

Headedness and licensing constraints in the phonotactics of (Old) French

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This paper deals with a subset of the data on syllable structure (stage 1). It addresses the question of the evolution $k \rightarrow t$ and $g \rightarrow d$ from Latin to (Old) French. Briefly stated, k, g become t, d when followed by a front (syncopated) vowel $\langle i, e \rangle$ plus a rhotic consonant $\langle r \rangle$, and preceded by a consonant (e.g. Lat. *vinc(e)re* > OFr. *veintre*, further examples under (1) in the data set). Of particular interest is the case of k which is expected to become ε ($\rightarrow s$) in the vicinity of a front vowel; a common case of palatalization as illustrated in (4) and (5) in the data set. The reason why k does not undergo palatalization in forms like *vintre* lies in the phonotactics of (Old) French. This language disallows any occurrence of sibilant+rhotic, although it complies with the sonority profile of a branching onset. Stated informally within the Government Phonology framework, this means that a sibilant cannot license a rhotic consonant in French. The loss of the front vowel in forms like *vincere* results in an illicit $*\text{sr}$ or $*\text{sr}$, which is reinterpreted as *tr*, leading to *veintre*.

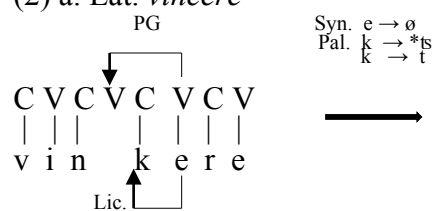
The absence of sibilant+rhotic sequences in French reflects, I argue, a condition on the melodic structure in relation to the syllabic level. Several works in Element Theory claim that among obstruents, only strident consonants and aspirates (irrelevant here) are headed by $|\text{H}|$ (see Backley 2011: 142, Kaye 2000, Lahrouchi & Ulfsbjorninn 2018). As to the rhotic consonant, it is defined as lacking $|\text{?}|$, unlike lateral and nasal consonants (see Backley 2011, Harris 1990, Kaye 2000). The ungrammaticality of $*\text{sr}$ can be formalized as in (1) below.

(1) Licensing constraint on SC clusters (French)

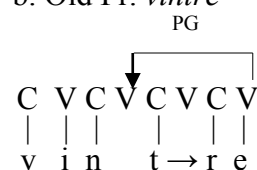
Headed $|\text{H}|$ cannot license a consonant without $|\text{?}|$.

This condition excludes any sequence of strident+rhotic, hence the absence in French not only of $*\text{sr}$ and $*\text{tsr}$ (at issue here) but also $*\text{zr}$, $*\text{fr}$ and $*\text{gr}$. By way of consequence, it explains why Latin k becomes t . The same reasoning holds for g which becomes d , rather than expected dʒ or ʒ (see (1) and (2) in the data set). However, one might still wonder why $k, g \rightarrow t, d$ shift does not occur in intervocalic position. Standard government and licensing relations allow a consonant to occur in a strong position when it is licensed but not governed by the following vowel (see (2a,b) below). Conversely, an intervocalic position corresponds to a weak position where the consonant is licensed and governed and the same time (2c). The reader is referred to Scheer (2004) for details on government and licensing in Standard GP and in Strict CV.

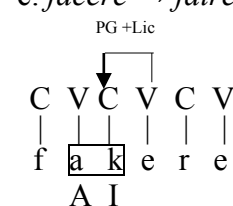
(2) a. Lat. *vincere*



b. Old Fr. *vintre*



c. *facere* \rightarrow *faire*



These representations, simplified for expository reasons, are meant to account for the evolution from Latin to Old French, a hard task since it is difficult to determine in the data subset considered here how many stages took place in the evolution from k to t and when exactly the front vowel was syncopated. In any case, the representations in (2) show how licensing and government relations provide the appropriate context for the sounds shift at issue: in (2a), k sits in a strong position where it is licensed but not governed by the following vowel. The same situation arises in (2b) where t is licensed but not governed. On top of that, the loss of Latin e allows t to license r . In contrast to these representations, (2c) illustrates the case where k occurs in a weak (intervocalic) position where it is governed and licensed at the same time. Then the palatalizing element, the only melodic content left in this context, forms a diphthong with the preceding vowel.