

‘Verner’s law’ as a result of the interplay of intervocalic voicing and coda retraction

Roland Noske
Lille 3 University & UMR 8163 ‘STL’

Abstract.

Verner (1877) presents his ‘law’ as an exception to Grimm’s law: plosives following a syllable that is not stressed in Indo-European (IE) are voiced (or at least lenited) and show up as lenited or voiced plosives and not as voiceless fricatives as expected under Grimm’s law. Verner’s law has given rise to an abundant literature (see Rooth 1974). Major problems connected with the law are:

- i. the chronology of the change: Verner’s law refers to the place of IE (free, or phonemic) accent, while Verner places it chronologically after Grimm’s law (which among other things, is a spirantization based on Germanic initial stress).
- ii. the phonetic details of the change:
 - a. because Verner and others since him assume that Verner’s law applied after Grimm’s law, a stopping (or despirantization, occlusivisation) process has to be assumed undoing the working of Grimm’s law: e.g., in the case of the change $t > d$ like Sanskrit *pitár* versus Old English (OE) *fædar*: $t > \theta$ (by the working of Grimm’s law), $> *ð$ (by Verner’s law), $> d$ (by stopping). In addition, voiced fricatives like δ have never been attested word-internally);
 - b. while IE accent is usually supposed to be ‘melodic’, Germanic stress was supposed to be ‘expiratory’. Because the application of Verner’s law depended on the absence of a directly preceding IE accent, it is difficult to see how this putatively melodic accent can have prevented voicing or lenition. As experience shows, this type of blocking is usually related to stress.

In a radical and daring proposal, Vennemann (1984), inspired by the glottalic hypothesis (for an overview of this, see Clackson 1977:45-48), defends the view that Verner’s voicing or lenition took place *before* the Germanic stress shift as well as *before* the spirantization, usually called a part of Grimm’s law, but which Vennemann calls the ‘Proto-Germanic Sound Shift’¹. This proposal implies that the lenition or voicing noted by Verner had actually *bled* the application of Grimm’s law in cases like OE *fædar*, hence dispensing with the need for a counter-intuitive stopping rule.

However, Vennemann (1984) does *not* discuss why Verner’s voicing or lenition took place only if the preceding vowel was not stressed. He just mentions the term ‘Verner context’ (*Verner-Umgebung*, 1984:21). Neither does he address the question of the nature of IE accent interacting with Verner’s lenition or voicing.

In this talk I will address these issues. More specifically, I will treat:

- i The question of the nature of accent that influenced the working of Verner’s lenition or voicing. With Jespersen (1933) and Verner (1877) himself we will see that IE accent at he

¹ Vennemann (1984), also defends the view that there was only one Germanic Sound Shift which worked out differently for High-German (and Longobardian) and the rest of the Germanic dialects. The shift entailed a bifurcation of the dialects in one go. Hence there was no succession of two Sound Shifts (Grimm and the High German one). The view that Verner’s law must have preceded Grimm’s law was later endorsed by Kortlandt (1988).

time of the working of Verner's lenition or voicing was not merely melodic (as claimed by various authors);

- ii. The precise conditioning of Verner's lenition or voicing; and in connection with this:
- iii. The precise mechanism dictating the context in which Verner's lenition or voicing was prevented from applying. We will propose a similar mechanism of retraction into coda position as proposed by Hoard (1971) for English. Going back to Verner's original 1877 text, we will see that Verner's explanations were far more adequate than those of many later scholars, including Boer (1924) and Prokosch (1939).

References:

- Boer, R.C. 1924. *Oergermaansch Handboek*. 2nd edition. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Clackson, James. 2007. *Indo-European Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoard, James E. 1971. 'Aspiration, Tenseness, and Syllabication in English'. *Language* 47, 133-140.
- Kortlandt, Frederik. 1988. 'Proto-Germanic Obstruents'. *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 27, 3-10.
- Prokosch, Eduard. 1939. *A Comparative Germanic Grammar*. Philadelphia & Baltimore: University of Pennsylvania & Linguistic Society of America.
- Rooth, Erik. 1974. *Das Vernerische Gesetz in Forschung und Lehre*. Lund: Gleerup.
- Vennemann, Theo. 1984. 'Hochgermanisch und Niedergermanisch'. *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* (Tübingen) 106, 1-45.
- Verner, Karl. 1877. 'Eine ausnahme der ersten lautverschiebung'. (A. Kuhn's) *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen* 23, 97-130. (*Kleinschreibung* in the original title!)