

Rasmus Rask's conception of phonetics

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The problem

- Holger Pedersen thought that Rask meant sound correspondences when he wrote ‘letter transitions’ (bogstavovergange) (Pedersen 1932: XXXIIf)
- Rask, however, was all his life concerned with precisely the relationship between letters and sounds, cf. Rask 1823; 1826 (as Pedersen is well aware (ibid.))
- The reason Rask wrote ‘letter transitions’ was that in order to compare, you must be sure you actually compare likes; the data are in fact written letters

The problem 2

- So, Rask had to find a way to represent the sounds that letters 'represented' in the language(s)
- But in order to do this, one must have some sort of *theory of writing* and some version of a *theory of speech sounds*, i.e. a phonetics
- Rask's *theory of writing* was simple: Writing had to represent as simply as possible the sounds of the spoken language. This raises the problem of the sound systems of spoken languages
- So, restating the problem:
- *What was Rask's theory of phonetics?*
- Logically, this can be broken up into two separate issues:

The problem 3

- *What knowledge of sounds (and sound systems) was available to Rask? (And did he avail himself of it?)*
- *What was his own contribution?*
- The first problem is the problem of (possible) INFLUENCE
- The second problem is the problem of ORIGINALITY

1

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Rask on dialect

- Rasmus Rask worked on the sound system of his own Funen dialect when he was still in high school (cf. Andersen 1937) in order to write it down as truthfully as possible
- The manuscripts are from the time before he went to the University
- In the manuscripts he shows himself as a brilliant phonologist
- He is especially good at analyzing his own speech and that of his own milieu

Rask on grammar 1815 (1820)

- Rask as Herderian
- An essay in historical grammar ('grammatical etymology')
- Rask refers back to this paper in his campaign for a new orthography later

The Spanish grammar

- This is a key text:

Ved denne ringe Forandring vil den nordiske Selvlydsordning (Vokalsystem), som nu er aldeles fordunklet og oversât, fremskinne i sin skønne Ejendommelighed og Regelrethed, bestående af følgende 10 Selvlyde:

hårde a, å, o, u, e;

bløde æ, o, ø, y, i.

De sidste give altid i Dansk og Svensk et foregående *k* og *g*, den bløde Lyd, man behøver derfor i intet sådant Tilfælde at indskyde noget *j* for at frembringe denne;

RR: *Spansk sproglære* [Spanish grammar], 1823: 18, repeated in Kriger's Småting

The treatise on orthography

- It is significant that the treatise on Orthography (1826) is by far the longest book RR has written, except the prize essay
- It is intended as a *scientific*, i.e. rational, discussion of how to organize an orthography for a language like Danish
- The main problems are: the diphthongs, the letter å, the vowel system (and the stød) and the consonant palatalizations

2: the problem of influence

**HISTORY OF PHONETICS UNTIL
RASK**

Jespersen's history of phonetics

Otto Jespersen wrote a history of phonetics as part of his opus magnum 'Fonetik'

He lists five possible influences:

- Jacob Madsen Aarhus (Jacobus Matthiae): *De litteris, libri duo* 1586
- Jens Pedersen Høysgaard (cf. Hans Basbøll's paper)
- Christoph Friedrich Hellwag: *Dissertatio...*
- E.F.H. Chladni: *Traité d'acoustique* 1809
- Jacob Hornemann Bredsdorff (several works)

More recent contributions

Possible but not used:

- Cartesian phonetics according to Ohlsson
- Kratzenstein (and v. Kempelen) according to Eli Fischer-Jørgensen

Used (and partly referred to):

- The classic tradition according to Desbordes
- Swedish research on writing and speech
Leopold and Silverstolpe

On Jacobus Matthiæ

What Rask took from Jacob Madsen:

- The idea that Danish does not have any diphthongs (by which he seems to mean two vowels making up one syllable)

What he did not take from Jacob Madsen:

- The apocope, Madsen is from Jutland

On Hellwag

- Rask has not owned Hellwag's dissertation (cf. the catalogus) and the Royal Library did not either (or they have lost it). There is no indication that Rask knew about Hellwag
- Hellwag gives a better description of articulatory phonetics than his contemporaries, in particular Chladni, according to Jespersen; however, there is no indication that Rask is particularly interested in how the sounds are produced.

