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Notice of Element Theory

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An Introduction to Element Theory. By PHILLIP BACKLEY. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 210. ISBN 9780748637430. Paperback \$40.

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This book introduces Element Theory (ET), which assumes that the primitive units of segment organization are elements rather than features. The conceptual equivalents of elements are used in several phonological frameworks, but this introduction assumes that elements are flexible enough to be used independently of any particular theory of phonology. The book consists of a preface and five chapters.

Chapter 1 'A Theory of Elements' provides the conceptual background for the book by motivating the use of elements as an alternative to traditional features. The discussion essentially centers on two points. The first is that, unlike features, elements are capable of capturing the linguistic knowledge shared by both speakers and hearers; this distinguishes them from both articulatorily defined features, which privilege the speaker, and acoustically defined features, which privilege the hearer. The second point addresses the fact that, unlike most features, elements are monovalent in the sense of representing only positive properties of segments. This allows ET to avoid the pitfall of making incorrect predictions about the behavior of sounds.

The remaining chapters introduce the elements themselves. Chapter 2 'Elements for Vowels' introduces the resonance elements H U A and shows how they are used to represent vowel contrasts and phonological processes. A substantial portion of this chapter is devoted to a detailed demonstration of how the resonance elements may be

used to model the vowel system of (RP) English. Chapter 3 ‘Place Elements in Consonants’ shows how the same elements are used to represent consonant place. In the version of ET adopted in this book, the |I| element represents palatal resonance in palatals and some coronals, the |U| element is used for labials and velars, and the |A| element for pharyngeals and some coronals; the subgroups within each group are distinguished by using the notion of headedness. The same notion is also used in representation of consonants with complex resonance, such as uvulars and labiodentals. Chapter 4 ‘Manner Elements in Consonants’ introduces the remaining elements |ʔ H L|, which represent the ET alternative to laryngeal and manner features. Depending on its headedness status and the complexity of the segment, each element may stand for a range of properties. Specifically, the stop element |ʔ| represents occlusion in stops, nasals, and laterals, and is also found in ejectives, implosives, and laryngealized vowels. The noise element |H| represents frication in fricatives, audible release in stops, voicelessness or aspiration in obstruents generally, and high tone in tone languages. Finally, the nasal element |L| represents nasality in nasal consonants and vowels, voicing in obstruents, and low tone in tone languages. The last chapter in the book, ‘Liquids, Licensing and Antagonistic Elements’, explores the structure of liquids and the relationship among the elements, as well as between elements and the units of prosodic structure.

Although it is primarily an introduction to ET, this book also provides a good overview of segmental phonology. Throughout the book, elements are systematically compared with features, and ET with feature theory, with respect to their predictions about the behavior of sounds and the shape of sound systems. It is written accessibly,

frequently mentions alternative analyses of the data, and illustrates each point with abundant examples from English and other languages.