PHONETIC EUPHEMISMS AND PHONOLOGICAL DISTANCE

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In the study of phonology, a number of models have arisen to depict the operation and internal structure of the phonological component, each model based on a differing set of fundamental postulates and bearing differing relations to the realm of empirical evidence. In particular, one may start either from a purely axiomatic basis or from an uncorrelated set of empirical data, with the majority of studies coming from intermediate points on this methodological continuum. Once values for particular distinctive features have been determined, it is possible to establish matrices of phonological 'distance' based on feature values. In this study, an additional method is suggested by means of which one may hope to gain insight into the workings of distinctive feature systems. The phenomenon in question is the phonetic modification of socially proscribed words to form acceptable euphemisms. Obviously, constraints exist which allow some types of modification and disallow others. One particular case, from Spanish, is analyzed in detail, and after examining purely phonetic modifications (as opposed to lexical replacement by already existing forms), it is concluded that such constraints may indeed be discovered by further study of existing and potential euphemistic deformations. An ongoing research project is revealing both anticipated and unexpected specifications of phonological distance, suggesting the need to reexamine the notions of distance and the irrelevance of individual phonological specifications in determination of phonological systems.