

In the Beginning was the *Lautbild*: Hermann Paul's Theory of Sound Change

At the heart of the study of sound change lurks a fundamental question: What changes? Ask this question of a present-day linguist who does not work in the area of sound change or open an introductory linguistics textbook, you will probably get an impossibly optimistic answer: the phoneme. This in spite of the fact that there is no accepted theory of how the properties of sound change can be explained on the basis of “a point of reference in an interlocking network of contrasts” (Hockett 1958:112). Ask present-day specialists on sound change the same question and the situation gets even worse, for here there is not even agreement on whether it is phonemes, allophones, features, underlying forms, exemplars, or even words that undergo change, a lack of consensus that specialists have been living with for more than 130 years.

Characteristically, the great neogrammarian Hermann Paul (1920) had no doubt whatsoever about what changes—the *Lautbild* (sound image). Also, characteristically when dealing with interpretations of Paul's theories, we get extremes of opinion when asking a relatively straightforward question: what is this sound image of Hermann Paul's? In his brief overview of the state of the art overview a scholar such as George Lane (1945) can write: “I have been unable to find any hint at a phonemic theory anywhere in Paul.” Although—perhaps tellingly—Lane continues: “it may be there, but, if so, it is buried in his psychology.” As a strong Bloomfieldian, Lane felt entirely justified in ignoring Paul's “psychologizing.” By contrast, about two decades later with the ebbing influence of behaviourism and the ascendancy of mentalism, Weinreich et al. in their seminal work see things quite differently: For Paul “the mental representations of the speech sound involve both a kinesthesia (*Bewegungsgefühl*) and a sound image (*Lautbild*) for audio-monitoring (*Kontrolle*). It is an empirical fact for Paul that these representations are insufficiently precise to guarantee absolutely consistent performance; for example, what is coded as a single kinesthesia and sound image (today we would say: a single **phoneme**) ...” (emphasis my own).

This paper focuses on the heart of Paul's “psychologizing” on the nature of sound change and comes to an unexpected conclusion. Hermann Paul was not the incipient structuralist that many have portrayed him, but rather the first linguist to develop an explicit exemplar theory of sound change based on a notion of unconscious perceptual learning (Watanabe et al. 2001).

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