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The Onset Principle in Faroese

While the common syllabification of CVCV sequences as CV.CV in English is normally attributed to the Onset Principle (Onset), Duanmu (forthcoming) argues that Onset is epiphenomenal in English and proposes that much of the work of English syllabification is done by the Weight-Stress Principle (WSP), which mandates that stressed syllables must be heavy (bimoraic). Duanmu contends that syllabifications attributed to Onset instead result from one or more of the following factors: (a) unstressed syllables must be light; (b) syllable rhymes are limited to VX, where the X slot may be filled by a vowel or a consonant; or (c) rhymes can be filled by vowel lengthening.

Although his own analysis is limited to English, Duanmu (forthcoming) notes that it “raises questions about the status of Onset ... in other languages.” This paper therefore evaluates its status in Faroese. In Faroese, as in English, CVCV sequences are syllabified CV.CV, e.g. *seta* [se:ta] ‘set’ is syllabified [se:.ta]. Such syllabifications can be accounted for without Onset: stressed syllables must be bimoraic to satisfy WSP, thus filling the X slot and forcing a following consonant into a syllable onset. A similar logic applies to forms containing intervocalic consonant clusters, e.g. *toldi* [tɔldɪ] ‘suffered’, syllabified [tɔl.dɪ] and *Februar* [fe:brɔar] ‘February’, syllabified [fe:.brɔar]: in such forms, the X slot is also filled, forcing a following consonant or consonants into a syllable onset. (Heterosyllabification vs. tautosyllabification is attributable to syllable contact.) These facts indicate that Onset is epiphenomenal in Faroese, supporting Duanmu’s view.

This assessment is challenged by intervocalic glide epenthesis, as in *suða* [su:wə] ‘whistle’, which has been accounted for, e.g. by Kitto and de Lacy (1999), by reference to Onset. However, glide epenthesis is considerably more controversial than Kitto and de Lacy (1999) indicate, as some examples of glide epenthesis are analogical and others are lexicalized (Höskuldur Thráinsson et al 2004). Thus, two options are available: (1) Onset and WSP are both crucial to Faroese syllabification, with glide epenthesis motivated by Onset, but with some analogical and some lexicalized examples; or (2) WSP is crucial to Faroese syllabification, while Onset is an epiphenomenon, and glide epenthesis is generally either analogical or lexicalized. Since glide epenthesis is a messy process either way, and because the second option yields a simpler analysis, the second option is preferable, meaning that Onset is in fact best treated as an epiphenomenon in Faroese, and supporting Duanmu’s view of its status.

References

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