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Melodic representation – what is left after the 80s-90s battle ?

The empirical focus of linguists changes over time in quite unpredictable fashion. A recurrent motivation for switching to another thematic field seems to be desperation: when a theory turns without gaining ground and no fresh data can help, people leave it as it is and turn to another area, either empirically or theoretically speaking. In the 70s and early 80s, phonologists were concerned with computation (abstractness – concreteness, rule ordering, Lexical Phonology). Following the autosegmental revolution, they then switched to representations, especially to the internal structure of segments: all individual theories of the 80s are based on and differentiated by contrasting assumptions on segmental structure: Feature Geometry, Dependency Phonology, Particle Phonology, Government Phonology (only Lexical Phonology is agnostic here). By the late 80s/ early 90s, arguments were exchanged, and advances either on the empirical or on the conceptual side were rare (except perhaps in Government Phonology). Since the early 90s, the focus is back on computation (OT, Declarative Phonology). In OT, representations as an autonomous referee of grammaticality have been evacuated altogether: the arbitral award of autosegmental representations is always outranked by the constraint chamber; most of the time, there are no segmental representations left at all: *[dorsal] and the like are not representations since they cannot be ill-formed.

Since discussion of segmental structure is rare these days, this talk proposes to step back and look at the core achievements of the various theories after the battle: which are the conceptual objects that have survived and will still be needed 20 years from now? How are they expressed in the various theories?

A list of concepts that no theory of segmental structure can do without certainly includes

1. the same set of primes for vowels and consonants
2. the existence of a dominance relation among melodic primes
3. the implementation of melodic primes into autosegmental representations

Beyond these issues which I believe are fairly uncontroversial nowadays, there are others which are still under debate. From this set, I will discuss the following:

1. privativity

segmental representation should be privative: there are no negative specifications for properties that are absent. Privativity is the anglestone of many of the classical theories (Particle, Dependency, Government), but is also present in some versions of Feature Geometry, where it runs under the label of Underspecification.

2. complexity (which supposes privativity)

I take John Harris' notion of segmental complexity to be the most significant advance in segmental structure that the 80s-90s have produced: it allows to derive sonority, a non-observational property of sound, from independent considerations (regular segmental alternations) and hence free the discussion from circularity. Sonority must not be encoded by independent primes such as [±son] and the like.

3. the labial-velar-[u,w] triangle

every theory must be able to somehow express the fact that labial consonants, velar consonants and [u,w] alternate with each other.

4. the debate of markedness (related to point 3):

which are the empty consonants? Dentals or velars? Should linguistic theory encode cross-linguistic counts? Should it encode what a probable, or what a possible language is? Are

implicational relationships (e.g. if a language has fricatives, it has stops as well) a kind of markedness?

5. are sonorants or obstruents the heavy (= complex) guys?

6. what exactly is counted when computing complexity (related to point 5)? All melodic primes or only place definers? I argue for the latter option.

7. how should manner be encoded: by particular primes or structurally?

The idea that manner should be encoded structurally rather than by specific primes has gained much ground since the early days of privative representation. This is true for all areas: ATR, nasality (no structural existence, but attempts at getting rid of a specific nasality prime), stricture, stopness. While there are plausible systems for the structural representation of ATR and the absence of a nasality prime, the attempts at making consonantal manner a structural property have not been very successful up to now. If this obstacle can be overcome, though, the issue of point 6 becomes pointless: the only melodic primes that are left are place definers.

Finally, the issues mentioned float in a general space that needs to be substantially revised: since the early days, one definitorial though tacit property of generative phonology has been the non-recognition of structuralist thinking. According to the view on the socio-political situation of the late 60s that one is inclined to adopt, this may be characterised as a simple neglect, a refusal to take over what the previous generation has established, or a straight denial. In any event, generative theory of segmental structure (with a timid exception in form of some of the underspecification approaches of the late 80s) has never implemented the very simple structuralist insight that a sound is not a sound by itself. Its properties are also defined, and maybe defined to a large extent, by the relation that it contracts with other sounds, in short by its systemic properties. If the system changes, the properties of individual sounds also change, even though they may be phonetically unmodified. Therefore, the properties of a given sound may not be studied without looking at the properties of the other sounds present in the system.

Contrast and systemic properties of sound have been called into the focus of attention by the grounded/ functionalist movement in OT, Clements (2001) and by the work on Licensing Constraints that has been carried out at SOAS in the 90s. While I do not know how exactly systemic properties and hence cross-linguistic variation for the representation of the same sound should be treated by phonological theory, I believe that there is no way for phonologists not to behave like all other linguists, actually all other scientists: to model both structure and process. The natural world is made of both, and any theory of a natural phenomenon that admits only one must be wrong.

References

- Clements, George 2001. Representational economy in constraint-based phonology. *Distinctive Feature Theory*, edited by Tracy Hall, 71-146. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.