

Right at the left edge: initial consonant mutations in the languages of the world

Pavel Iosad

1 Introduction

This paper presents a typological overview of initial consonant mutations (abbreviated: *ICM*) — pretheoretically, changes in the first consonant of a word which are not obviously caused by the phonetic / phonological context. They are relatively well-known from the modern Celtic languages such as Welsh (Ball and Müller 1992) and Irish (Ní Chiosáin 1991; Green 2006). The main goals of this paper are as follows:

1. Provide an overview of initial consonant mutation and initial consonant mutation-like phenomena attested cross-linguistically;
2. Examine whether initial consonant mutation can be thought of as a separate phenomenon or just a special case of (morphologically conditioned) phonological alternations;
3. Make some typological generalizations over initial consonant mutation (as long as it is possible on such a small set).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I propose an overview of initial consonant mutation cases attested cross-linguistically and try to define the concept of mutation more clearly. Section 3 presents a fuller inventory of languages exhibiting initial consonant mutations (or initial consonant mutation-like phenomena). Section 4 considers some issues in the phonological exponence of initial consonant mutation, with special reference to autosegmental approaches. Section 5 discusses factors which trigger mutation. Section 6 contains a brief discussion of initial consonant mutation typology. Section 7 concludes.

2 Overview of mutations

Initial consonant mutations are best known from the (Insular) Celtic languages Irish, Scottish, Manx, Welsh, Breton, and Cornish. Here, I will use