

As noted by [1], research into Germanic languages has long attempted to identify the precise phonetic quality of the Proto-Germanic (PGmc) rhotic alongside the rhotic phoneme that developed from PGmc \*/z/ in Northwest Germanic (NWGmc). These efforts have also proposed phonetic values for rhotic allophones to explain their role in triggering vocalic changes, such as Old English Breaking, or blocking changes, like Old High German Primary Umlaut. However, recent research highlights an oversight: rhotic sounds within many languages exhibit significant phonetic variability (cf. *inter alios* [4], [5]), suggesting that earlier attempts at proto-rhotic reconstruction rest on unsound assumptions. I claim, akin to [3], that rhotic sounds, as conditioners of vocalic change, must have specifications with vowel features like [high] or [front]. Pre-Old Norse (ON) r-umlaut exemplifies this point. Due to this change, back vowels shifted to corresponding front vowels before \*/r<sub>HF</sub>’/ from PGmc \*/z/, but not before \*/r’/ from PGmc \*/r’/. Here, <sub>H</sub> and <sub>F</sub> represent the features [high] and [front]; single quotes (‘’) indicate uncertain phonetic quality. The change is observed in ON *b[æ]rr* ‘bare’ (< PGmc \*b[a]zaz), but not in ON *b[a]rr* ‘barley’ (< PGmc \*b[a]raz). Crucially, pre-ON \*/i<sub>HF</sub>/ - through an independent process - produced the same changes to preceding back vowels as \*/r<sub>HF</sub>’/, e.g. ON *k[æ]till* < PGmc \*k[a]tilaz. Thus, \*/r<sub>HF</sub>’/ and \*/i<sub>HF</sub>/ form a natural class of [high], [front] segments that trigger back vowel fronting. This study applies the comparative method to reconstruct a phonological history of rhotic sounds, tracing their evolution from PGmc into early East, North, and West Germanic languages. Central to this approach is the analysis of rhotically-conditioned vocalic changes - such as Pre-ON r-umlaut - from each major Germanic branch. The resulting feature structures provide a basis for puzzling together a coherent phonological history that captures the evolution of rhotics across the Germanic languages. This research has several implications. Beyond clarifying the phonological structure of rhotics and their historical development in Germanic languages, it challenges claims that rhotic variability results from minimal representations (e.g., [1], [4]) and also moves away from a longstanding phonological assumption that the set of distinctive features for vowels is fundamentally different from that for consonants. In consequence, this research provides a clearer explanation for vocalic changes conditioned by rhotics - changes that are common in and beyond Germanic languages. Furthermore, it

**underscores the importance of understanding the phonological patterning of rhotics before attempting to reconstruct their phonetic qualities.**References: [1] Chabot, Alex. 2019. What's wrong with being a rhotic? *Glossa* 4(1). 1-24. [2] Howell, Robert B. 1991. *Old English breaking and its Germanic analogues*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. [3] Kostakis, Andrew. 2019. Gothic <r> and Old High German <r>: Implications from phonological patterning. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 4(1). 75, 1-26. [4] Natvig, David. 2020. Rhotic underspecification: Deriving variability and arbitrariness through phonological representations. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 5(1): 48. [5] Walsh Dickey, Laura. 1997. *The Phonology of Liquids*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, Ph.D. Dissertation.

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## **Title**

Rhotic History from Vocally-Conditioned Change: The Case of Early Germanic Languages