

The regularity of Old French velar onset voicing, and its bottlenecked path from Roman lenition

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This work situates the voicing of onset /k/ before a sonorant and then a low vowel in Old French as an archetypal Neogrammarian regular sound change, and as the last in a series of synchronic states with the well-known process of Romance lenition at the point of origin. Along the way, I explore broader implications and connections for historical phonology in general, in French, and in Romance.

This sound change, or *VOV* (velar onset voicing), is placed in the late 12th century and assigned a specific conditioning context before a liquid then low vowel, which are both consistent with the attested corpus data and the evidence of the interactions (feeding, bleeding, counterbleeding) between *VOV* and other phenomena with known dating. All apparent exceptions can be accounted for in the typical Neogrammarian way: well-precedented phonosemantic developments, and analogy due to membership in one of three identifiable word families, each with a root regularly unaffected by *VOV* due to known earlier *bleeding* rules. The regular action of *VOV* is shown in French for at least 13 inherited etyma and 4 reflexes of Germanic borrowings, along with other evidence like corresponding patterns throughout *oil*, which are discussed as pertinent to *VOV*'s Gallo-Roman roots.

Although French diachrony enjoys meticulous past study, the items affected by *VOV* were considered in isolation rather than as possible members of a regular diachronic class until two recent accounts (Marr & Mortensen 2020, 2022). While there are certainly cases where Gillieron's maxim "*chaque mot a son propre histoire*" is apt, without a unified account that generates falsifiable predictions for each relevant etymon, we may have 'missed a forest for the trees'. The 'forest' here could show the potential of the Neogrammarian method to yield new insights, even in such a well-studied language; Neogrammarian and the lexically focused approaches are necessarily complementary tools in diachrony.

Proceeding to explore the tracks found in this forest, they come together to suggest a trail leading back to a much older and well-known process in Romance. This process, "*lénition romane*", which acted after vowels and before sonorants to (among other things) voice stops, continued to be active in Iberia, and may have deeper Romance connections in Sardinian and Neapolitan (Martinet 1952; Cravens 2002; Russo & Ulfsbjornin 2020; Carvalho 2008). This process may also have evolved at the coda into French *liaison*, and a survey of three corners of Gallo-Romance suggests that Proto-Gallo-Romance may provide another example of lenition of velars near low vowels, a recurrent pattern I motivate physiologically in terms of competing positional demands on the tongue dorsum.

By connecting these downstream results and their source, I trace a branching series of synchronies from Roman lenition to 12th century French, each stage a version of the last reshaped by systemic factors that are motivated in terms of both general typology and Romance history (Gurevich 2004; Recasens 2002; Figge 1966; Hualde et al 2011). Put together within the framework of the 'Big Bang model' (Janda & Joseph 2003), we see a striking example of how a *bottlenecked* trajectory for a sound change, as different factors conspired to progressively reduce the scope of a broad and purely phonetics-conditioned lenition process into the specific voicing of onset *cla-* and *cra-*.