Sound Change

"Sound change, in so far as it takes place **mechanically**, takes place according to laws that admit no exceptions"

(Osthoff & Brugmann, 1878)
Motivations

- Early historical linguistic inquiry revolved around looking at related languages and related forms and positing origins.
- Without a sound methodology, one can posit anything.
- Need for a systematic, comprehensive method to investigate sound change & language relatedness.
Die Junggrammatiker ("The Neogrammarians")

- Young linguists working in Leipzig (Germany) set out to rewrite historical linguistics by establishing coherent, comprehensive methodology to account for sound change.
- This method was based upon what has come to be known as the Neogrammatarian Regularity Hypothesis.
Regularity?

- In the Neogrammarian sense, sound change is absolutely regular if the term "sound change" refers to change in sounds conditioned only by phonetic factors.

- Another way to look at this is that sound change in absolutely regular if the change in sounds is not conditioned by non-phonetic factors.

- Sound change is phonetically gradual (proceeds imperceptibly) but lexically abrupt (effects all relevant words simultaneously).
This means that...

- Analogy is not regular, neogrammarian sound change (*kine > cows*, but *swine* didn't become *swows*)

- Socially motivated change is not regular, neogrammarian sound change (*shit > shoot*, but *hit* didn't become *hoot*)

- Neogrammarian sound change assumes that the change operates "blindly" and from "below" (without lexical or grammatical conditioning or any degree of social awareness)
Blind Change

- "Pin" vs. "pen" in Appalachian English ([ɪ] & [ɛ] > [iə])
- "Mary" vs. "merry" vs. "marry" ([e] & [ɛ] & [æ] > [æ]
- Blind change often leads to circumlocutions or one of the newly formed homonyms being dropped (i.e. "cleave" is almost never used any more to mean "stick to")
Other Caveats

- The regularity hypothesis is a statement about particular sound changes as historical events, limited by place, time and language / dialect

- Certain types of sound change, while not analogical, are nonetheless notoriously irregular
Irregular Sound Change

- Metathesis = the transposition of sounds: OE bryde > Mod. Eng. bird, OE bros > Mod. Eng. horse

- Dissimilation = when sounds become less similar to make the difference between them more clear: colonel = [kərnəl]
Two Cheers for Regularity

- While Neogrammarian regularity is real enough in many cases, their hope to establish "absolute" regularity was unrealistic.

- The Neogrammarian regularity hypothesis is a good general guideline for investigating sound change.

- Socially motivated sound change & Lexical Diffusion are also attested.
Lexical Diffusion

- Lexical diffusion is an observed phenomenon: a phoneme is modified in a subset of the lexicon, and then spreads gradually to other lexical items.

- In this view, sound change is phonetically abrupt (proceeds in perceptible increments) but lexically gradual (spreads across the lexicon in groups of words).

- Lexical diffusion operates from "above": characteristic of an internal change that has been differentiated by lexical & grammatical conditioning (plus high social awareness and/or borrowing).