

The Sesquisyllable as a Disyllabic Word

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Sesquisyllables (Matisoff 1973), commonly found in languages of Southeast Asia, are traditionally defined as a type of word comprising one fully formed (major) syllable and one phonologically reduced (minor) syllable. Previous analyses (Cho and King 2003, Gussmann 2007, et al) have attempted to show that there is some phonological structure unique to minor syllables which differentiates them from major syllables. However, I argue that words generally considered to be sesquisyllables are in fact ordinary disyllabic words in which the minor syllable is subject to more stringent markedness constraints than is the major syllable.

Minor syllables are generally characterized by a reduced phonemic inventory, reduced syllable structure (CV, not CVC) and alignment with the left edge of the prosodic word, among other things. I focus on three Southeast Asian languages, Kammu (Svantesson and Karlsson 2004), Burmese (Green 2005) and Bunong (via my own investigation), within an Optimality Theoretic framework (Prince and Smolensky 2004). I claim that these phonological effects can be accomplished through highly ranked markedness constraints, outranked by faithfulness constraints which target prosodically prominent positions (Beckman 2004). For example, in Burmese only reduced vowels are allowed in minor syllables, while all vowels are allowed in stressed syllables, as in (1). This is accomplished by positing a markedness constraint against vowel features that can apply in unstressed syllables but which is crucially ranked below a faithfulness constraint that protects vowel features in stressed syllables.

I propose that sesquisyllabic words are all minimally disyllabic but that the degree of disyllabicity varies by language due to differences in the ranking of markedness constraints. In Kammu, for example, minor syllables bear contrastive tone and have codas, and in Burmese minor syllables can be formed through compounding. Therefore, in both cases there is a lexical target for the minor syllable. In Bunong, however, the set of minor syllables is much more restricted, as shown by my fieldwork. While major syllables can be (C)(C)V(C), minor syllables are restricted to either CV, where V is epenthetic or excrescent (depending on rate of speech and cluster type), or a syllabic C only. Crucially, in each of these languages, prosodic prominence is aligned with the right edge of the word, so the minor syllable is always located at the left edge.

Furthermore, based on a phonetic study of Bunong, I find that the word type is predictable by the sonority of word-initial consonant sequences. Kreitman (2008) proposes an implicational hierarchy of onset cluster types for sonorants (S) and obstruents (O): $SO > SS > OO > OS$. If the SO and SS sequences in Bunong were analyzed as onset clusters, we would expect to find OO clusters, though these are clearly missing, as shown in (2). This implies that only OS sequences are onset clusters, and that the SO and SS sequences constitute both a minor syllable and the onset of a following major syllable (i.e. heterosyllabic sequences), rather than tautosyllabic onset clusters. It is precisely in the heterosyllabic sequences that we find inserted schwas, either epenthetic or excrescent. The tableau in (3) demonstrates the phonology associated with these forms.

In summary, I show that though sesquisyllabic word types have features in common which set them apart from standard disyllabic words, it is not necessary to posit a new phonological apparatus to account for their structure. Word types in Southeast Asian languages (i.e. monosyllabic versus disyllabic) are predictable from word initial consonant sequences. Furthermore, apparently unique syllable types (i.e. minor syllables) can be straightforwardly accounted for by constraint ranking.

(1) /ŋa' + ʔu/ → [ŋə.ʔu]

(2) Bunong consonant sequences- No OO clusters

| C ₁ / C ₂ | p | ph | b | t | th | d | tʃ | k | kh | g | ʔ | h | s | m | n | ɲ | ŋ | r | l | w |
|------------------------------------|----|-----|----|----|-----|---|-----|----|-----|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|-----|-----|----|
| p | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | pr | pl | |
| t | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | tr | tl | |
| k | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | kr | kl | |
| kh | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | khl | |
| s | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | sr | | |
| tʃ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | tʃr | | |
| m | mp | mph | | | | | | | | | mʔ | mh | | | | | | mr | ml | |
| n | | | | nt | nth | | ntʃ | | | | nʔ | nh | ns | | | | | | | |
| ɲ | | | | | | | | | | | | ɲh | | | | | | | | |
| ŋ | | | | | | | | ŋk | ŋkh | | | | | | | | | ŋr | ŋl | |
| r | rp | rph | rɓ | rt | | | rtʃ | rk | | | | rh | rs | rm | rn | | rŋ | | rl | rw |

(3) Formulation of a Bunong minor syllable, Stress is aligned to the right

| /rblaŋ/ | *SO onset cluster | Faith (ProsodicHead) | NoCoda | *Consonant Nucleus | *OS onset cluster |
|----------|-------------------|----------------------|--------|--------------------|-------------------|
| rblaŋ | *! | | * | | |
| ☞ r.blaŋ | | | * | * | |
| r.bla | | *! | | * | |
| rb.laŋ | | | **! | | |
| /krap/ | | | | | |
| ☞ krap | | | * | | * |
| k.rap | | | * | *! | |

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