

(N''' = domain): Syllables as a Type of Possible Constituent

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It has been argued in Government Phonology (since Kaye et al. 1990) that syllables do not exist, at least as an abstract but phonologically relevant node/projection/category/'thing'. This position, however, is quickly confronted by many psycholinguistic tests which show that something syllable-like can, in fact, be manipulated by a phonological derivation (see Jones 1994 for summary of the literature on language games). The most common of these is when teachers ask their students to syllabify a word aloud in class: [pas.ta] vs. *[p.ast.a]¹.

Working in the framework of Minimalist Phonology (Pöchtrager 2006) one assumes that words are binary-branching, arboreal, relationships which vary as much as what the individual nodes are allowed to 'hold'. What this framework has to offer the typology and ontology of syllables is that constituency is given a) a structural interpretation and b) relativization (see (1) on next page):

- a) Constituency in Arboreal Phonology: node X = (max) domain²
- b) Take nodes N', N'' and N'''. Each may be a (max) domain for a process z

We firstly show the reality of this relativized constituency where it can be relative even within the same language. For instance, Vietnamese has a process which takes N' as its domain: assimilation (cf. Pham 2003) while another takes N'' as its domain: overlength (ibid.; cf. Úlfsbjörninn 2007). Meanwhile, there is nothing stopping N''' being the maximal projection of a domain, in fact, we would call this a prototypical syllable (similar to Khan's (1976) structure).

The relevance this has to the phonology of syllables is that it completely neutralises the 'hypothetical' debate between Vergnaud (2007) and Pham (2003). The former claims that in a #CVC# sequence the #CV portion forms a closer relationship than the VC# portion, while, the latter *de facto* makes the reverse claim.

Similarly, an arboreal approach, neutralises any UG based argument for the universality of word-final stops as onsets (Kaye 1990) versus the availability of word-final stops as 'codas' (Scheer 2004). The former supports the #CV hypothesis (of the previous section) claiming C# not to be constituents with their preceding V. Meanwhile, the latter specifically allows an interpretation of VC# constituency. An MP view, would turn this debate from a UG-inspired spat about the well-formedness of syllable boundaries into a simple relativization of constituency where, hypothetically, the same language could offer both options (for different processes).

Lastly, we will show this relativization of domain to be active even within a specific phonological process. Overlength under-application in CVC+V words of New York City English of the '[bet] vs. [be:d] and [betə] vs. [bedə]³' type will be shown to be best understood in terms of the principle of 'closest good licenser' which reads the arboreal structure and dictates the maximal node for the domain of this phonological process, this replaces the current analysis based on differences in lexical structure between words like 'monosyllabic' [be:d] 'bid' and 'disyllabic' [bedə] 'bidder' (*contra* bid vs. libby domains of Pöchtrager 2006).

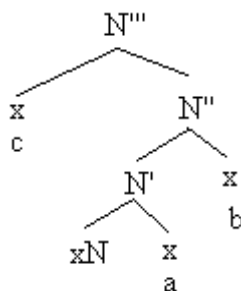
In conclusion, this approach of phonology classes 'syllables' as one of the possible constituents; where a constituent is a domain in which a phonological node is selected to be its maximal projection. What we would call prototypical syllables in MP, therefore, are: N''' = domain.

1 Or anything else which is not *[pas.ta]

2 Where xN stands for nuclear head, N' lexical projections where onset heads or further nuclear heads can be inserted.

3 'bit' vs. 'bid' vs. 'bitter' vs. 'bidder'

Images: 1. The stuff that words are made of (Pöchtrager 2006)



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