Irish initial consonant mutations:
Disentangling phonology from morphosyntax

What are initial consonant mutations?

► Well-known characteristic of the Celtic languages

► Systematic phonological alternations of word-initial consonants, depending on morphosyntactic context

(1)   a.   *b*róg 'shoe' (radical form – initial consonant is [b])
        b.   an *bh*róg 'the shoe' (lenited form – initial consonant is [v])
        c.   ar an *mb*róg 'on the shoe' (eclipsed form – initial consonant is [m])

► Discussion below based primarily on data from the Connaught dialect of Iorras Aithneach (Ó Curnáin, 2007)

Why are they interesting?

► At the interface of phonology, morphology and syntax - challenging for modular theories of grammar

► Usually, the triggering mechanism can be defined in purely morphosyntactic terms, while the mutations are defined phonologically

► However, in some cases phonology appears to affect whether or not mutation is triggered

Case 1: Coronal blocking of mutation (CB)

► Blocking of mutation when two coronals come together

► e.g. *an t*eanga, **an th*eanga 'the language'

► Regular after article *an*; occasionally in attributive adjectives

► In compounds, after some prefixes but not others

► Q: Why are some prefixes consistently more likely to block mutation?

Is CB determined by stress patterns?

► Stress patterns in Irish derivational prefixes:
  • Type I: no stress on prefix, main stress on base
  • Type II: primary stress on prefix, secondary stress on base
  • Type III: equal (primary) stress on prefix and base

► Observation:
  • Regular lenition associated with type II stress
  • CB associated with types I and III stress

► Generalisation: CB applies to targets that carry primary stress

(2)   a.   *in-ˈd*éanta, **in-ˈdh*éanta 'do-able' (Type I)
        b.   **ˈmion-ˌt*orthaí, *ˈmion-ˌth*orthaí 'micro-products' (Type II)
        c.   *ˈan-ˈd*ona, **ˈan-ˈdh*ona 'very-bad' (Type III)

► Next steps:
  • Can we generalise this to non-compounds?
  • Does CB apply to any target that carries primary stress within the NP?

Does phonology affect triggering in this case?

► Evidence from epenthesis (Ní Chiosáin, 1991):
  • CB sometimes circumvented through insertion of an epenthetic vowel
  • e.g. *an + dona → ˈan-ˈd*ona OR *ˈan[ə]-ˈdh*ona 'very bad'

► Suggests mutation is still triggered as usual via morphosyntax

► Separate phonological process later blocks mutation when two coronals come together

Case 2: Palatalised consonants as triggers?

► Most mutation environments can be defined without reference to phonological features of the trigger or target

► One putative exception: lenition of attributive adjectives and nouns after a plural noun ending in a palatalised consonant

► e.g. *buidéil bh*ainne 'bottles of milk'

► Q: Can this be explained without reference to phonology?

Evidence against phonological triggering

► Triggering of mutation by a set of words ending in schwa (orthographically -*igh*, plural form of -*ach*) in some dialects

► Triggering of mutation by English plural borrowings that are not palatalised, e.g. *teorams mh*aith 'good terms'

► No other mutation environment in Irish makes direct reference to phonology

Irish nominal plural classes

► Irish nouns divided into "plural classes" (Carnie, 2008)

► Set of plural words that trigger mutation aligns closely with plural class "W1"

► Both sets share the following properties:
  • "Weak" plural types, i.e. no syncretism between plural forms
  • Formation of plural does not increase syllable count
  • Common plural form ends in a consonant (usually palatalised)
  • Include the -*igh* forms mentioned above

► Proposal: plural nouns marked as members of this class trigger lenition

► New nouns (e.g. borrowings) are admitted to this class based on whether they have any of the core defining features

► Advantage: triggering mechanism no longer depends on phonology

Take-home points

► Despite appearances, the phonology can be disentangled from the triggering mechanism in each case

► The mutation environments discussed here are therefore still compatible with a modular system of grammar, where morphosyntax and phonology operate distinctly and independently from one another

References

Carnie, A. (2008). *Irish nouns: a reference guide.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ní Chiosáin, M. (1991). *Topics in the phonology of Irish* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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