Weight vs. weight, tone vs. tone: Affix blocking in featural affixation systems

In many languages with rich segmental morphology, affixes with similar properties block each other (e.g. prefixes block prefixes, person affixes block person affixes) which has lead to descriptions in terms of templatic position classes (e.g. Bloomfield 1962) and the development of rule-block formalisms in Word-and-Paradigm approaches to inflection (Anderson 1992, Stump 2001). Which affix actually shows up in a given context (i.e. whether A blocks B or B blocks A) is often attributed to feature hierarchies such as the person scale 2 > 1 > 3 suggested for Algonquian (Macaulay 2009). Hyman (2013) observes that similar patterns can also be found with featural affixation, viz. tonal morphology. Thus he argues that different verbal categories in Leggbó which are expressed by characteristic tone sequences systematically exclude each other, a conflict which is resolved by the morphosyntactic hierarchy Irrealis > Negative > Habitual > Other. Based on data from Western Nilotic languages, I address in this talk three basic questions such systems raise: (1) Is blocking triggered by competition in morphological position classes or by lack of phonological space? (2) does featural affix blocking interact with segmental affixation or work in parallel to segmental morphology (and to segmental blocking)? (3) How does Featural Affix Blocking (in the following shortly: FAB) relate to featural overwriting, the fact that featural affixes often overwrite corresponding phonological features on their morphological bases (Inkelas 1998, Trommer 2011). I demonstrate that in Nilotic (especially Jumjum and Mabaan, Andersen 1992, 2004), there are truly parallel systems, where person hierarchy effects in featural affixes are independent of similar effects in segmental affixes (question 2), and that similar parallel dissociations are also found between length-manipulating (moraic) featural affixation and tonal affixation in Dinka (Andersen 1995, Trommer 2015). Both facts provide evidence against a purely morphological account of FAB, where the blocking relations between different affixes should only reflect their morphological properties not their phonological substance. However FAB also proves to be problematic for the most prominent approach to featural affixation, Sign-based Construction Morphology (Inkelas 2014), which suggests to capture the phenomenon as essentially phonological, i.e. as overwriting to bases by affixal tone in specific constructions since arguably many tonal and quantitative blocking patterns in Dinka favor the realization of structurally inner morphological categories, not of outer categories as predicted by the sign-based account (question 3). Consequently, I argue that FAB at least in Western Nilotic is blocked either by purely phonological constraints (such as the lack of specific contour tones in the tone inventory of a given language) or specific constraints on morphophonological complexity (as the ban to associate a vowel to moras of more than two different morphemes proposed in Trommer 2015). Thus FAB seems to be essentially (morpho-)phonological which implies that the morphosyntactic hierarchies proposed by Hyman should be epiphenomenal and raises the question whether phonological factors also play a role in segmental affix blocking (question 1).

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