

The Notion of the Sound Law and Its Criticizers

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Abstract

This article deals with the problematic nature of the concept of sound law in linguistics, where the authors attempt to comprehend the reasons for the sharp criticism of this concept in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by relying on the modern understanding of science on the whole and the status of scientific law in particular. The paper gives a brief historical reference to the formation of the concept of scientific law, which was a prerequisite for the emergence of the sound law in linguistics. It gives the postulates by [Osthoff \(1878\)](#) and K. Brugmann who swore allegiance to the sound law and represents their sharp criticism by such linguists as H. [\(Baudouin, 1968; Saussure, 1977\)](#). Investigating the works by the critics of Neogrammarian concept, the authors attempt to determine the causes of the problematic nature of this concept, which later would help determine the modern status of the scientific law in linguistics, and accordingly, the possibility of the existence of sound laws.

Keywords: Linguistics; Human Sciences; Scientific Law; Sound.



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1. Introduction

The renewal of science in the 20th century, and as a consequence – the rethinking of the foundations of scientific knowledge, as well as the actualization of the problem of the concept of law in science, give us the right to return to the problem of the concept of sound law in linguistics. The purpose of this problematization is the modern interpretation of this concept, as well as an attempt to answer the questions whether the concept of law has a right to exist in linguistics and what the criteria for this concept are. The problems of sound regularities, regardless of whether the status of the law has been secured for them, still remain relevant in phonology, as evidenced by the works of such scholars as [\(Hill, 2009\)](#), [\(Enger, 2013\)](#), as well as [\(Anderson, 2016\)](#). To obtain answers, it is necessary to analyze all aspects of this problem, including the criteria for criticizing the concept of sound law within the period of neogrammarian movement. Thus, in the last third of the nineteenth century, a new direction was formed in linguistics, called Neogrammarian School, which disseminated throughout the world and had a tremendous impact on all subsequent linguistics. The fundamentals of this tendency were formulated by [Osthoff \(1878\)](#) in the preface to *Morphological Research in the Field of Indo-European Languages*, where the first postulate was as follows: Phonetic laws existing in the language have no exceptions (exceptions arise as a result of overlapping laws or are caused by other factors).

However, at the beginning of the 20th century there was the rising tide of ferocious criticism of Neogrammarian School of linguistics. The weak points inherent in classical neogrammarian concept caused the desire for improving neogrammarian means of the linguistic description, or for putting forward alternative research programs as opposed to Neogrammarian school. This period includes the creation of new linguistic schools, which are in sharp opposition to Neogrammarian School. This includes the school of words and things, the school of aesthetic idealism, and later the so-called Neolinguistics. There were original linguists, for whom the view stand of the neogrammarians turned out to be dogmas that prevented the development of linguistics. These scientists are [\(Baudouin, 1968; Saussure, 1977\)](#).

2. Methods

The material of the study was the works by linguistic scientists of the young grammatical direction and by their critics that were being comprehended for revealing the main criteria of the concept of sound law in the 19th century. The study applies historical method of investigating the problem.

3. Results and Discussion

Let us dwell in greater detail on the criticism of neogrammar sound laws [\(Baudouin, 1968; Saussure, 1977\)](#). Schuhardt and Bloomfield opposed the use of the very concept of law with reference to phonetic changes. So, [\(Saussure, 1977\)](#) writes that it would be the greatest benefit for linguistics to get rid of the concept of law. [\(Baudouin, 1968\)](#) wrote that there are no sound laws and that the concept of sound laws must be completely rejected by linguistics. Bloomfield called them a dangerous metaphor. As can be seen from these statements, one of the criteria for determining the phonetic law as a law was its consistency-inconsistency with the generally accepted canons of scientific law. It is beyond the question that for the linguists of the late 19th - early 20th centuries the

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concept of scientific law in general was understandable and problem-free, the problem was its applicability in linguistics.

