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VOLUME XVII**

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AMERICAN PHILOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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CONTENTS OF VOL. XVII.

I. Phonetic Law	5
By Professor FRANK B. TARBELL.	
II. Notes on Homeric Zoology	17
By JULIUS SACHS, Ph. D.	
III. The Sources of Seneca De Beneficiis	24
By HAROLD N. FOWLER, Ph. D.	
IV. On Southernisms	34
By Professor CHARLES FORSTER SMITH.	
V. The Sounds <i>o</i> and <i>u</i> in English	47
By BENJAMIN W. WELLS, Ph. D.	
VI. The Dative Case in Sophokles	78
By ARTHUR FAIRBANKS, A. B.	
VII. List of Amended Spellings	127
Edited by Professor F. A. MARCH.	

APPENDIX :—

Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Session, Ithaca, 1886,	iii
Treasurer's Report	xxv
List of Officers and Members	xlii
Constitution of the Association	liii
Publications of the Association	lv



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CALIFORNIA

TRANSACTIONS
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I.—*Phonetic Law.*

BY FRANK B. TARBELL,
PROFESSOR IN YALE UNIVERSITY.

"*Phonetic laws admit of no exceptions.*" Ten years have passed since Leskien first enunciated this principle and flung it into the arena of discussion. Under hostile criticism the interpretation and defence of the formula have been variously modified, but the formula itself is still held as vital truth by many of the most eminent, and justly eminent, of living philologists. It is in fact the chief battle-cry of the so-called neo-grammarians. In the view of these men, to deny or to doubt the unfailing uniformity of phonetic laws is to be guilty of grave laxity in scientific method, if not altogether to rob linguistic study of its scientific character. At the same time, distinguished voices have been raised in protest. The year 1885 was prolific in important contributions to the subject. Georg Curtius' pamphlet, *Zur Kritik der neuesten Sprachforschung*, in which the new dogma of phonetic uniformity was a main object of attack, evoked prompt replies from Brugmann and Delbrück, entitled respectively, *Zum heutigen Stand der Sprachwissenschaft* and *Die neueste Sprachforschung*. Schuchardt's short but weighty tract, *Ueber die Lautgesetze*, directed against the neo-grammarians, was published before the end of the year. Numerous notices of these essays have, of course, appeared in the philo-

logical periodicals, and the echoes of the discussion thus raised have not yet wholly died away. Nothing so considerable, however, as a critical review of the literature of the subject of phonetic law is to be here attempted. It is the more modest purpose of the present paper to define with precision, if that be possible, what for convenience' sake will be called the neo-grammarians doctrine, and to estimate the value of the arguments on which its supporters now rely.

What then is a 'phonetic law'? It is important to banish from our minds all associations connected with the word 'law' in its mandatory sense. A scientific law does not 'govern' facts; facts do not 'obey' the law. These expressions, harmless as they are when properly understood, carry with them dangerous suggestions. A scientific law, it must always be remembered, is simply a uniformity existing in facts. But there are uniformities and uniformities. In strictness of speech, a law is an absolute uniformity which prevails throughout time and space. Yet even physical science has its 'empirical laws' which pretend to no such permanence and indefeasibility; while in mental and social science we are perhaps still more ready to dignify limited and approximate regularities with the name of laws. Nowhere else, however, I think, has it been customary to apply the term to uniformities so local and temporary as in phonetic science. The historian of architecture would hardly call it a 'law' that the style of English Gothic changed in the latter half of the thirteenth century from Early English to Decorated; the zoölogist would hardly call it a 'law' that the dodo disappeared from Mauritius between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet a 'phonetic law' is a no less limited truth than these. When precisely ascertained, it is expressed in the following form: In a certain dialect, and at a certain time, the sound n changed under the phonetic conditions x, y, z , to n' .¹ The

¹ It is all-important to bear in mind that the parties to this discussion understand by 'phonetic conditions,' elements of speech. The x, y, z , of the formula belong to the same order of things as the n . In order to meet the neo-grammarians on terms the most favorable to them, I shall leave out of account in what follows certain forms of phonetic change, such as metathesis, assimilation, dissimilation between non-contiguous sounds (see, for these, Paul, *Principien der*

wide distinction between such a rule as this and a true law of nature is now emphatically recognized by some and perhaps all of the neo-grammarians themselves. On this understanding, nothing further need be said about the use of the term 'phonetic laws,' except that it must not be allowed to prejudice the question as to whether these laws admit of exceptions.

This question, at first sight, looks simple and definite, but it is far from being so. I waive, as of minor consequence to my immediate purpose, the difficulty which might be raised over the word 'dialect.' Whether we accept Delbrück's important concession,² that exact laws of phonetic change are to be found only in the speech of the individual, or assume, for argument's sake, the existence of practically homogeneous linguistic communities, the words, *Phonetic laws admit of no exceptions*, suggest a plain meaning. That meaning is, — to resort to our typical formula, — that the sound *n* did actually change to *n'*, within certain limits of time and place, in every case where the phonetic conditions, *x, y, s*, occurred. Now this, though the only meaning that the words ought to bear, is of course inconsistent with facts.³ It is imagined, however, that the principle may be saved by saying that phonetic laws *as such (an sich)* admit of no exceptions, but that they are liable to 'counteraction from extraneous (i. e. non-phonetic) forces.' This language betrays a serious confusion of thought. *Causes* may be counteracted, *laws*, never. This is so, whether we regard a law as the uniformity itself or the expression of that uniformity in words. An expressed law is an assertion that things are uniformly Sprachgeschichte, 2d ed. pp. 59-60), and also accent-shifting, although a literal interpretation of the phonetic law principle would include these classes of cases.

² Einleitung in das Sprachstudium, 1st ed., p. 129.

³ According to Paul (op. cit. p. 63) and Brugmann (op. cit. p. 52) the process of phonetic change does in every such case actually begin. After it has made more or less progress, it may be arrested in one or more words, say by the action of analogy, and the original sound restored. This makes the phonetic change absolutely uniform at the outset; but it must not be overlooked that the retrograde movement would itself be a phonetic change not statable in terms of phonetic law.