REPLY TO POSNER

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In 'Nasalization as universal phonological process' I presented a conceptual framework for understanding nasalization. This system is designed to answer questions about nasalization which immediately occur to the inquisitive linguist, though apparently not to Mrs Posner.

Numerous questions arise, of which I listed nine. To illustrate my thesis I repeat here two of them:

1. Why does German nasalization occur before x (denken, dachte) but not before other continuants (Gans, fünft, Mund < *mung) or stops (Mund)?

2. Why is Polish final o denasalized but not final ę?

My theory answers these questions in terms of an abstract principle governing phonological change:

Weakening applies preferentially to weak elements.

The theoretical system underlying my paper is found in my forthcoming book Theoretical Phonology. It cannot be presented here, but I indicate briefly some of the relevant aspects.

Phonological elements are distinguished from each other in terms of their relative phonological strength. For example, o is phonologically weaker than ą, ą is phonologically weaker than n or m.

The relative weakness of e vis a vis o is evinced by its preferential elision (Lat. mare > Sp. mar, but Lat. amicus > Sp. amigo), its appearance as a weakened reflex of o (Lat. societas < societas, cf. socius), and its strengthening to o (Gk. leipo, leloipa).

The relative weakness of velars vis a vis dentals and labials is evinced by their preferential weakening (N.Ger. seyen, but baden, beben) or elision (Skt. ghansas > hansas, but bharami, bhokoi).

In terms of relative strength of phonological elements (which was not established specifically for nasalization), and given the higher-order principle that weakening applies preferentially to weak elements, we have an explanation both for the denasalization of ę but not ę (weaker ę denasalizes - i.e. weakens - in preference to stronger ę) and for the German nasalization before x but not before ę, ē, ę (weakest nasal ę drops but stronger n and m remain).

This brief discussion indicates how my theoretical system provides motivated and coherent explanations for phonological phenomena.

A theoretical system cannot be challenged by random remarks and putative counterexample, but only by another theoretical system. If Mrs Posner can produce a theoretical system comparable to Theoretical Phonology which can provide principled explanations for the above problems, then her contribution will be worth considering. Until then, her comments are irrelevant to any serious study of nasalization.