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Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Jul., 1912), pp. 314-317

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3713680>

Accessed: 28/06/2014 10:44

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ON THE PRONUNCIATION OF 'S' IN GERMANIC.

THE familiar rule of alliterative technique which requires that initial *s-* when followed by a voiceless explosive shall only alliterate with *s* + the same explosive and not with a single *s-* or with *s* + any other explosive, or with *s* + any consonant other than a voiceless explosive, would appear to throw some little light on the speech habits of the Germanic peoples and may at the same time perhaps find its explanation in those speech habits.

The necessity of alliterating *sp-* only with *sp-* and not with *sk-* or *sn-* or *s-* or any other combination than *sp-* can only be accounted for on the assumption that the latter alliteration failed, in some way not self-evident, to satisfy the essential requirements of alliteration. The essential requirement of alliteration, as of rime and assonance, may be said to be the recurrence of sounds which in their acoustic effects are identical. The question of vowel alliteration may be left out of the question for the present, and we are therefore forced to the conclusion that in the inadmissible alliteration of *sp-* with *sn-* there is such a difference in the acoustic effect of the *s* as to destroy the impression of identity.

It should be noticed that initial *s-* can alliterate freely either with itself or with *s* + any consonant except a voiceless explosive, so that one may assume that in such positions the acoustic value of *s-* was always the same. On the other hand *s-* cannot alliterate with *sp-*, *sk-*, *st-*, and therefore we may assume that these three combinations formed a closed group with some special distinguishing features of their own, one of which must be a different acoustic value of the initial *s-*. It may however be urged that if we deduce different values of *s-* from the inadmissibility of the alliteration *sp-* : *sn-* we may also deduce different values of *s-* from the inadmissibility of the alliteration *sp-* : *sk-*. This however is not a valid objection; for, as we have seen, *sp-*, *sk-*, *st-*, form a group by themselves, and hence the cause of the special treatment of

this *group* may also be the cause of the special treatment of members *within* the group, and this we shall see to be the case.

Moreover *s-* may alliterate with *sn-* or *sl-* or *s* followed by any consonant except a voiceless explosive, and the consonant plays no determining role in the alliteration; but in the combinations *st-*, *sp-*, *sk-*, the consonant *does* play a determining role, in so far as it participates and must participate in the alliteration. Consequently, if *st-* cannot alliterate with *sp-* it is because of the difference of consonant and not because of any difference in the value of the *s-*.

We are thus forced to the conclusion that whereas the acoustic value of *s-* in the groups *st-*, *sp-*, *sk-*, is the same, or, at any rate, not necessarily different, this acoustic value differs from the value of *s-* in all other combinations. It remains to enquire wherein this difference consists.

It can scarcely be said to be a difference of articulation or quality, for the *s-* was in all probability articulated in the same way in *sm-*, *sn-*, etc., as in *st-*, *sp-*, *sk-*, since there is nothing, phonetically speaking, to shift the articulation—the articulation of *sm-* corresponds exactly (if we except the nasal factor of the *m*) to that of *sp-* and *sn-* to *st-*. Rather we should expect to find the difference in the stress or quantity of the *s-*. A little experiment will immediately show that *s-* followed by a continuant is of much greater length and much more clear and distinct acoustically than an *s-* followed by a voiceless stop. The manner of articulation of the groups *st-* and *sn-* confirms this experience, for in the pronunciation of *st-* the current of air is cut off at a very early stage in order to form the position for the *-t-*. In the group *sn-*, on the other hand, the current of air is not cut off at all in the transition from the *s-* to the *-n-*, and hence the acoustic effect of the *s-* is much stronger when the latter sound is followed by a continuant.

