On regularity and predictability in language change
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There is widespread pessimism among historical linguists about the possibility of prediction in their discipline. This is seen as a major divide between (diachronic) linguistics and exact sciences like physics or chemistry. Still, in the absence of 'Laplace's Demon', physics can only predict trajectories of ongoing motion, but not when and where change will occur in the future. In that sense, physics and linguistics are not really different. In diachronic linguistics, we cannot predict when and where a change will occur (the well-known 'actuation problem'), but we have a reasonably detailed idea on the trajectory of change during its 'propagation' phase, which is known to frequently follow a parametrically defined sigmoid curve. Of course, language is much more complex than particle physics (in the same sense that biology is more complex than organic chemistry), and this makes it notoriously difficult to keep track of all factors involved in change. We have no idea what English will develop into in the next millennia (much like we have no idea what the pigeon, rabbit or frog will evolve into in the future). In short, diachronic linguistics finds itself in a position comparable to other fields of science when it comes to predictability, and there is no reason to be overly pessimistic about what our knowledge of the constraints on language change. In this talk, I will do three things: (i) assess how good the proposed mathematics of the s-curve fit to actual changes, (ii) review what (external) factors influence the trajectory of the change, (iii) examine what we don't know yet, and what the limits are on modelling change.