Do grammatical factors impact sound change?

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The definition of sound change as phonetic change that is regular within a phonetic environment covers a vast number of known cases. A certain residue of changes that appear to be phonetically conditioned but that violate the definition in one way or another present a long standing, but very interesting problem. These include cases of ‘lexical diffusion’ in which a change does not go through to completion in the lexicon, sound changes that appear to be blocked in certain grammatical conditions, and phonetic changes that occur only in a certain word class, construction, morpheme or phrase.

The hypothesis of this presentation is that the phonetic environment is key, but the ‘phonetic environment’ must include cases where that environment itself is variable or alternates because of factors such as in the degree of stress (in discourse) and distributional probabilities by which some words occur in the favorable phonetic environment more than others. I will argue that the rate at which a word occurs in the phonetic context for the sound change is the primary factor in creating cases in which it appears that grammatical information may be influencing the phonetic change. An exemplar model with constantly updating representations provides a mechanism both for lexical diffusion and for apparent grammatical effects. This accords well with the Neogrammarians’ idea of the mechanical nature of sound change, but expands the contextual factors that have to be taken into account.