The neutralisation of phonological contrasts increases the amount of ambiguity in a language, particularly when phonological neutralisation also leads to significant amounts of homophony. Because too much ambiguity would result in a functionally ineffective language, we can hypothesise that some pressure works against neutralisation during the course of language change. Previous work has tended to model neutralisation avoidance as external to the learning process, stemming instead from a production/perception loop (e.g. Wedel 2004, 2006, 2012) or communicative pressures (e.g. Kirby 2015). In this talk, I will argue that a neutralisation avoidance bias is (additionally) active during phonological learning itself.

In the first part of the talk, I will present results from two artificial language experiments showing that learners are less likely to learn neutralising phonological rules than identical non-neutralising rules, and that this effect is primarily driven by an avoidance of homophony. In the second part of the talk, I will outline a real case of language change in the history of Campidanian Sardinian, where evidence suggests that neutralisation avoidance caused learners to shift to a drastically different phonological system, even though the new system was itself highly marked from a phonological perspective.