UNDERSPECIFICATION AND PHONOLOGICAL ASSIGNMENT OF PHONETIC STRINGS: THE CASE OF CLASSICAL MANDAIC [qen:a:] 'NEST'

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ABSTRACT

The Classical Mandaic(CM) coinage of the verb [qǎna:] 'to build a nest' on the basis of the phonologically isolated noun [qen:a:] 'nest' poses a puzzle for linear phonology by implying that the underlying representation of the noun was taken to be marked /qen?aa/ rather than unmarked /qennaa/. However when the situation is reanalyzed in terms of nonlinear underspecificational phonology the puzzle vanishes, the nonlinear counterpart of /qen?aa/ turning out to be unmarked after all.

In [7] Sanford Schane proposed that a phonetic form which is indeterminate with respect to its phonological structure be automatically provided with whatever phonological structure might be determined by universal theory to be least marked for the phonetic string in question. In [4] I adduced a prima facie counterexample from CM, which I will briefly review here.

The CM noun [qen:a:]'nest' had become lexically isolated and hence phonologically opaque. Though its original phonology had been */qennaa/, synchronically it might just as legitimately derive from either /qen?aa/

or /qe?naa/ by assimilation of /?/ to /n/. In accordance with Schane's hypothesis, [qen:a:] should certainly reaffiliate with its original phonological representation as /qennaa/, /nn/ being patently a less marked origin of [n:] universally than either /n?/ or /?n/. But in fact the Mandeans' coinage of a verb 'to build a nest' on the basis of [qen:a:] clearly revealed that /n?/ was the underlying solution; see [4] for justification.

QED--or so I thought in 1970. However, the advent of autosegmental, syllabic, and underspecificational phonology(cf. specifically for this study [1,2,3,5,6])has led to a complete revaluation, as I shall now show.

Taking off from the observation that /?/ was merely an SPE-vintage abstract segment (though historically the reflex of a true phonetic laryngeal(*[?])or pharyngeal (*[ʕ])),and should rather be replaced synchronically by a featurally unspecified melodic unit (/φ/),let us start with the derivation in (1).

First, melodies associate to whatever skeletal positions are syllabically marked. Archangeli's approach[1] allows marking of syllable heads,indicated in (1a) by a vertical line over an X; and also of positions in the

domain of a syllable head, indicated by a slant line over an X. Hence the melody e associates to the simple nucleus X while a associates to the complex nucleus XX. These associations are given in the step (1a) to (1b), making for the short e of the stem and the long a of the suffix.

Next, remaining melodic segments are associated with syllabically unspecified positions in the step(1b)to(1c).

Then remaining syllabic specifications are provided in moving from(1c)to(1d). This is guided in part by universal regularities, and in part by language-specific patterns. Thus for CM, assignment of Onset (O) to the X associated with φ is not hampered by the featural vacuity of the latter, since Mandaic-impossible syllables would result from any other assignment. The X in question cannot be associated leftward, since Coda (C) adjuncts are admitted only under quite restricted circumstances. Neither can the X associate rightward, since three-mora Nuclei (N) are strictly disallowed.

Finally, an anchoring convention dictates that an unspecified melody reassociate from its skeletal position to whatever adjacent melody the syllabic assignments will tolerate: to the lefthand melody in this case, only n but not also (righthand) a comprising a possible Onset.

The derivation in (2), corresponding to the historical /qennaa/ analysis, falls out even more simply, since there are no unspecified melodies. Beyond that, the only notable difference from (1) is in step (b) to (c), where the melody n spreads to two tandem X's.

However, when we attempt to apply this treatment to a

form with a second-radical φ, in(3), an apparent difficulty emerges, since the phonotactics of the language will allow the φ to assume either Codal value, in(3d), or Nucleic value, in(3d'), with the consequence of predicting alongside correct [qen:a:], in(3e), also incorrect $[qi:na:]in(3e')-- [i:]instead of[e:]following by a rule of raising.

But this is not a difficulty per se. Though not considered in [4], this is a potentially correct result, one brought out virtually automatically under the joint autosegmental-underspecificational assumptions adopted here. Though lexical "freezing"forestalls pervasive free variation, the overall reflexes of nouns of this stem shape with original 2/ *? or *ʕ are pretty much split between resolutions like [qen:a:], and those like the unattested alternant $[qi:na:].

We are now ready to consider how the paradigmatically isolated noun [qen:a:]'nest' might "choose"among the likes of (1,2,3)upon the occasion of the Mandeans' fielding a new paradigm to the tune of a denominal verb 'to build a nest'.Which of these, (1a)or (2a)or(3a),might provide the best suited underlying representation, all else being equal?

It seems to me that (1a) does, for three reasons: (I)Both (1a)and(3a)should be favored over (2a)because each of the former contain three-radical roots, which all hands down represent the unmarked state of affairs in CM and all other Semitic languages. Thus the root in (1a) is √qnφ and that in (3a) is √qφn. So-called geminate roots, on the other hand, are normally analyzed as

biradical autosegmentally (see e.g.[5,6]). Thus the root in (2a) would be the two-radical /qn.

Two factors give the edge to (1a) over (3a): (II) First of all, (3a),as we have seen, allows vacillation in phonetic stem-shape, between a long-consonant resolution like [qen:a:] and a long-vowel resolution like ⁺[ɑi:na:]. (1a), on the other hand, provides unambiguous stem-stability, in terms of just long-consonantal [qen:a:]. (III) Finally, the verb actually coined on the basis of (1a) turns out to be appreciably closer to the unmarked (strong verb) canon [CăCaC]. Thus [qŏna:], the actual verb 'to build a nest', is phonetically closer to a strong verb like [ləYaṭ] 'to take' than would either ⁺[qan], corresponding to (2), or ⁺[qa:n], corresponding to (3).

Thus there need be nothing at all maverick about the restructuring of [qen:a:] as phonological /qenɸaa/. On the contrary, if the analysis just proposed is approximately correct, it instantiates one of the most mundane of all analogical change types: assimilation to the least marked available model-- much like Schane [7] proposed way back in 1968 after all.

REFERENCES
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ILLUSTRATIONS

(1)a.   (1)b.   (1)c.
(1)d.   (1)e.

(2)a.   (2)b.   (2)c.
(2)d.

(3)a.   (3)b.   (3)c.

either   or
(3)d.   (3)e.   (3)d'.   (3)e'.

[qen:a:]   ⁺[qi:na:]