

The melody and the syllable structure: vowel length in Modern Icelandic

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One of the issues in the syllable theory that continues to spawn discussion is that of the relation between the melodic and the syllabic level. Fundamentally, is the melody necessary and sufficient for a specific syllabic constituent to be set up or is the syllabic level independent of the melodic one? With the former or melody-driven approach, syllabification consists in projecting melodic units as syllable chunks but justification for the model is slim if not dwindling since there is a one-to-one correspondence between units on the two level. Thus the syllabic level is fully predictable from the melodic one and introduces little new in comparison with it. An alternative approach, adopted by Government Phonology, views syllabification as a mechanism matching melodic strings with an independently existing and highly restricted sets of syllabic units. No priority or dominance is given to either of the two levels (Harris 1994). The position recognises empty syllabic positions while the existence of unassociated (floating) melodies, while admitted in practice, is theoretically difficult to support. In this approach the syllabification of a form is a straightforward operation ensuring that, say, [rd] is syllabified as a coda-onset domain or as an onset-onset sequence; in the former case the preceding nucleus contains a full vowel or is empty whereas in the latter case there is an intervening empty nucleus.

The present paper, while broadly adhering to the melody-syllable independence considers the possibility that at least some syllabic associations may have to be pre-specified. As a testing ground we take the distribution of vocalic length in Modern Icelandic. As shown elsewhere (Gussmann 2002) long nuclei appear in stressed open syllables, given the Government Phonology view of syllabic constituents. This means that the stressed vowel is long not only in traditional open syllables like *tala* [t^ha:la] ‘speak’ but also in traditional monosyllables ending in a single consonant, e.g. *tal* [t^ha:l] ‘speech’ as well as in traditional monosyllables ending in a consonantal cluster which functions as an onset, e.g. *pukr* [p^hʏ:k^hr] ‘secretiveness’. Against this dominating pattern there are subregularities where additional mechanisms must be resorted to. The fact that some typical codas can also act as onsets may be due to the fact that they display the same complexity cline; in effect, some coda-onset sequences may be reversed, e.g. [s] and [m] in *kjamsa* [ˈcamsa] ‘eat nosily’ - *hismi* [ˈhismɪ] ‘chaff’. In other cases coda stops may viewed as realisations of spirants, e.g. *gefnir* [ˈʝɛpnɪr] ‘given, nom. pl. masc.’ (cf. *gefinn* [ˈʝɛ:vin] ‘nom. sg. masc.’) even if this move seems to admit a measure of derivation into an avowedly non-derivational framework. Finally, some stops may be regarded as phonetic effects of phonological geminates, e.g. *fugl* [ˈfʏkl] ‘bird’, *epla* [ˈɛpla] ‘strengthen’. The real problem emerges with the consonant [s], some instances of which are preceded by a short nucleus, hence should occupy the coda position, e.g. *kvíslast* [ˈk^hvislast] ‘branch out’ while others follow a complex nucleus, hence must be assigned to the following onset, e.g. *húslegur* [ˈhu:lɛʏr] ‘house-proud’. It is argued that the Icelandic [s] unpredictably requires to be associated with the onset position, an association which must be viewed as lexical.

References

- Gussmann, E. 2002. *Phonology. Analysis and theory*. Cambridge University Press
Harris, J. 1994. *English sound structure*. Oxford: Blackwell.