

Phonologically Conditioned Affix Order as an Illusory Phenomenon

There are several claims in the literature of ‘phonologically conditioned affix order’ (PCAO), where a phonological property of an affix and/or stem determines the position and ordering of the morphemes within a word. Two types of PCAO are described; the first is the type in which the ordering in question is between two or more affixes on the same side of a stem. An example is found in Hargus & Tuttle’s 1997 analysis of Witsuwit’en, in which the position of the *s-* negative prefix relative to the neighboring Tense/Aspect and Subject prefixes is claimed to be determined by a constraint requiring the *s-* prefix to be syllabified as a coda, along with another constraint prohibiting complex codas.

The second type of PCAO described in the literature involves ‘mobile affixation’, a phenomenon in which the position of an affix relative to the root (i.e., whether it occurs as a prefix or a suffix) is variable. It has been claimed that an affix may be unspecified as to whether it is a prefix or a suffix, and that the placement can be determined by phonological factors such as syllable structure considerations (in Huave; Noyer 1994 and Kim to appear), the identity of the root-initial segment (in Afar; Fulmer 1991), and homophony avoidance (in Akan; Ofori 2006).

The existence (or non-existence) of PCAO is crucial to formulating an accurate model of the phonology-morphology interface since it distinguishes between two types of theories. Theories in which phonology and morphology operate in tandem (e.g., a version of Optimality Theory in which phonological constraints can outrank morphological constraints in a single ‘P >> M’ ranking schema (McCarthy & Prince 1993a,b)) predict that PCAO should be attested in the world’s languages. On the other hand, theories in which morphology precedes phonology (as a whole, as in Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993), or at each individual level in a derivation, as in Lexical Phonology and Morphology (Kiparsky 1982)) disallow PCAO.

In this paper, I claim that there is no such thing as ‘true’ PCAO. I begin by recapping the results of a cross-linguistic search for cases of the first type of PCAO described above (Paster 2005), showing that the few reported cases (e.g., Witsuwit’en) constitute ‘fake’ PCAO and can be explained without assuming any effect of the phonology on the affixation process itself. Most examples involve affixes consisting of a single segment, so the apparent reversal of the ordering of two affixes can be explained as straightforward phonological metathesis which takes place *after* affixation; i.e., the segments are reordered but the morphemes themselves are not.

I go on to discuss mobile affixation, arguing that no example requires the assumption that phonology and morphology operate in tandem. Rather, each of the few documented cases is compatible with the assumption that affixation takes place in morphology prior to the operation of regular phonological processes. For example, in Afar, I argue that the apparent mobile affix is really two separate affixes, a prefix and a suffix, that have the same shape. Though this admits some redundancy into the analysis, it is preferable to an approach based on phonological constraints because the position of the affixes, while phonologically *determined*, is not phonologically *optimizing*. Therefore, the P constraint in a P >> M analysis would be an arbitrary, language specific constraint with no functional grounding or external motivation in Afar or any other language. I show how the Afar case is comparable to an example in Chimariko (Conathan 2002) where some subjects are marked by either a prefix or a suffix depending on the phonological characteristics of the root, but where it is clear that the two forms are distinct underlyingly because they have a slightly different phonological shape (though they are similar enough to suggest that they come from a single etymological source). Analyses without P >> M are possible and, I argue, preferable for the Huave and Akan examples as well.

Based on these cross-linguistic findings, I conclude that the ‘P >> M’ / OT approach to phonology/morphology overgenerates and should be abandoned in favor of a more restrictive model in which morphology precedes phonology, and the limited types of phonological conditions on affixation are all located within the subcategorization frame of an affix rather than in the interranking of phonological and morphological constraints.

References

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