

Representations against serialism

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As a beginning student, I asked a question about generative phonology that students have asked many times: do people go through these step-by-step derivations in their heads every time they pronounce a sentence?

The answer was: No, of course not. So I asked the logical next question: then what makes derivations cognitively real if the intermediate stages never occur in the minds of speakers? I got the performance-competence answer: The intermediate forms are real in terms of competence, but not performance.

Like other students of generative grammar, I soon learned to stop asking such questions.

George Lakoff. Cognitive phonology. In John Goldsmith (ed.), *The last phonological rule. Reflections on constraints and derivations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 117.

I would like to say that we've moved on from that 30 years after this text – and more than 50 years after the theoretical framework, SPE, which is mentioned in it. Yet...

Yet, some are now reverting to rule-based models. For their part, many optimality theorists have come to accept a serial model in order to explain, among other things, opaque derivations, causing OT to lose the strictly parallel character it had in its early days and which, through its connectionist origins, embodied in its own way the goal set by Lakoff and Goldsmith in 1993: that of a one-step phonology.

Furthermore, even during the golden age of representational approaches (1976-1993), the main aim was to motivate rules, not to replace them. Now, for many of us, this issue is mostly reflected in an *impensé*: even if we no longer explicitly refer to a rule-based theory, serialism is still in our heads, at least tacitly accepted, if only because it is indeed useful for explaining in a very simple way some differences between languages. Many of us are (more or less) repressed serialists, as if we have given ourselves the same rule of conduct as young Lakoff. There is a question that should not be asked: do phonological derivations imply "intermediate stages"?

My talk will be a plea for a negative answer to this question. In particular, I contend that, like Harmonic Serialism (HS) and its gradualness requirement, "*one change at a time*" (McCarthy 2016: 48), enriched representations avoid the pitfalls of classical OT, but, unlike HS, without having to resort to a serial approach and its intermediate stages.