

# Neutralization: Rhyme and Reason in Phonology

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Babelese inventory:

**p t k i u**

**m n ŋ a**

Babelese root shapes: **CVCV**, **CVCVC**, **CVCCV**, and **CVCCVC**

**Paradigmatic** limitations: only six of the values may be commuted in the first position of a root (**p t k m n ŋ**), and only three of the values may be commuted in the second position of a root (**i u a**).

**Syntagmatic** limitations: the only consonant clusters found morpheme-internally are of the form **homorganic NP** (where **N**=nasal, **P**=plosive): there are only three phonetic values that commute in the relevant **N** paradigm: **m(p) n(t) ŋ(k)**.

**Static** limitations: it is *always* the case that root-internal consonantal sequences in Babelese are one of three *fixed* homorganic nasal-stop sequences (**mp nt ŋk**).

**Dynamic** limitations: derived **C+C** clusters take twenty-four different forms:

17 **p+p p+t p+k t+p t+t t+k k+p k+t k+k**  
 18 **p+m p+n p+ŋ t+m t+n t+ŋ k+m k+n k+ŋ**  
 19 **m+p n+t ŋ+k**  
 20 **m+m n+n ŋ+ŋ**

21 Babelese words have only three contrastive **NP** configurations, though they each come in two  
 22 rather different varieties:

23 **mp nt ŋk**

24 **m+p n+t ŋ+k**

25 Neutralization:

26 **tampan# tampam+p tampan+t tampan+k**

27 **timpan# timpam+p timpan+t timpan+k**

28 NEUTRALIZATION: derived homophony. (When used in this formal sense, the term appears in small  
 29 caps.)

30 **tampan# tampam+p tampan+t tampan+k**

31 **tampan# tampam+p tampan+t tampan+k**

- 32 1. An alternation that eliminates the phonetic distinction between or among values, but instead  
 33 shifts or displaces the phonetic distinction elsewhere (“partial phonemic overlap”) is not  
 34 NEUTRALIZATION
- 35 2. An alternation that eliminates the phonetic distinction between or among values that are  
 36 contrastive elsewhere, but does not induce homophony, is not NEUTRALIZATION
- 37 3. An alternation that reduces the number of contrastive values in some context, but does not  
 38 derive homophones, is not NEUTRALIZATION
- 39 4. Static, morpheme-internal contrast suspension is not NEUTRALIZATION

40

41 We may treat non-alternating components of morphemes—whatever their shape or size—as  
 42 wholes, as *Gestalten*, and further recognize that components in alternation—again, whatever their  
 43 shape or size—are also *Gestalten*, ones that are set in high relief against their phonetically fixed  
 44 morpheme-internal backgrounds: “there is no reason to assume that language users subdivide the  
 45 words they learn into distinct sound-components unless there is evidence from alternation to do  
 46 so”.

47 Sounds that function as elements of contrast in one context may not serve this same function in  
 48 other contexts (cf. Firth and polysystemicity).

49 The spans of speech within morphemes—despite phonetic appearances to the contrary, and  
 50 however “recyclable” their attendant motor routines—are *not* necessarily built out of smaller  
 51 linguistically significant units that combine in various ways. Rather, the spans of the speech stream

52 underlain by a specific linguistic *function*—morphemes, words, and perhaps certain rote phrases—  
 53 are the genuine building blocks of linguistic structure, blocks that may only be partitioned into  
 54 smaller units when there is evidence from alternation to do so.

55 Apart from mere phonetic similarity—their *extrinsic phonetic similarity*—there is no reason to  
 56 group any components of the speech stream together unless there is linguistic evidence that they  
 57 do indeed possess some sort of *intrinsic functional non-distinctness*.

58 **In phonology, the *only* instance where this scenario obtains—and the only case in which physical**  
 59 **dissimilarity is regularly overridden by functional identity—comes from alternation: components**  
 60 **of the speech stream that substitute for one another, and yet morpheme meaning remains the**  
 61 **same, share an *intrinsic functional identity*.**

62 In Babelese, Morpheme-internal  $\eta k$  bears no intrinsic phonological relationship to any other  $\eta k$ , be  
 63 the sequence found in another morpheme-internal context ( $\eta k$ ), or at a morpheme boundary ( $\eta+k$ ),  
 64 or across a word boundary ( $\eta\#k$ ). Rather, functional links may be established solely by semantic  
 65 criteria; allomorphs are functionally—semantically—non-distinct.

66 Important exception: derived homophony (NEUTRALIZATION). Here—and *only* here—the allomorphs  
 67 in alternation do not share a unique functional identity. Rather, in just this instance, identity is  
 68 forfeited—indeed it is shared, or overlapped, with another morpheme—due to the absence of  
 69 phonetic evidence for these morphemes' distinctness in meaning.

70 The only phenomenon that remains as a genuine instance of NEUTRALIZATION is an alternation that  
71 derives homophones. Here, there is an *extrinsic phonetic similarity*—indeed, a derived *phonetic*  
72 *identity*—among items, but it is the consequent *intrinsic functional non-distinctness* of the derived  
73 forms that establishes the phenomenon’s linguistic relevance: any phonetic evidence for these  
74 items’ difference in meaning is washed away.

75 Babelese suffixes are monosyllabic (**CV** or **CVC**), and are subject to vowel harmony:

76 **tampan+tak**, but **kupit+tik**.

77 Affixes are usually shorter than roots, and also, are often subject to assimilatory phenomena such  
78 as vowel harmony

79 The alternation in evidence likely encompasses any consonant(s) that intervene between the root-  
80 final vowel and the suffix vowel:

81 **tampan+tak**, but **kupit+tik**)

82 NEUTRALIZATION is rarely an issue here.

83 Phonological RHYME may increase until encountering a counter-pressure that inhibits undue  
84 decreases in phonological REASON: the inventory of motor routines that a language deploys is likely  
85 to be influenced by lexical semantic factors: coarticulation and assimilatory alternations may

86 conceivably evolve rather freely, provided the transmission of *meaning* between speaker and  
87 listener is not adversely affected.

88 Indeed, as a passive consequence of communicative success—of effective transmission of lexical  
89 semantic content—speech with less coarticulation (as opposed to more coarticulation) may  
90 emerge as the conventionalized norm. Articulatory details put in service to failed communication—  
91 as when the meaning associated with overly-coarticulated or -assimilated speech tokens is not  
92 effectively communicated to listeners—are less likely to be reproduced as listeners become  
93 speakers (since such speech may be misunderstood), and are thus less likely to become  
94 conventionalized motor routines.

95 So-called “phonetic or “low-level” effects (such as patterns of coarticulation) may in fact be the  
96 result of deep historical and systemic pressures many times removed from the physical systems  
97 that proximally underlie speech; the emergent result of persistent, slow-going, interlocutionary  
98 tendencies that shape and change speech conventions.