ENGLISH IN THE CONTINUUM OF SYLLABIC -- NON-SYLLABIC (PHONEMIC) LANGUAGES (RP AND DIALECT DATA)

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ABSTRACT

Analyzing linguistic facts observed in RP and English dialects, the author presents evidence suggesting that, contrary to the established views, English typologically occupies a place intermediate between purely non-syllabic and syllabic languages.

The predominant concept of the role of the syllable in English is that it is a purely articulatory phenomenon, viz., an articulatory unit. But there are facts related to the phonological structure of English words, and especially facts of dialect variation, that are hard to accommodate with this established view.

Let me first point out the fact that /l/ in English, especially in RP, much shorter than /l/, (apparently the same phoneme) in lead. That is only one example of the English syllable demonstrating that in English, whereas a morpheme boundary occurs after a consonant, it tends to be also the place of a syllable boundary, the final consonant of the morpheme tending to remain syllable-final even when a vowel-initial morpheme is affixed to it. Although this fact has often been mentioned in the literature, it seems that its implications for the structural role of the syllable have not been sufficiently explored.

As a general rule, the syllable has been proved by B. Malmberg in experiments to remain syllable-final even when /l/ is linked with the above-mentioned /l/. This is one of the facts that show that in English, wherever a morpheme boundary occurs after a consonant, it tends to be also the place of a syllable boundary, the final consonant of the morpheme tending to remain syllable-final even when a vowel-initial morpheme is affixed to it. Although this fact has often been mentioned in the literature, it seems that its implications for the structural role of the syllable have not been sufficiently explored.

Nowadays our theory is benefited by an important contribution by Prof. V. N. Kasevich whose profound re-examination of the syllable, its structure and functional role in various languages enabled him to come up with an entirely new, independent, and revolutionary system of language typology. According to this theory, the world languages form a continuum with two extreme types - the so-called phonemic type, the ideal syllabic type and a number of intermediate types.

Should English belong to the first of these extreme, or polar, types, such rules as those described could not happen, for in purely phonological languages, syllabic strucuture of the words is essentially independent of their phonemic structure, thus freeing the phonemes of any dependence on their place in the syllable.

A careful examination of the facts of the English phonology shows that many of these have most striking analogies in syllabic and near-syllabic languages. The results of an exariation will be reported in my book due to appear in print in English University Press in the near future.

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The trend for a morpheme boundary to coincide with the syllable boundary; the resistance of English to re-syllabification; the close contact of vowels with the following consonants; the dependence of vowel variation only on the following consonant; the difference in variation patterns of syllable-initial and syllable-final allophones of consonants.

None of these facts are entirely new to theorists. But their typological importance, it seems, has been overlooked. These facts have been discussed in the literature in connection with different theoretical problems. Considered together, these facts show that the syllable in English is developing into a peculiar unit of surface structure, somewhere in between the phoneme and the morpheme, and that it is moving in the direction of coalescence with the morpheme. The purely asemantic syllable of the non-syllabic, phonemic languages is being gradually ousted by the syllable which is typically a morpheme.

To be sure, English greatly differs from such purely syllabic languages as Vietnamese or Chinese, but it shows in many ways a trend to develop into a type intermediate between non-syllabic (phonemic) and syllabic languages.

References