In the case of *st-*, *sp-*, *sk-* the first sound is, as it were, subordinated to, and almost swallowed up by, the explosion which follows it. In the case of strongly stressed or aspirated explosives the effect of the initial *s-* would be still less. Thus it is that if in a large room somebody at a distance cries out 'Speech!' the *s-*, though by nature a more sonorous sound than a *p*, and one which carries further, is yet lost in this case and the *-p-* is heard more clearly than the *s-*. In this partial suppression of initial *s-* by a succeeding explosive is doubtless to be found the explanation of the rule which requires the alliteration of *sp-* with *sp-*, etc., more especially since the old Germanic poetry was composed for the ear, intended for large audiences, and frequently recited in the open air. It

was felt, no doubt, that since the explosive was the predominating initial sound and not the spirant, the explosive should participate in the alliteration.

The whole question may also be approached from another side. Jespersen has already pointed out (*Lehrbuch der Phonetik*, § 192 ff.) that a syllable consists of a rise in sonority up to the head of the syllable and of a fall in sonority from the head of the syllable to its end. The initial groups *st-*, *sp-*, *sk-* would seem however to be at variance with this principle, in so far as *s* is a more sonorous sound than *p*. This difference in sonority is however very slight in the case of *s* and *t*, *p*, or *k*, and is further reduced by weakening the expiratory force of the *s-*, as we have seen above. If the difference of sonority had been more marked, as for example between *m + p*, the combination would have been impossible at the beginning of a syllable. The initial groups *sp-*, *st-*, *sk-* are, in any case, very unstable at the beginning of a syllable and would appear to survive only on one of three conditions:

(i) Either the initial *s-* becomes the final *-s* of a prefixed syllable, e.g. Latin *strictum* > Fr. *estroit*, Lat. *studium* > Fr. *estude*, Lat. *spiritum* > Fr. *esprit*.

(ii) Or the explosive is pronounced with greater articulatory stress (cf. Guineken, *Principes de linguistique psychologique*, Paris, 1907, § 531).

(iii) Or the quantity (and hence the sonority) of the *s-* is reduced.

That *s* in the groups *st-*, etc. is subject to special modifications due to speech habit may also be seen from the comparison of initial *st-* with final *-st*. In the latter, in such a word as 'fast,' the passage from *s* to *t* represents a perfectly normal descent in sonority and therefore *s* is not weakened in any way and is a clear and distinct sound. Far from being in any way affected by the final *t*, it frequently gains in length at the expense of the *t*, as in 'a fast train' = 'ə fās trein' or 'a fast boat' = 'ə fās bout.' It is true that in these cases the loss of the final *t* may be due to the difficulty of pronouncing *t + t* or *b*, but the important fact remains that in this position the *s* retains its character, whereas in the initial position it modifies its character. So also in such a word as 'fāsq' (fasten) if we divide the syllables 'fas-sten' we can readily see why the *t* disappears with compensation lengthening of the *s*, instead of weakening the *s* and keeping the *t*. If, indeed, in modern English we preserve the *t*, then the syllabication immediately becomes 'fās-ten' (just as in 'of-ten' as distinguished from 'oft').

If, then, initial *s* in the groups *st*-, etc., is a weakened *s*, coalescing, as it were, with the following explosive, it becomes clear that *sp*- can only alliterate with *sp*-, and *sk*- with *sk*-, etc., because these groups alone satisfied the requirement of identical recurring sounds, and it would also appear that this identity was interpreted more strictly than is commonly supposed. The conclusion that complete identity of sound alone sufficed is further borne out by the investigations of R. M. Meyer (*Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, xxvi, 149), who discovers a strong tendency in old Germanic poetry to alliterate two initial consonants instead of one.

Incidentally it might be observed that this may throw some light on the current theories of vowel-alliteration. One of these theories assumes the glottal catch to have been the alliterating element in vowel alliteration, and has often been called in question on other grounds. If, however, *sp*- could not alliterate with *st*- because the *s* sound was too weak, how shall we believe that the glottal catch—a still less sonorous sound—should have constituted the alliteration before initial vowels?

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