CHAPTER 2

Phonological Theory & Past Views of the Indo-European Syllable

In the previous chapter we observed that PIE, like all languages, possessed a synchronic grammar, one which contained a finite number of phonemes and phonological rules. This is the larger picture in which we will view each of our reconstructions and proposals within this monograph, ensuring that each abides by the system set forth in chapter 1. Thus, if we reconstruct a form with two adjacent obstruents, according to rule (16) those obstruents must agree in voicing and aspiration: *-pt- not X-bʰt-. If we reconstruct a word-initial sequence of two stops followed by a resonant (that is not *ɨ), according to rule (21) that sequence must always exhibit epenthesis of schwa secundum in derived forms: *PəPR- not *PPR-. In short, throughout this work we will approach the analysis of late PIE from a synchronic standpoint, though always being mindful of diachronic residues and the possibility of multiple temporal layers. Within our synchronic analyses we will also continually strive to view PIE as a “real” language. While it is rarely the case that scholars treat PIE literally as an algebra problem, it is certainly true that not all scholarship in IE studies is mindful of (or even considers it important to be mindful of) this basic assumption. If all of the world’s languages possess a certain property (such as syllables), then we should assume said property to exist in PIE, unless there is extraordinarily strong evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, if all of the world’s languages lack a certain property (such as the ability to front single constituents within a coordinated structure), then we should assume said property did not exist in PIE, unless there is extraordinarily strong evidence to the contrary. Our approach to the reconstruction of syllabification in PIE will therefore follow the well-accepted Uniformitarian Principle (Labov 1994:21).

1 See Byrd, forthcoming b for discussion of the structured approach to the reconstruction of sounds adopted here.

2 This would constitute a violation of the Coordinate Structure Constraint. Thus, in the Eng. sentence “I spoke with John and Leroy.” We may front the direct object to produce “John and Leroy, I spoke with”, but “John, I spoke with and Leroy” is strictly forbidden.
The Ramifications of the Uniformitarian Principle

Proposed sounds and sound sequences must follow absolute linguistic universals and should obey strong linguistic tendencies unless there is compelling evidence of the contrary.

2.1 Phonological Frameworks

The synchronic analyses presented in this book will alternate between rule-based generative phonology and the most widely used constraint-based phonological framework, Optimality Theory. The former framework (see Kenstowicz & Kisseberth 1979) will likely be familiar to most present-day scholars of Indo-European linguistics. Here underlying, phonological forms (denoted by //) transform into surface, phonetic forms (denoted by [] or italics) by undergoing one or more phonological processes within the derivation: /X/ → [Y] / A _ B. Indo-European scholars will perhaps be less familiar with Optimality Theory (OT). OT proposes that grammars arise from the interaction of conflicting constraints (Prince & Smolensky 1993) and formalizes the concept of ‘conspiracies’, or the triggering of one or more phonological rules by the avoidance of a single phonological structure.³

There are two basic types of constraints within OT: faithfulness constraints and markedness constraints. Faithfulness constraints require that the surface form (the output) be identical to the underlying form (the input) in some fashion. Markedness constraints place requirements on the structural well-formedness of the output. The interaction of these two types of constraints results in the winning candidate, or the most ‘optimal’ form. For example, let us assume two constraints as interacting within the grammars of German and English:⁴

(49) Sample Constraints

a. *FinalVoice: No surface form may contain a final voiced obstruent. Assign one * for each instance.

b. Ident(Voice): Corresponding input and output segments have identical values for the feature [voice]. Assign one * for every change.


⁴ Note that within standard OT (Prince & Smolensky 1993) constraints are argued to be universal: all of the world’s languages contain the same basic set of constraints (Zsiga 2013:310).