In order to understand what meaning the scientific minds of the nineteenth century put into the concept of law, it is advisable to analyze this concept in diachrony. The very concept of law emerged not in science. In Antiquity the law denoted a set of legal rules that was prescribed to a person of the city-state. In the works of ancient materialist philosophers the law could metaphorically express the regular connections between the phenomena of the human world. And only in the forming of natural science the concept of law of nature began to gradually form in the modern meaning. However, in the 16th-17th centuries, when the notion of law was not yet universal, other terms were often used: for example, Copernicus and Kepler argued about hypotheses, Galileo, using mathematical terms, mentioned axioms and theorems. And only Descartes and Newton used the concept of natural law in the scientific context. Newton views the rule as a purely methodological research principle, and the law as the norm prevailing in the phenomena of nature. Newton's main factor for the introduction of the new concept was the desire to discern the difference between axioms as a principle of only an abstract meaning and a purely mathematical explanation, and those positions to which the objective reality of nature was attributed. However, this restriction had not been preserved. The definition of law of nature (*lex naturalis*), having discarded the signs of nature, gradually extended into all possible areas where it was possible to establish generally accepted regularities (Antúnez, 2014).

Apparently, the concept of law has come to science metaphorically, being borrowed from the norms of public order. But then the question arises: if the very mankind established the social laws to create and regulate social orders, then who or what established the laws of nature, according to medieval scholars? As (Wundt, 1886) writes, Descartes' laws of nature are the rules that are formulated not from observing nature, but from contemplating the divine properties in it. They are considered to be rules because they are recognizable and underlie the explanations of phenomena; laws – because God originally put them in matter when he was defining the properties of this matter. Thus, according to Descartes, the law maker is God (Klaus and Buhr, 1966). Leibniz said that all phenomena occur according to mechanical laws with strict necessity, the very mechanical laws, however, must be based themselves from the goals. These goals, according to Leibniz, are the goals of the divine world order, where the natural and moral worlds, the laws of nature and the laws of morality are directly related: all this is the result of the divine will. Newton, in his natural philosophy, departed a little from theological considerations, but with the religious consciousness that was characteristic of the great naturalists of the middle Ages and the Renaissance, there is no doubt that in his *leges naturae* he also reflected on the divine will as the highest maker of law.

In the 17th century, in the era of its formation, science rejected God, but, despite this, the concept of the law of nature was preserved. But now nature itself imputes laws. So, (Shchedrovitsky, 2000) said that the science and laws of nature were needed for people to replace God and appeal to God. However, if you think about it, it turns out that God did not go anywhere from the science of the 17th century, it turned now to be called Nature. Finally, Kant excluded God from the science in the 18th century in his Critique of Pure Reason. At the same time, the concept of law was preserved. By the 19th century, the concept of scientific law was formed as a stable, strong concept, devoid of theological implication. And already no one thought now that the concept of law is a continuation of God's expression. It was believed that the law was a universal concept and applied to all areas of knowledge. It was thought that the more general was theoretical knowledge, the more important it was, and the more scientific it was. And the scientific nature of science was determined by the existence of natural laws in it. Each science of the nineteenth-century sought to establish laws and, on their basis, to describe and explain the phenomena studied. And the concept of scientific law exactly corresponded to the ideal of science.

It should also be noted that at the end of the 19th century Windelband and Rickert advanced the idea that along with generalizing (nomothetic) sciences that aim to discover scientific laws, there exist individualizing (ideographic) sciences that do not formulate any laws of their own but represent the objects under investigation in their singleness and uniqueness, that is, there is a differentiation between the sciences of nature where the requirement for objective knowledge is the scientific laws and the sciences of man where the scientific laws forsake their significant positions. Thus, critics of sound laws having a precise and undeniable idea of the concept of scientific law could not reconcile themselves with empirical laws in linguistics – the science of language as a humanitarian science. At the same time, none of them denied the very facts of sound regularities which really beared resemblance to the phenomena in natural science. However, the straightforwardness of neogrammarians, their fidelity to this concept, for the first time, indicated the problematic nature of the concept of law in science. This concept of criticism was understood metaphorically. However, this metaphorical sound laws were incomplete, and the sound laws as such did not fully comply with the canons of scientific law. It should be noted that critics hypothesized laws in the humanities to have been formulated metaphorically: not scientific laws in a pure sense, but laws in a figurative sense. So, (Baudouin, 1968), denying phonetic laws, did not deny the laws in the language at all. He wrote: *“To classify language as the organism, linguistics as the natural sciences is an empty phrase, without an actual lining”* ... (Baudouin, 1968), The essence of the human language is exclusively psychic. The existence and development of language is conditioned by purely psychic laws. Speaking about the fundamental difference between linguistics and the natural sciences, consisting in the fact that it is based on individual psychology and sociology, at the same time he believed that linguistics like other sciences about man, should become an exact mathematized science. Thus, the language laws, according to Baudouin (1968), are psychic and social: Language exists and changes not arbitrarily, not because of some whim, but according to permanent laws – not according to sound laws, for such do not exist and cannot exist in language, but according to the mental and sociological laws. In Baudouin (1968), judgment, real existence has not a sound language, but the language as a mental phenomenon, as a totality of representations. Thus, the concept of phonetic law should be replaced by the following concepts: 1) the laws of the

