

Syllabic and trapped consonants in Slavic: different but still the same

Syllabic consonants (SC) have been one of the step children of generative endeavour since its beginning. Autosegmental and non-autosegmental inquiry have worked on representations for basic phonological objects such as long vowels, geminates, consonant clusters etc. Until very recent times, however, the only thing that has been done in order to discover the phonological identity of SC was to literally implement the 19th century wording: "a SC is a consonant in vocalic function". Following this stance, the standard assumption in the generative literature is that SC, unlike their non-syllabic instantiations that they may alternate with (bott[ɫ]e – blottling, Czech vítr[r] – větru "wind NOMsg, GENpl"), sit in the Nucleus (cf. the replacement of [±voc] by [±syll] in SPE, and further Clements 1990:293ss, Hall 2000:215ss, Kenstowicz 1994:255s, Blevins 1995).

I show that this conception is wrong. Wrong because it is based on no inquiry at all, and wrong because it builds on a property ("SC are functional vowels") rather than on the behaviour of the object under scrutiny. Moreover, it violates the fundamental principle of autosegmental phonology according to which consonanthood and vowelhood is not decided by some inherent property of the segment, but rather depends on the syllabic constituent to which a melodic expression is associated (e.g., a melody specified as front, high and unrounded will show up as a [j] if attached to an Onset, but as an [i] when belonging to a Nucleus). Hence, it is impossible for a melody that pertains to a Nucleus alone to appear as a consonant.

In line with autosegmental principles, some more recent interpretations hold that a SC belongs to an Onset, but in contrast to its non-syllabic peers also spreads on an adjacent vocalic position. Most voices believe that SCs spread onto the preceding Nucleus (Harris 1994:224s, Hall 1992:35s, Wiese 1986,1996, Toft forth), but in some views spreading also targets the following Nucleus (Rowicka 1999:261ss, Blaho 2001, Afuta 2002, Rennison 1999:333ss). In this talk, I argue that Slavic provides critical evidence in favour of a left-branching status for SCs. The major argument grounds on the comparison of syllabic with so-called trapped consonants (TC). In Slavic, the former type of consonants is found in Czech, Slovak and Serbo-Croatian, while the latter is a notorious feature of Polish (compare Cz t[r]vat with Po trwać, where the Polish "r" is trapped, both "to last").

TCs have been extensively studied in work by Rubach and others (Bethin 1984, Rubach & Booij 1990a,b, Rubach 1996,1997a,b), but this was done on Polish-internal grounds only. On Rubach's analysis, TCs are extrasyllabic. This position is at variance with the largely consensual peripherality condition ("extra-X (syllabic, metrical, prosodic) objects may only occur at the edge of words", e.g. Roca 1992,1994:213), and makes Polish the only language on record (as far as I know) where extrasyllabic consonants occur word-internally.

I propose an alternative analysis that builds on the behaviour of SC in Czech/ Slovak and TC in Polish. It turns out that both types of consonants show exact opposite behaviour. A comparatistic approach is promising because both kinds of consonants share a common diachronic origin: they occur in the same words with (more or less) the same meaning. Their antagonistic behaviour mentioned is obvious from the following check-list: 1) syllabic consonants may bear stress, but their trapped counterparts may not (Cz tívat vs. Po trwać while Polish has invariable penultimate stress); 2) SC count in poetry, TC do not; 3) in case a vowel-zero alternation occurs to their left, the zero alternant appears before SCs (which thus behave like a vowel), but the alternation site is vocalised before TCs (compare Cz ode-brat vs. odø-birat, odø-f[r]knout "to take away pf; ipf; to snort" with Po roze-rwać, roze-drgać (się) where "r" is trapped vs. rozø-rywać "to tear apart pf; to become vibrating, to tear apart ipf", the Polish situation is intricate, full detail will be provided).

In terms of Government Phonology, the latter fact betrays the identity of both SCs and TCs: the former must be left-branching because the preceding Nucleus governs the prefix-final Nucleus. By contrast, the vocalisation of the prefix-final site in Polish shows that the Nucleus preceding TCs is unable to govern. In roze-dø₁rø₂gac, the trapped [r] branches on ø₂, which then governs ø₁. The working hypothesis which may be abstracted from this functioning is that SCs are left-branching, while TCs are right-branching.

This analysis receives striking support from the diachronic situation, which is its direct translation. As in all other languages (this seems to be universal, cf. Bell 1978), SCs are not diachronically primitive: they are created by the loss of an adjacent vowel. In any event, this holds true for both SCs and TCs, which arose from the loss of Common Slavic (CS) yers. And it is a comparatistic fact that SCs are the result of the loss of a *preceding* yer (CS рьгъ, вьлн, вьлкъ > Cz prvý, vlna, vlk), while TCs were born when a *following* yer fell out (CS тръвати, гръмѣти, клън- > Po trwać, grzmieć, klnę). This situation is not evidenced in diachronic grammars because the distinction "syllabic" vs. "trapped" is not usually made (on many occasions, both categories are confused). I provide extensive comparatistic material (whose key actually lies in Eastern Slavic) in order to establish this fact.

In sum, the talk proposes a representational identity for SCs that relies on their opposite behaviour in regard of TCs. This result is gained on Slavic grounds and builds on both synchronic and diachronic evidence. It harmonizes with what we know from other languages and implies a number of consequences of more general kind, among which the existence of "empty" Nuclei to the left of syllabic, and to the right of trapped consonants

(in fact they are not really empty because we can "hear" them: they carry the syllabic/ trapped information, phonologically as well as acoustically).

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