Workshop: Abstractness in Phonology

Kristján Árnason  
The University of Iceland  
kristarn@hi.is

Structure preservation and morphophonemics

The morphologically simple Icelandic verb *ansa* ‘to answer’ has the lexical representation /ansa/, a sequence of four (tokens of) Icelandic phonemes, which can have varying postlexical realisations, the following among them: [ (?,)ansa], [(?)ažsa] or [(?)ã:sa]. The different realisations of the lexical form are conditioned by processes or constraints, such as the deletion or weakening of the nasal before a voiceless fricative and the insertion of a glottal stop in a lexically onsetless form, which may be variously prominent in utterances, depending on things like stress or clarity in utterance style. For a derivational compound like lán samur ‘lucky’, consisting of the nominal stem lán ‘luck’ followed by the suffix –samur ‘some’, the lexical form is /laun samyr/, but it may have variant output forms like [ ‘laun̥:samyr] [ ‘lau̥nsa myr], [ ‘lau̥za myr] and [ ‘laû:sø myr], depending on postlexical conditions or style, including the realisation of stress.

The set of lexical phonological oppositions or phonemes in lexical forms is invariably the result of sound change. According to Kiparsky (2008: 188): “In the Stratal OT framework, … sound change corresponds to the promotion of markedness constraints to undominated status in the postlexical phonology (with the innovative constraint ranking then spreading to the word phonology, or even to the stem phonology).”

The lexical component of the phonology, or word phonology, is structure preserving (in the sense of Kiparsky 1985), which means that for each language (or language state) only symbols from the same (language particular and finite) alphabet must be used for all representations at this level. This means that postlexical, “subphonemic” units (or allophones) may not be used for morphophonemic purposes. Thus ablaut and umlaut paradigms such as Icelandic lít ‘look-PRES’ /lit/ – leit ‘look-PAST’ /leit/, and barn ‘child’ /bætn/ – börn ‘children’ /pœtn/ and the consonantal relations in saga ‘story-NOM’ /saɣa/ – sagna ‘story-GEN’ /sakna/ may involve the substitution of one (or more) phonemic unit(s) for another (or others). But there is no change in the type of structure, i.e. units from the same alphabet are used in the representation of the singular /batn/ and the plural /bœtn/ and the Nominative Singular /sau̥a/ and Genitive Plural /sakna/. By the same token a subphonemic nasalised vowel which may occur in variant pronunciation [ã:sa] beside [ansa] of forms like MI *ansa* ‘to answer’ may not be used in this way for morphophonemic purposes. The apparent minimal distinction between [ã:sa] and [a:sa], corresponding to *asa* ‘haste-OBLIQE’, is not “promoted” to phonemic status due to the fact that the more clearly pronounced variant [ansa] can also be used for *ansa* ‘to answer’ in contrast to [ã:sa] *asa* ‘haste-OBL’.

Based on these and other examples I will argue for a separate level of lexical or phonemic oppositions. These oppositions need not be based on melodic properties alone, as e.g. vocalic phonemes may have prosodic characteristics as “short”, opposed to normal “long” ones, and consonants as phonotactically “weak” (sonorous) or “strong” (less sonorous). These prosodic characteristics have an effect on phonotactics, constituent structure and syllabification.