

The Inadequacy of Evidence for Sonority-Driven Stress

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One of the central questions of this workshop is “What patterns of segmental and supra-segmental interactions are found cross-linguistically?”. Over the past decade, a great deal of my work has been devoted to answering this question for ‘sonority-driven stress’ (de Lacy 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007).

‘Sonority-driven stress’ is a quintessential segment-prosody interaction: metrical heads and non-heads avoid segments with a particular sonority level (see de Lacy 2007 for an overview). My work has claimed that there is both universality and variability in sonority-driven stress. It is universal in two senses: metrical heads always prefer more sonorous segments to lower sonority ones, and certain segmental distinctions are never made (e.g. stress never prefers [u] to [i]). However, it is variable in terms of conflation: category distinctions can be ignored. For example, Gujarati ignores the distinction between mid and high peripheral vowels, while Nganasan favors mid over high vowels (de Lacy 2002, 2004). At this point, it seems that a great deal is known about sonority-driven stress (and of course not just because of my own work – e.g. Kenstowicz 1997, McGarrity 2003, Crowhurst & Michael 2005).

However, I now believe that very little is known about the phenomenon. The problem lies with the quality of the evidence: I will argue that Generative theory imposes specific standards for phonological evidence, and the majority of evidence provided for sonority-driven stress does not meet these standards (also see de Lacy 2009, to appear). The broader implication of the approach to evidence evaluation advocated here is that far less is known about patterns of segmental-suprasegmental interaction than is currently believed, and in fact that very little is known about the capabilities of the Phonological Module.

References

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