

Consonant harmony and patterns of speech errors: Experimental evidence from Russian

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It has been recently proposed that phonological constraints enforcing consonant harmony (long-distance consonant assimilation) are grounded in functional exigencies of speech production. Specifically, the Agreement by Correspondence approach (Rose & Walker 2004) hypothesizes that patterns of consonant harmony originate in difficulties at the level of phonological planning and phonetic implementation of featurally similar consonants. One interesting prediction of this approach is that harmony-like patterns may arise spontaneously, under certain conditions, even in languages that do not exhibit consonant harmony as a phonological process. In this study we test this prediction experimentally, by examining patterns of elicited errors involving sibilant fricatives in Russian, a language that does not exhibit consonant harmony as a phonological process. The results of an experiment with four Russian speakers (and additional data being currently analyzed) showed that speech errors with fricatives were indeed characterized by some segmental and directionality asymmetries typical of patterns of consonant harmony, thus providing support for the hypothesis and raising some new questions for further research.