Functional head : Lexical argument :: Vowel : Consonant

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Linguistic elements at various levels (phonemes in the case of morphemes; words or morphemes in the case of sentences) are preferably linearized such that qualitatively different elements alternate: Within and across languages, syntactic representations preferably obtain an alternation of (functional) heads and (lexical) arguments. This alternation is reminiscent of phonotactic constraints which lead to a roughly regular alternation of vowels and consonants (ideally: CVCV). There seems to be a deeper sense to this apparent parallelism inviting reductionist speculations (see Bermúdez-Otero & Honeybone 2006). Note the following parallels between syntax and phonology that correlate with the above observation:

i. both within phonology, as well as in syntax, there is a clear asymmetry between heads (functional heads in syntax, vocalic syllable heads in phonology) and dependents (syntactic arguments, consonantal syllable margins).

ii. somewhat paradoxically, heads do not obligatorily appear on the surface, but dependents usually do: There are languages in which words (even whole word strings) may consist of consonants only (e.g., Tashelhiyt) but no language that allows (longer) sequences of vowels to form words. As for syntax, there are languages in which sentences may consist of lexical words only, i.e., that do without overt functional morphology; but there is no language that forms sentences by concatenating functional heads, leaving out lexical words.

iii. Lexical morphemes are bearers of core meaning, whereas functional morphemes serve a syntactic function. As for phonology, Nespor and colleagues (2003) suggest that, within morphemes, consonants primarily represent the lexical meaning while vowels tend to carry syntactic information (syntactic category, tense, number etc.) – cf. semitic root and pattern morphology with consonantal and vocalic tiers.

In this talk, I seek to explore the above stated parallelism(s). The question is, whether these parallels hint at a core mechanism that is active in both the syntactic and the phonological domain. I suggest that syntactic restrictions on self-similar structures (e.g., the ban on direct X-within-X-recursion, Arsenijević & Hinzen 2012) are comparable to constraints restricting self-similarity in the phonological domain (cf. the various instantiations of the Obligatory Contour Principle). I will discuss to what extent this comparison helps explaining linearization patterns.

References: • Arsenijević, B. & W. Hinzen. (2012). Linguistic Inquiry, 43(3), 423-440. • Bermúdez-Otero, R., & P. Honeybone (2006). Lingua, 116(5), 543-561. • Nespor, M., Peña, M., & Mehler, J. (2003). Lingue e linguaggio, 2(2), 203-230.