

Lexical accent in Lithuanian: Is tone enough?

Anton Kukhto (MIT; kukhto@mit.edu)

The Lithuanian language (Baltic, Indo-European) has a lexical accent system, which has previously received some attention in the phonological literature. A number of accounts within various frameworks have been proposed over the years, and the main divide between them has been the issue of whether lexical stress and tone need to be represented separately (as in, most notably, Kenstowicz 1971 or Halle & Vergnaud 1987) or if a strictly tonal representation is sufficient to derive the surface accentual patterns (as in Blevins 1993 and, most recently, Kushnir 2018). In this presentation, I would like to provide an account of Lithuanian nominal accent that uses both metrical and tonal properties of morphemes, thus going back to the earlier proposals of Kenstowicz 1971 and Halle & Vergnaud 1987, and to argue that the location of stress and the tonal specification of the stressed syllable are largely independent and need independent representations.

Standard Lithuanian distinguishes light and heavy syllables, i.e. syllables with short vowels vs. syllables with long vowels, “pure” diphthongs, and “mixed” diphthongs, or vowel-sonorant sequences. All of these syllable types can be either accented or unaccented. Accented light syllables are marked in the orthography with a grave mark, and the accent is traditionally called the grave accent. Heavy syllables can either have an acute, or falling, or a circumflex, or rising, accent (although the phonetic correlates of these accents are a separate issue, see references in Blevins 1993 and Kushnir 2018). The computation of stress placement in a word given the properties of its morphemes generally follows the Basic Accentuation Principle: stress the leftmost accented syllable or the first syllable if there are none.

Certain suffixes, however, trigger the application of a process termed de Saussure’s Law, whereby, in the most basic case, a suffix attracts stress from a circumflex- or grave-final stem even if this suffix is not normally accented itself. To account for the behaviour of such suffixes as well as morphemes that do not trigger de Saussure’s Law, I propose a classification of Lithuanian morphemes that is based on two properties: the presence or absence of an underlying accent and the presence or absence as well as the site of association (with the first mora in acute, falling syllables and the second mora in circumflex, rising syllables, following Blevins 1993 in this) of an underlying high tone, H. Under this proposal, weak morphemes, the ones that do not attract stress, are underlyingly unaccented, whereas strong morphemes, on the contrary, do have an underlying accent.

A generalisation holds of the Lithuanian lexicon that no morphemes with heavy syllables trigger de Saussure’s Law, so the difference between Saussurian and non-Saussurian morphemes is only found in morphemes with short syllables. While they can be either strong or weak, i.e. can have or lack an underlying accent, I claim that Saussurian suffixes do not have a H associated with them, which allows the attraction of a H from the last mora of the stem. I provide an OT-analysis of stress placement and compare it to the HG-style tonal analysis with gradient symbolic representations provided by Kushnir (2018). Support for the necessity of both metrical and tonal representations comes from dialects where unaccented syllables have tonal specifications and the distribution of tones independent of stress placement, i.e. the fact that all tones are available in all of the possible accentual positions, which also shows in the constancy of tonal properties of a given syllable.

References

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