How unnatural and exceptional can languages become?

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One of the main ideas in Optimality Theory is that the phonological behavior of languages can be derived from different orderings of universal faithfulness constraints and natural markedness constraints. Therefore phenomena that seem not to meet naturalness pose a challenge to this idea. Lexical exceptions to phonological processes, and how they must be encoded, also pose a challenge to OT—and to other theories as well.

In order to shed some light on these questions, we will analyze two phenomena, word-final n-deletion and r-deletion in Catalan, that share the two aforementioned properties: (a) they do not seem to synchronically follow a natural phonological explanation, and (b) they have a considerable number of lexical exceptions. We will consider several possible analytical alternatives, such as constraint conjunction, acceptance of parochial constraints, and predicting phonological behavior from generalizations derived from the lexicon.

We will base our analysis on dialectal and crosslinguistic variation: most data come from several varieties of Catalan, but additional data from other Romance languages will show that the phenomena under study are not marginal, and thus demand an explanation.