

Strata Optimization in Allomorphy: A case study

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Many languages have morphemes, which have multiple listed allomorphs. Phonologically conditioned suppletive allomorphy was overtly acknowledged in the literature (Carstairs 1988) and has been studied relatively systematically only in the last decade (Bye 2008, Yu 2007, Embick 2008). Rhythmic Allomorphy (RA), which involves “counting” syllables or moras, is a subtype of phonologically conditioned allomorphy. It was studied and discussed by Kager (1996), Dolby (1997) and Paster (2005, 2006), among others.

One of the major issues in modeling syllable counting allomorphy is whether this type of allomorphy is optimizing or whether it should be derived from lexical subcategorization. Kager (1996), Dolby (1997) and Trommer (2008) view syllable counting allomorphy as optimizing, modeled with violable constraints.

In contrast, Paster (2005, 2006), relying on examples from her survey, concludes that syllable counting allomorphy varies with respect to optimization from optimizing, exhibiting TETU effects, to arbitrary distribution (non-optimizing), to ‘perverse’, or counteroptimizing. In as far as this type of allomorphy should be dealt with as a unitary phenomenon, it should be modeled with declarative subcategorization frames. This conclusion is echoed in Bye (2008).

In this paper, I will argue that dealing with rhythmic allomorphy as a unitary phenomenon that has to involve lexical subcategorization impedes our insight into the phenomenon: while allomorphy can be seen as non-optimizing and counteroptimizing with respect to some criteria, the phenomenon should only be considered with respect to a particular language’s system in order to determine whether the allomorphy is optimizing or we have to resort to selection (subcategorization) to model all instances of it.

In Khanty¹ (Uralic, Ob-Ugric), which I use as the example for this paper, there are examples of optimizing RA, as well as what is ostensibly non-optimizing and counter-optimizing RA. These examples are exactly parallel to examples of nonoptimization and ‘perverse’ syllable counting allomorphy in Paster (2006). However, in having the advantage of looking at the whole system of the language, we can demonstrate that the allomorphy is optimizing at different levels of analysis, requiring cophologies (à la Inkelas and Zoll 2007) or, at a minimum, Stratal Optimality Theory (Kiparsky 2000, Bermúdez-Otero 2008).

I will argue that Khanty RA is not amenable to an analysis purely in terms of subcategorization. For Khanty, an analysis based on subcategorization misses generalizations of complete parsing requirements on different morphological strata. I conclude by discussing the possibility that RA, as well as other types of phonologically conditioned allomorphy, should receive disparate treatment on case-by-case basis, depending on the degree of optimization within the system of the particular language.

¹ All the data comes from the author’s fieldwork on the language.

Selected References

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