On Chladni

- Chladni was an acoustician interested in all kinds of acoustics
- He translated his German treatise on acoustics into French as *Traite d'acoustique* and actually supplemented the German version with a small section on the vowel system
- Rask refers to Chladni whenever there is a need for an authority but he dismisses his system and that's it

On Bredsdorff 1

- Sources: Rask's Letters (cf. Commentary); Bredsdorff's reviews of the suggestions in Rask 1823
- Personal relationship: Bredsdorff's letter home, quoted in a biography of the grandparents by a granddaughter shows that he stayed with Rask when he went to university as a beginning student
- Analysis: Bredsdorff knew about the schwa, cf. his 1818 paper which Rask of course knew
- Bredsdorff indicates palatalization of the consonants

On Bredsdorff 2

- In my view there has been a tendency to overstate the difference between Bredsdorff and Rask, the first being a good phonetician, the latter being not so good
- They were scientists of very different natures: Bredsdorff was a polyhistor dabbling at very many things and often right in the details but with no discernible sense for the grand view
- In contrast, Rask was a man of vision

Summary: On influence

- Rask did not live at a time with a professional specialization called phonetics
- He probably did *not* know about Hellwag; he *did* know about Chladni but dismissed both his vowel system and his system of consonants
- and he most certainly had read the entire orthographical literature including first and foremost the Danes: Jacob Madsen, Høysgaard, Baden, Abrahamson, Bloch, Dampe, Skougaard but also the Swedes Silverstolpe and af Leopold and finally Siegenbeek, Zeydelaars and the French literature
- He knew all about Bredsdorff, so why did he not include the schwa?

3

THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINALITY

Vowel systems according to Rask

- Vowel systems have to be based on
- reference to other languages and other speech communities (RR refers to 'the peasants' (*almuen*) having a different å)
- synchronic alternations: *kamp, kæmpe, greb, griber, love, løfte*: **vowels which alternate belong to the same class**
- reference to phonological processes: the palatalization of consonants is dependent on the following vowel

The vowel system of Danish

- HARD: a, å, o, u, e
- SOFT: æ, ö, ø, y, i
- Consonants are invariably soft before the soft vowels (and thus this needs no indication)
- The problem is of course e, because e is the unstressed vowel par excellence in Danish orthography, equalling a schwa phonetically

The Danish consonants according to Rask

- Velars **k, (k'), g, g', g~,**
- Dorsals **t, (th), d, D, n,**
- Labials **p, f, b m**
- Semivowels **j, j, v, w,**
- Liquids **l, r,**
- Sibilants **s,**
- Breathed **h,**

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Remarks on the system

- Rask sees that d and D are distributional variants, and the same goes for the palatalized variants of k and g
- Likewise v and w are distributional variants and partly also dependent on dialect or style

Rask's criteria

- The facts: do other languages have the same sound? Is there some dialect specialization? What about style? BUT also and importantly: Does the sound in question play the same role as in other languages? (cf. p. 57 on an important difference between the system of Icelandic and that of Danish)
- Distributional criteria, inside the syllable, in compositions
- Alternations (both synchronically and diachronically)
- Coarticulation (the palatalizations)

Conclusion as to Rask's analysis

In all cases it makes much more sense to understand Rask's analysis as a **morphophonological** one aiming at determining the underlying form of each word as far as possible. In this sense RR is much closer to generative phonology and glossematic analysis than to phonetics, i.e. the analysis constantly aims at leading to an optimal orthography that aptly represents the SYSTEM. The schwa, e.g. is derivable and therefore NOT part of the SYSTEM (derivable in terms of stress assignment). This approach is truly original in that it puts phonetics in a place serving (morpho)phonology and yet it is also completely traditional: the orthographical tradition is here critically weighed and received based on RR's own ear, fallible but still unbelievably right in so many respects

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THREE CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion 1

- Rask was a morphophonologist, interested in deep relationships between sounds partly because the morphological alternations are so extremely important in a Danish orthography which prioritizes morpheme constancy, cf. Rischel's Consonant gradation: *bage* – *bagt* ('to bake' – 'baked'): [bæ:] - [bagdh]
- His aim was to construct orthographical means to bring out the true 'system', 'structure' or *ordning* as he writes several places of any language he studied, not only Danish
- Thus he was not, it seems, out to reduce writing to transcription, nor keen on constructing a really radical orthography (although it certainly was radical enough for his contemporaries) (cf. Bredsdorff)

Conclusion 2: originality?

- With the grand vision of analyses of a number of different languages based on ‘the same plan’ and based on a reduction of their ‘system’ to a rational orthography, Rask had no predecessor and unfortunately also no successors (until possibly Hjemselev, cf. John Joseph’s paper)
- With this special interest it was natural for Rask to learn a lot more from the rationalist orthographers than from Chladni (or Hellwag)
- In this sense he is an original phonologist coming from a long tradition

Conclusion 3: RR in the HoLS

- As we know from Hjelmslev's incisive analysis, Rask's aim was to write a long series of grammars so that he – and we - could compare languages based on descriptions which were truly comparable
- With Rask we could have had a linguistics where the difference between common history and common structure was not the dividing line between a historical linguistics and a typology; i.e. we would have had a *general comparative linguistics*. Maybe we can still use Rask's ideas in an attempt to dissolve frontiers within linguistics which have turned out to be less than helpful