak] ~ [tal], [papt’a] ~ [palt’a]. Analogously, the same thing happens to t/d-deletion in English, sensitive to preceding (1a) and following contexts (1b) (Kiparsky 1982, Labov 1997, Guy 1997): 1

(1) a. pest pent pelt pet
    b. textbook west man west land west area

In the listed words (1a, b), the probability of t-deletion in pest and

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1 Weinreich et al.s. (1968) dub the quantitative variation of t/d-deletion in accordance with the context as "orderly heterogeneity".