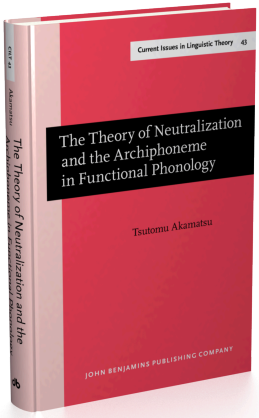
Foreword

https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.43.02for



Pages xiii–xv of
The Theory of Neutralization and the Archiphoneme in Functional Phonology
Tsutomu Akamatsu
[**Current Issues in Linguistic Theory**, 43] 1988. xxi, 533 pp.

FOREWORD

by André Martinet

The case of neutralization is one of the best illustrations of how theoretically minded linguists let their mother tongue guide their approach to their science. A native Russian or Polish scholar, used to the constant alternation of voice with its absence cannot be satisfied with positing a /p/ and a /b/ without mentioning somewhere the unstable nature of their opposition to each other. As this instability is, above all, revealed by inflexions, he will be tempted to place it astride phonology and morphology and finally ascribe it to some 'morpho(pho)nology'. Baudouin de Courtenay led the way into this trap. Roman Jakobson followed and never got out of it. Trubetzkoy knew better and never confused the phonetically conditioned neutralization of oppositions with the morphological alternation of well-established phonemes. Yet he never made the distinction clear enough so as to prevent beginners ... and veterans from being led astray.

A Frenchman, dealing with his own language, could hardly accept to put on the same footing the relation of /e/ to /i/ — which is that of two permanently distinct units — with the relation of /e/ to /ɛ/ involving two phonic products that are, in most cases, in complementary distribution and, elsewhere, kept distinct by only some members of the linguistic community, which means the distinction has to be disregarded if communication is to be achieved. Presented with the concept of neutralization, he will eagerly adopt it in order to take care of the /e/ vs. /ɛ/ relation. There is a danger that neutralization may be conceived here as covering, not only partial complementary distribution, but, as well, the lack of agreement among the speakers as to the choice of one or the other in word final position where 'Parisian' speakers are supposed to keep them apart. As a result of that confusion, phonologists have started referring to an /A/ archiphoneme covering /a/ and /ɑ/, two products whose distribution is hardly complementary, but random, so that we should not say that the distinction of /a/ and /ɑ/ is

neutralizable, but rather that it is 'messy' and actually verging towards extinction.

Let us now consider a native speaker of English. His consonants are, as a rule, thoroughly distinct in all positions. The instability in the case of apicals + [j], as in *did you*, *towards you*, where /dj/ and /zj/ alternate with /dʒ/ and /ʒ/, is a case of 'messiness' or, more precisely, of fluctuation between two distinct phonological products indicative of level shift from careful to careless. His vowels are, upon the whole, well defined, with only mininal and locally restricted cases of blurring. When I taught at Columbia University in the early fifties, the only case of neutralization my students could think of was the confusion, wide-spread among them, of *merry*, *Mary* and *marry*. In view of all this, why not decree that, once two sounds have been found distinct, they should be identified as corresponding to two different units, irrespective of whether the distinction is general or restricted to some positions? As we know, the wording was: Once a phoneme, always a phoneme. All of this harks back to 1911 when Daniel Jones brought back from Saint Petersburg the notion of phoneme he had received from Ščerba, and interpreted it as a 'family of sounds', i.e., a physical reality, rather than a distinctive unit. The minimal pair test, which finally became general, was thus a mere trick without any theoretical basis. It was however what made it possible to secure a minimum of mutual understanding across the Atlantic.

Tsutomu Akamatsu is an outstanding and welcome exception to the rule that language specialists are led by the structure of their mother tongue when establishing their theoretical framework. When dealing with their own language, Japanese scholars may easily dispense with the notions of neutralization and archiphoneme. Frequent consonantal alternations, such as /h/ and /b/, /s/ and /z/ and the like, have for centuries ceased to be phonetically conditioned as they must have been when intervocalic position determined a neutralization of the opposition of voice to its absence. We might, no doubt, posit a nasal archiphoneme in syllable final position, covering /m-/ and /n-/. But describing the phonetic situation is just as effective, if not more so.

Our author has thus, without preconceived ideas and personal bias, tackled a problem of which he was aware on account of the 'Neo-Praguian' and Saussurian teaching to which he had been exposed in Paris. The result is a factual treatment of the twin notions of neutralization and archiphoneme which is in no way tainted by unconscious subjective prefer-

ences. We may hope it will not be mistaken for a history of these notions, but valued as a plea for their general adoption in the practice of descriptive linguistics. Some readers might be tempted to find, in the present book, an excess of theoretical rigour which actual descriptive activity will probably temper. Yet it is important, at a certain turn, to set up a neat framework which ulterior practice will contribute to make more manageable. This writer remembers how a paper of his, entitled 'Un ou deux phonèmes?' and published, just before World War II, in the first volume of *Acta Linguistica*, met with the approval of those who insisted on theoretical rigour. And yet, when it was later reprinted in a manual, the author, with a wider experience, deliberately softened its contours, which does not, by any means, indicate that the earlier version should have been different. As it now stands, Tsutomu Akamatsu's book is, I think, just what it should be.