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The typology of stress languages: with special reference to stress windows

This talk will start from a concise overview of the typology of rhythmic stress languages, focussing on major dimensions of variation (in particular, directionality). The typology will be couched in rhythmic licensing theory (Kager 2001; 2006), which uses a small set of OT constraints restricting the positions of lapses and clashes with respect word edges.

Next I will link up typological issues in single stress versus multiple stress systems, focussing on stress window languages. In stress window languages, the primary stress is restricted to fall within a fixed sequence of syllables near the beginning or end of the word. The size of windows appears to be universally limited to two or three syllables, never more. Within a window, the primary stress may be selected on the basis of syllable weight (e.g. Latin, Pirahã), lexical accent (e.g. Greek, Hebrew), or a combination of weight and accent (e.g. Spanish, Aklan). Earlier work has interpreted stress windows either as theoretical primitives, or as epiphenomena of constraint interactions. Upon the former view, stress windows reflect the domains of primary stress placement, disjoint from domain(s) of secondary (rhythmic) stress (van der Hulst 1984; 1999). The latter view adopts the opposite strategy, attempting to derive window effects from constraints limiting the distance between the stress and the word edge: either rhythmic constraints that ban or license lapses (Kager 1994, 2001; Green & Kenstowicz 1995; Gordon 2002), or alignment constraints (Baerman 1998; Hyde 2008).

I will test the different approaches on their ability to account for two typological asymmetries. The first asymmetry involves the maximal size of the stress window at the left and right word edge. It has been observed that three syllable windows, although cross-linguistically well-attested at the right word edge, are (at best) rare at the left edge (Gordon 2002). This LR-asymmetry has been interpreted as matching the LR-asymmetry between non-finality (common) versus non-initiality (rare), as well as matching the asymmetry between rightward versus leftward iambic systems (Kager 2001; cf. Buckley 2010). If the LR window asymmetry were empirically substantiated as well as unifiable by rhythmic constraints, this might provide strong evidence for the rhythmic approach. Yet, this conclusion could be undermined by alleged initial stress window languages such as Terena (Bendor-Samuel 1962) and Munster Irish (Doherty 1991; Green 1997), which may pose the need for re-evaluating the empirical basis of the LR-asymmetry regarding window size. In sum, the evidence needs to be re-considered.

The second asymmetry to be considered is between window languages that select word stress based on syllable weight and lexical accent, respectively. Here, both the stress domains approach and rhythmic approach predict similarities (not asymmetries), because whatever mechanism accomplishes windows, this should not differentiate between stress prominence on heavy versus accented syllables. I will raise the issue whether weight and accent are indeed on a par typology-wise, as predicted. For example, the well-attested quantity-sensitive window system that locates stress on the penult except when the antepenult is heavy and followed by two light syllables (e.g. Turkish toponyms, Mathili) seems to have no accent-based counterpart. Similarly, the typologically common window system of the Latin/Arabic type (heavy penult, else antepenult, not on final syllable) lacks unambiguous accent-based counterparts.

The methodological point of the paper will be that questions such as the ones raised above can only be answered in the face of reliable typological evidence of a sufficiently large sample of stress languages. That is, typological databases such as StressType (Goedemans & van der Hulst 2009) and (Edie & Heinz 2008) have become indispensable for metrical research.