Do affricates need to be eliminated from phonology? A typological approach.

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From a phonetic point of view, affricates are complex sounds consisting of a plosive and a fricative part. Like normal plosives, an affricate starts with the obstruction of air in the oral cavity, but unlike plain plosives, the obstructed air is released through a narrow channel, yielding turbulent airflow. The phonological, underlying, representation of affricates, on the other hand, is highly debated. In the SPE framework (Chomsky and Halle 1968), affricates have been described as plosives with a delayed release, thus opposing them to plain plosives with an instantaneous release. From the mid of the 1970s until the mid of the 1990s, affricates were generally considered complex segments, specified as [-continuant] and [+continuant] at the same time, directly reflecting the plosive and the fricative parts. During the last twenty years, several phonologists still have defended a complex phonological representation of affricates, while others have argued that this view makes false predictions, and have advocated a description of affricates as strident stops instead. Crucially, in recent years, Clements (1999) and especially Kehrein (2002) have taken this latter view even one step further, by denying the existence of a separate phonological class of affricates altogether, and by making them underlyingly identical to normal stops.

As to date, different views exist side by side, and uncertainty remains. This situation is mainly brought about by the fact that most existing analyses are language-specific, which only yields a fragmentary picture of the cross-linguistic patterning of affricates. The number of existing typological studies of affricates is extremely limited, and the ones that exist come up with contradictory findings (e.g. Van de Weijer 1996, Kehrein 2002). An additional problem is that it is often not entirely clear on which languages these typological studies are based or how the sample of languages has been selected. Consequently, it is not clear whether the studies rely on a properly based collection of languages that reliably mirrors the world's languages, or whether it is rather opportunistically sampled by including all, and only, information of languages at hand.

In this paper, we aim to contribute to a solution to the long-standing problem of the phonological representation of affricates. By relying on data from the most recent version of UPSID (*UCLA Phonological Segment Inventory Database*), a database containing the segment inventories of a properly balanced sample of languages, we will show first of all that several arguments put forward in favour of a particular representation of affricates are inconsistent and sometimes even invalid. Moreover, we will discuss whether the UPSID data force us to adopt a representation of affricates as complex plosive-fricative combinations, plosives with a distinct release, or whether affricates indeed have no phonological value at all, and are only plain plosives underlyingly.

References
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