Is the Coda Mirror a phonological object?

The five positions in the string a consonant may come to stand in

\[
\_\_ \quad \text{Coda}\_\_ \quad \text{V}\_\text{V} \quad \_\# \quad \_\_.C
\]

can be grouped in the following way when considering their influence on segments they host: 
\{#,C\}__ are strong, while __{#,C} and V__V are weak in regard of Lenition and Fortition.

One goal of the conference is to confront this partition with data coming from as many languages as possible.

Our talk evaluates the consequences of this generalisation for phonological theory. Two positions may be taken:

A the total number of relevant positions being five, The Strong Position \{#,C\}__ (SP) and lenition-sites \{Coda, V__V\} (WP) are the complementary set one of each other. If the theory is able to define one, there is no need to assign a particular identity to the other because it is defined by default: SP := non WP or, equivalent to that, WP := non SP. Hence, as long as phonological theory is able to address WP, it is not called to be able to assign a positive identity to the Strong Position (cf. Patrick Sauzet's abstract).

B theory must be able to define both the strong and the weak position as a

a) single
b) unique and
c) positive
phonological object.

We shall argue in favour of the latter option. Four arguments will be developed:

1. refusing to allocate a positive identity to the Strong Position in defining it as the complementary set of the Weak Position is descriptively and empirically equivalent to the option that refers to both positions as a genuine phonological object. It is, however, unable to explain why the Strong Position is strong and the Weak Position weak, rather than the reverse, or another partition of the five contexts. In the Coda Mirror, we have defined a formal frame that predicts that \{#,C\}__ can be nothing else than strong, and \{Coda, V__V\} nothing else than weak. Explanatory adequacy may not be achieved unless the Strong Position is conceived of as a single, unique and positive object.

2. defining the Strong Position as the complementary set of the Weak Position supposes a theory that is able to say why the Weak Position is weak. In absence of such a theory (such as e.g. John Harris' Licensing Inheritance or Joaquim Brandão de Carvalho's proposal), the strength of the Strong position does not follow.

3. in most cases \{#,C\}__ is a relevant context, nothing happens to consonants occurring in this position. Why should phonological theory account for the fact that no process is observed? For one thing, things do happen in the Strong Position, that is Fortition. Second, it is extraordinary to observe that nothing changes as time goes by: an object that does not change is not a human language. Hence, preserving the status quo over a long period is the most extraordinary event possible, and requires explanation.
4. if the only definition of the Strong Position is negative, it is expected to lack any genuine identity, and thus should be unstructured: "anything else than \{Coda, V__V\}" has no contour of its own. The Strong Position, however, is everything but unstructured. On the contrary, it is the precise mirror-object of the Coda, both in its structural description and regarding the effect it produces on segments. If the Coda has a positive phonological identity, its Mirror must have one, too. Approaches that deny a positive phonological identity of the Coda Mirror are unable to account for the Mirror-effect.

In a further exploration, we argue that effects that are commonly viewed as stemming from adjacent segments and prosodic features may be reduced to syllabic structure.

In a consonant cluster where C1 agrees in voicing with C2, C2 is usually said to impose its voicing on C1 via spreading. However, assimilation may also be interpreted as a consequence of the weakness of C1 that stems from its weak syllabic position. C1, in this view, seeks to establish a link to C2 in order to acquire licensed phonological substance.

In English, voiceless stops are aspirated word-initially and in stressed syllables, which is a triggering context that merges positional (#__) and prosodic (stress) properties. It has been argued earlier and for other languages that stress materializes in syllabic form, cf. Italian Tonic Lengthening. Combining this insight with the representations argued for in The Coda Mirror, the distribution of English aspirated stops may be referred to in purely syllabic terms: they occur iff preceded by an empty CV unit. Other prosodically conditioned segmental phenomena such as the survival of Latin syllables in word-initial and stressed position in French, and Verner's Law possibly fall under the scope of this approach.