

Rethinking the relationship between plain & nasal clicks

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Although nasalized click consonants are robustly attested, and well-documented phonetically, they have attracted less attention than other types of clicks in the phonological literature. Nasal clicks are commonly assumed to be phonologically [+nasal] – i.e. [n!] (a nasal alveolar click) is the ‘click equivalent’ of /n/. I present evidence against this view, based on the distribution patterns of nasal clicks observed cross-linguistically.

Synchronic phonological alternations involving clicks are quite rare. As such, previous work on nasal clicks ascribes a [+Nasal] feature specification to them either on the basis of measurable nasal airflow (Ladefoged & Traill 1984), or by inference from the classification of non-click consonants in a given language (Sagey 1986; Miller et al. 2007). Comparative studies (Güldemann 2001, e.g.) have generally taken the latter approach, focusing mainly on consonant inventories.

This talk considers different evidence: the positional distribution of oral and nasal clicks in words. Examining data on over 20 languages reveals a new universal, not previously noted in the literature – every language with clicks has nasal clicks. This is further supported by Dahalo, a language which has only nasal clicks, and no oral clicks.

The implicational relationship between oral & nasal clicks suggests that nasal clicks are phonologically unmarked, which is problematic for the assumption that they are merely [+nasal] clicks. Nasals are normally more marked than non-nasals (e.g. nasal vowels are marked relative to oral vowels), so any implication should go the opposite direction. The explanation for this confound, I propose, is that nasal clicks are not phonologically nasal. Instead, nasal clicks bear nasality only phonetically, as a side effect of maintaining a pulmonic egressive airstream through a click. Under this reanalysis, the [!] → [n!] implication follows from non-pulmonic sounds being more marked than pulmonic ones.