psyche in individual souls, that is, the laws of psychic existence and psychic metamorphosis; 2) the laws of the ways according to which social communication of people occurs, the laws of manifestation of linguistic representations through the medium of the organic and physical worlds. In addition, he distinguishes: 1) the mental laws of associations, perception and apperception, emotions, etc.; 2) physiological laws (reflex movements, mechanical combinations in the organism); 3) the laws of the physical world (the phonetic laws of acoustics, the laws of mechanics, optics, etc.).

Saussure (1977), unlike Baudouin (1968) considered the language from sociological viewpoint, and therefore, according to Saussure (1977), in language and in sociology there can be no laws. So, considering the concept of law in terms of science, he noted that since, for example, phonetic changes always occurred and will occur, it is possible to consider these phenomena generally as one of the permanent properties of language – this is, therefore, one of its laws. But these are only general principles, not dependent on concrete facts; concerning private and tangible facts, there can be no panchronic point of view. So, any phonetic change, whatever its distribution, is always restricted by a certain time and a certain territory; it by no means extend to all times and all terrain, it exists only diachronically. In general, allowing laws in the language, he was guided only by public laws, which have two main features: such laws are mandatory and universal. Such laws, according to Saussure (1977), are mandatory for everyone, and they apply to all cases, in certain time and space boundaries (Sharadzenidze, 1980). Thus, he considered the laws of language through the prism of the dichotomy of synchrony-diachrony. On this occasion he wrote that the synchronous law is a general law but not an imperative one; simply reflecting the order of things, it only states a certain condition: it is a law insofar as, for example, the statement that the trees are planted in oblique rows in a given orchard can be called the law. The order of things displayed by it is not stable, just because this order is not imperative. At the same time, he argues that the lack of imperative means that there is no force in language that would guarantee the continuity of the regularity determined at any point. Diachrony, according to Saussure (1977) assumes, on the contrary, a dynamic factor that leads to a definite result, fulfils a certain action. But this imperative character, he believes, is not enough to apply the concept of law to the facts of the evolution of language. One can speak of law only, he writes, when a whole set of phenomena obeys a single rule, and diachronic events always have in fact a random and particular character, in spite of the obvious exceptions from this (Akimzhanov et al., 2018).

Apparently, the empirical nature of the sound laws did not allow for critics taking them purely metaphorically, but they could not be considered to be purely natural science as well, since the sound laws had spatial and chronological limitations. Thus, the sound laws were not universal from the scientists' view stand of the late 19th century. Thus, Schuhardt in his article On Phonetic Laws expresses a sharply negative attitude to the principle of the immutability of phonetic laws. He argues that when a naturalist first hears of the immutability of phonetic laws, he imagines these laws as acting everywhere and always, since under the same conditions of speech activity, they are not only possible but also expected. As regards to the temporal limitation of sound laws, Schuhardt writes that every stage in the history of language is a transitional stage, and, therefore, each of them is just as legitimate as any other; what is really true in relation to the whole, it is in relation to the concrete. As a consequence, language cannot be imagined as the coexistence of established and non-existent phonetic laws (BOT, 2018).

