

# The history of palatalization: The case of full coronal palatalization in Early Modern and Present-day English

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In this talk I look at the case of coronal palatalization [t d s z] > [tʃ dʒ ʃ ʒ] in both Early Modern English (EModE), e.g. *issue* [ɪsju:] > [ɪʃu:] and Present-day English (PDE), e.g. *this year* [ðɪʃ ʃɪər] with the aim to determine its major phonological factors (such as the context, triggers, etc.) and to explain the existence of numerous palatalized/unpalatalized variants found in different accents of contemporary English, e.g. [tʃu:n]/[tu:n]/[tju:n] (Wells 2000, Bateman 2007, Beal *et al.* 2020). The analysis is couched in the Element Theory framework (Backley 2011) and it hinges on the assumption that the key to understanding the palatalization situation in contemporary English is the change in a parameter setting which took place in Middle English (ME). It is argued that this parameter is responsible for the merger (or lack of it) of two antagonistic resonance elements |I| and |U| within a single melodic expression. More specifically, it is proposed that the phonological system of ME witnessed a drastic change as a consequence of the introduction of the ban on the |I| and |U| merger. This \*|IU| constraint triggers the loss of the element |U| from the internal structure of the *i*-umlauted vowels [y] and [ø] and the palatalized velars [k̡] and [j] leading to the unrounding of the former and the affrication of the latter segments, e.g. [y] > [i] and [k̡] > [tʃ], respectively. This proposal can help to understand several puzzles including the lack of affrication before both *i*-umlauted and unrounded vowels, the palatalization and vocalization of the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/ and, generally, the chronology of affrication in the history of English (Minkova 2003). More importantly for this talk, this Middle English (ME) innovation guarantees the coronals, to the exclusion of labials and velars, the right to undergo full palatalization. This is based on the premise that only velars and labials are specified for the element |U|. Moreover, this historical perspective may shed some light not only on the linguistic micro-variation evident in contemporary accents of English, e.g. the [tʃu:n]/[tu:n]/[tju:n] situation, but also on the absence of front vowels from the group of potential palatalization triggers. It is suggested that a process which bears a direct responsibility for the coronal palatalization in EModE and the growth of the heterogeneous forms in PDE, i.e. the evolution of the ME diphthong [iu] > [ju:], is a result of the \*|U| constraint that is still operative in the language.

## References

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