

Another difference between prosody and melody: patterns in process inhibition

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There are clear connections between prosody and melody. The asymmetries in terms of which prosodic positions can host which melodic elements, for example, have long been recognised. Thus, for example, prosodically initial positions (eg, word- or foot-initial) typically license a wider range of segments than non-initial positions, and in theories which allow for branching constituents, asymmetries in melodic licensing potential are also recognised within prosodic constituents or domains. Melodic freedom is blatantly curtailed by prosodic factors.

There are also clear differences between prosody and melody. Their independence from each other is obvious: non-linear models recognise that a single melody can be connected to more than one prosodic position, and vice versa. Furthermore, recent evidence from the study of the evolution of language (McMahon 2002) points to a deep distinction between the two: although they connect, they seem to have fundamentally different natures and provenances.

In this paper, I investigate an aspect of the phonology of prosody and melody which, while at first glance may seem to connect them, in fact, serves to differentiate them further. Some of the phenomena examined are familiar, but their role as discussed here has not previously been recognised. I use both well-known and novel data to show that the patterns that prosody and melody impose on the inhibition of the introduction of phonological processes into a phonological system are fundamentally different from each other. I propose a novel approach to the understanding of melodically driven process inhibition and show how this can explain frequently encountered but poorly understood ‘exceptions’ to phonological processes.

The processes which form the paper’s empirical base can all be seen, following eg, Schane (1984) and Harris (1990), as cases of segmental decomposition. I deal with processes targeting both consonantal and vocalic segments. When such processes are introduced into a phonological system, they are typically subject to ‘exceptions’ – they are inhibited from affecting the targeted segments in certain environments. I focus on the ‘Old High German Sound Shift’ (eg, $p > pf > f$), the little-known patterns of synchronic lenition found in Liverpool English (eg, $k \rightarrow kx \rightarrow x$) and the ‘English /ʊ/ change’ (ie, $ʊ > \Lambda$). The discussion of Liverpool English involves the presentation of novel data.

Both prosodic and melodic factors inhibit processes of this type. Prosodically driven inhibition typically occurs in initial positions, as noted by eg, Harris (1994). I show that melodically driven inhibition is due to the autosegmental sharing of melodic material, which gives a segment the ‘strength’ to ‘resist’ the introduction of a process. It has previously been noted (eg, in Kirchner 1998) that cluster homogeneity in consonants can inhibit processes. I show how this approach can be extended to take in the sharing of other melodic material to account for inhibition in, eg, consonant-vowel sequences, and in stops in sC clusters.

While both prosodic and melodic factors drive process inhibition, the patterns involved are very different. Prosodic inhibition relies on asymmetries in prominence, whereas there are no such asymmetries in melodic inhibition, which requires a very different mechanism involving autosegmental binding. It would be surprising if the two did not both show inhibitory effects in process innovation. Because their effects are so different, however, I argue that this is further evidence for a fundamental and deep-reaching distinction between them.

References

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