At first glance, the Schuhardt's viewpoint seems to be quite justified. If we consider the diphthongization of narrow long sounds and the expansion of diphthongs in the New German language, then we know that in the literary German these two processes have led to the same result: the appearance of diphthongs *ei* [ae], *au* [au], *eu* [oe]. In other words, the sounds of different origin are mixed in these diphthongs, for example, the diphthong *ei* [ae] < *ī*: *Eis* < *īs* и *ei* [ae] < *ei* [ei]: *breit* [braet] < *breit* [breit]; or the diphthong *au* [au] < *ū*: *Haus* < *hūs* и *au* [au] < *ou* [ou]: *Baum* < *boum*. But, it is generally known that some dialects have differentiated these sounds so far, and in Low-German and Middle-German [*ei*] and [*ou*] they are usually monophthongized into long vowels (in Low-German *ei* > *ē*, *ou* > *ō*, in Middle-German *ei* > *ē* and *ā*, *ou* > *ō* or *ā*), and in Southern German they are preserved as diphthongs, for example: Swabian [*ei* > *oe*], [*ou* > *ao*], Bavarian [*ei* > *oa*], [*ou* > *ā*]. So, for example, *Eis* – *breit*, *Haus* – *Auge*: in Low-German *īs* – *brēd*, *hūs* – *ōye*; in Middle-German *ais* – *brād* или *brēd*, *haus* – *āg(e)* or *ōg(e)*; in Swabian *eis* – *broet*, *həus* – *aog*; in Bavarian *ais* – *broat*, *haus* – *āg*.

As the example illustrates, the time constraint is often closely related to the spatial constraint. And as neogrammarians claimed, to achieve the same result with phonetic changes, the same phonetic conditions are necessary. It was these the same phonetic conditions that aroused many questions among critics. So, Schuhardt, calling to imagine a few words with the same sound, asked which of these words have the equal phonetic conditions that should lead to the same results, for example, to fixing or changing this sound. Obviously, there is no answer to this question, since in each individual case there is a special set of conditions (stress, word position, quality of the sound to be directly next to, preceding or distant from the syllable, etc.), when comparing, it would appear that each of them differs from others. Baudouin (1968), recognized the necessity, inclusiveness and absolute conditioning, he also recognized both the regularity and the need for absolutely identical changes, and the absence of absolutely identical changes under absolutely identical conditions. But at the same time, he reminded us that in the object of our observations, in the life of the language, there are extremely difficult conditions, that we deal with a variety of extremely different combinations, that we must take a number of conditions that directly act both in individuals and in processes of social communication, the conditions including also self-communication of the individual. We must also remember that the absolute identity of conditions is an extremely rare case.

The expression the same dialect in the thesis sound laws do not know exceptions within the same dialect was also subjected to sharp criticism. Neogrammarians understood dialect as a kind of completely homogeneous unity. Baudouin (1968) categorically disagreed about this. So, Baudouin (1968) distinguished the individual language and the middle language. He considered the problem of neogrammarians to be that they confused these concepts, which

prevented from a clear understanding of linguistic relations, in particular, the problem of phonetic laws. In his opinion, the very ignoring by neogrammarians the fact that the general abstract concept of ethnic and national language dissolves in the plurality of individuals, in the multiplicity of real worlds, the speakers and the listeners, the intermediary is the external world was the cause of emerging opposition and the reason for criticizing these views. The position of critics in relation to the concept of dialect and language as the objects of linguistics is understandable. However, if we consider the objects of research from the position of natural sciences, we will see that the scholars deal with ideal objects, and not with real objects. It follows that the diphthongization of narrow monophthongs and the expansion of diphthongs in the New German language have the right to the status of sound law, since this process is characteristic of the ideal German language, the middle language, according to Baudouin (1968) And we agree with (Litvinov, 2006), who argued that a concept is not a mirror of an object, but a tool of thinking. Do not ask for natural facts of an objective language and an objective dialect, use the concept in such a way as to arrive at the best order of data.

4. Summary and Conclusions

Apparently, the criticism of sound laws was quite rigid and uncompromising and continued in the first third of the 20th century, which led to the fact that many linguists of that time began to avoid using this concept in their studies, replacing it with the notion of sound regularities, or, when using the concept of law, they added the expression so-called and took this word in quotation marks. However, it is also noteworthy that the critics were not able to completely eliminate the notion of sound laws from linguistics, since Grimm's Law, Werner's law and other historically established laws remained and were officially called laws. Obviously, the problem has remained relevant and the fate of this concept has not been sealed.

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