

# The problem of the labio-dental continuant [v] in Frisian: an OT analysis

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In Frisian, fake rising diphthongs, phonological sequences of a high vocoid followed by a vowel (Booij 1989), and fake triphthongs, sequences of a high vocoid followed by a falling diphthong, are formed with two on-glides: the high front vocoid represented underlyingly as //i// and the high back vocoid represented underlyingly as //u//. The front on-glide is consistently realized as [j], regardless of its position in the onset string, as in *jern* [jɛ] ‘yarn’ and *piist* [pjɪ] ‘peach’. The back on-glide, however, receives different representations depending on its precise position in the onset string, as exemplified by the difference between *swit* [swɪ] ‘sweat’ and *witt(e)* [vɪ] ‘to know’. In this talk, I undertake a phonological analysis of [v] from the perspective of Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 2004).

I begin the presentation with a discussion of the problematic phonetic description of the labio-dental continuant [v] (Sipma 1913, Cohen *et al.* 1959, Visser 1997) and look in detail at its distribution against that of the back glide [w], the voiceless labio-dental fricative [f] and the voiced labio-dental fricative [v]. Equipped with the distributional findings, I then discuss the phonological status of [v], which is complementary to [w] in the onset and is best analysed as a realization of underlying //u// at the beginning of the Phonological Word.

In Visser’s (1997) generative study of Frisian phonology, [v] is analysed as an allophone of the fricative //v// in the initial position. Although onsets favour strengthening, this weakening is a result of the conflicting force of the Fricative Onset Filter, which bans voiced fricatives in the onset position. Such a solution aims at elevating [f], occurring freely in the syllable onset but complementary to [v] in the syllable rhyme, to the rank of a contrastive segment. However, it involves a number of liabilities. First, apart from postulating onset lenition, it assumes that two phonemes, /f/ and /v/, are complementary in the rhyme. Second, it leaves unexplained the complementary distribution of [w] and [v] in the syllable onset. Finally, it cannot account for the defective distribution of //u//, which, as a regular on-glide, should occur word-initially in both fake rising diphthong and fake triphthong configurations.

The analysis of [v] as a surface realization of underlying //u// does not share the liabilities of Visser’s (1997) approach. In the presentation, I regard it as an instance of onset strengthening, which in Optimality Theory is compelled by the universal constraint disfavours the vocoid [u] at the beginning of a higher prosodic category, analogously to the prohibition on [u] in the syllable onset: \*ONSET<sub>[u]</sub> (Rubach 2000). I show how OT captures this type of operation, which is a minimal change in feature-geometric terms and yet one more strategy to resolve underlying hiatus configurations, generally avoided in the language. In the closing part of the presentation, I discuss special-case examples, such as *woarst* [vwa] ‘worst’, and show that they also receive a straightforward analysis in the OT approach.

References

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