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Title: **Optionality in Optimality Theory: Ranking Underspecification and Overspecification**

Date: Monday, November 14, 2005
Time: 4:00pm
Place: Rosenfeld Hall (corner of Temple & Grove)

Abstract:

In the original formulation of Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 1993/2004), the grammar of a language consists of a single total ordering of a set of ranked constraints. To handle two sorts of optionality, two departures from the assumption of a single total ordering have been proposed. Phonological variation is when a single morpheme surfaces in two ways in a single environment. Analyses of variation typically invoke ranking underspecification, in which rankings between a subset of the constraints are indeterminate, either because they are unspecified in a partially ordered grammar (Anttila 1997/2002), or because the orders are sometimes changed by a stochastic mechanism (Boersma 1998). Phonological exceptionality is when one morpheme undergoes or triggers a process while another morpheme fails to undergo or trigger that process, even though the two are in all relevant respects indistinguishable. Analyses of exceptionality have invoked ranking overspecification, in which the grammar contains multiple orderings of some constraints, with different rankings applying to different morphemes. This can be formalized in terms of lexically specific constraints by having a lexically indexed version of a constraint rank above a conflicting constraint, while the general version ranks beneath it (e.g. Itô and Mester 1999, Pater 2000).

I will present an analysis of exceptionality in Piro syncope (Matteson 1965, Kisseberth 1970) in terms of lexically specific constraints. In Piro, morphemes differ in whether they cause the preceding vowel to delete (/heta+nu/ [hetanu] 'going to see' vs. /heta+lu/ [hetlu] 'see it'), and in whether they undergo deletion themselves (/mey+wa+lu/ [meyiwlu] 'celebration' vs. /heta+wa+lu/ [hetawalu] 'going to see him yet'). As the behavior of the homophonous pair of /-wa/ morphemes illustrates, morphemes that fail to condition syncope can differ in whether they undergo the process. As well showing how constraint indexation deals with the Piro case, I will provide a learnability account that uses inconsistency detection (Tesar 1998) to trigger the creation of indexed constraints. This account of the genesis of constraint indexation resolves the apparent inconsistency of having morpheme-specific constraints in a theory that assumes constraint universality, and also ensures that learners will seek a phonological generalization before resorting to an analysis in terms of exceptionality. Finally, I will discuss issues that the Piro data and learnability raise for attempts to extend ranking underspecification to exceptionality (as in Anttila 2002, as well as in Zuraw 2000 and Hayes and Londe 2005).

References

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