

What sonorants do in positional plight

This talk aims at showing that the prism installed by CVCV uncovers unexpected bonds between apparently unrelated events that involve sonorants in Coda position. That is, coda consonants are known to experience a positional pressure that gears them toward lenition. Sonorants as well as other consonants fall prey to melodic depletion under these conditions: $m \rightarrow n$, $n \rightarrow \eta$, $l/r \rightarrow j$, $ʔ \rightarrow w$, $r \rightarrow \varnothing$ / r are typical lenition trajectories. I show that several other processes that involve sonorants in Codas are instances of the same logic, i.e. the positional pressure exerted by the Coda position. Cases in point are the homorganisation of NC clusters, the genesis of nasal vowels from VN{C,#} sequences and the process that creates syllabic consonants.

The inquiry starts with the analysis of homorganic NC clusters, which appear to be a serious problem for CVCV. This outgrowth of Government Phonology (Kaye et al. 1990) holds that syllable structure boils down to a strict sequence of non-branching Onsets and Nuclei (Lowenstamm 1996, Scheer 1999). On this analysis, a consonant stands in "Coda" position iff it is followed by a governed empty Nucleus. Hence, the nasal and the following obstruent do not contract any specific relation in a homorganic [NCV] sequence: in /NøCV/, the V governs the ø. How should homorganicity be explained? The classical stance is to say that the C dominates the N and imposes its place features. I argue that the reverse is true: the N is exposed to positional pressure. Therefore, it "docks" onto the following consonant and "pirates" its place features. The resulting partial geminate where one single set of place features is associated to two skeletal slots then remedies the positional plight of the nasal.

On this analysis, the active part is the nasal, and its activity is a direct reaction on the positional pressure it experiences. I show that this scenario can also explain other events. One straightforward property that sets it apart from other analyses is its independence from directionality. For example, the regressive character of nasal homorganisation is commonly taken to be fairly universal, and a few progressive cases remain mysterious. Homorganic CN sequences are reported for German (and English actually): when the schwa of a morpheme such as /-ən/ "infinitive" is pronounced, its nasal will always be dental. However, in case the schwa optionally drops, the nasal is syllabic and agrees in place with the preceding obstruent: haabm̩ "to have", helfm̩ "to help", zaagn̩ "to say", laχN̩ "to laugh" etc. This is unexpected only under the usual preconception of directionality. On the analysis advocated here, the only thing that is predicted is the reaction of the nasal: it will seek to dock onto a neighbouring consonant. Since in this special case the only provider of place features available stands to its left, the mirage of a progressive assimilation is created. The rarity of homorganic CN clusters in regard of legions of NC sequences simply stems from the fact that nasals scarcely appear in C_#.

Another well known process that falls under the scope of this analysis is the genesis of nasal vowels, which (probably universally) are born from VN{C,#} sequences where the N "moves" into the V (examples are French and Slavic nasal vowels). This appears to be the simple vocalic version of nasal homorganisation: as before, a nasal experiences the positional pressure of the Coda and reacts. This time, however, its "victim" is not a neighbouring consonant, but the preceding vowel. As before, the resulting structure offers a branching status to the nasal melody, which is therefore tranquillised.

Finally, the genesis of syllabic consonants also follows the same scenario: in Germanic languages such as English and German, the typical description contends that syllabic consonants arise word-finally when the preceding schwa (diachronically) "fades away". In this situation, the following sonorant takes over its syllabic function, hence bottl̩, butt̩ etc. The same holds true for Slavic languages such as Czech, Slovak and Serbo-Croatian, only that here syllabic consonants are also produced word-internally and enjoy obligatory character (i.e. no synchronic alternation with vocalised forms). Again, the causality is inversed when the sonorant is viewed as the active part: due to its positional plight, it seeks a bipositional status and therefore "kills" the preceding vowel as soon as it can, i.e. as soon as it has become schwa. The result is a sonorant that branches on two skeletal slots.

In sum, the positional pressure experienced by sonorants in Codas can provoke three different events: 1) ordinary lenition, 2) "pirating" of features of a neighbouring segment (homorganic nasals, nasal vowels), 3) "pirating" of the skeletal position of a neighbouring vowel. The selection of the particular type of process is partly predictable on the grounds of the idiosyncratic properties of the different sonorants: only nasals can "pirate" place features, while all sonorants can be syllabic (but obstruents cannot, which is the reason why they only follow 1) lenition).