Input restrictions and Tundra Nenets dorsals

Peter Staroverov
(Wayne State University)

This paper presents an argument for input restrictions based on a study of dorsals in Tundra Nenets (TN for short). In TN, [k] is prohibited word-initially, even though cross-linguistically initial position is known to favor preservation of contrasts (Beckman 1998; Casali 1998). While TN post-vocalic stops /p t/ undergo voicing, no parallel alternations are found for [k], and hence the undergoers of voicing arguably form an unnatural class (Mielke 2008).

Based on Janhunen (1986) I show that both problems can be solved by assuming surface [k] always derives from underlying /C+x/ sequences via the general processes of strengthening and cluster simplification. My analysis appeals to a ban on underlying word-initial clusters and a prohibition on underlying /k/. The talk describes the phenomenon of non-surface distributional generalizations, and proposes to implement them within Stratal OT. This analysis bears on the problem of unnatural classes, and on the role of abstractness in phonology.