

Word-initial sibilants and prenuclear syllable structure

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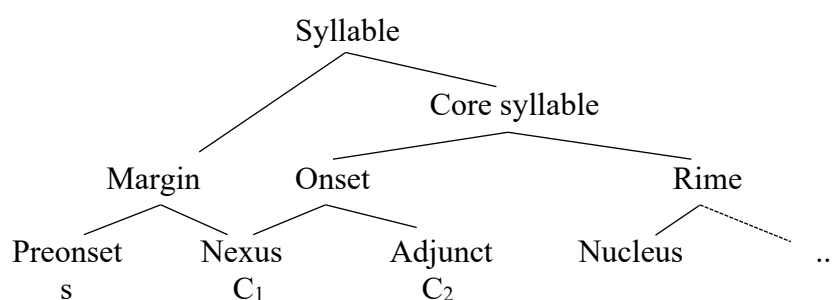
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Word-initial consonant clusters beginning with a sibilant, as in English *sport*, *snack*, *slack*, *straight*, have been subject to a long debate for their exceptional properties. Most scholars assume that segments are grouped in syllables and that these syllables are subject to the sonority sequencing principle (SSP; Selkirk 1984, Clements 1990, Zec 2007 and references there). Obstruents are of low sonority, sonorant consonants of higher sonority and vowels of highest sonority, and the SSP requires that they are linearized within a syllable in such a way that sonority rises steeply from its left edge towards the nucleus and then falls gently. In sC (sibilant + consonant) word onsets, the second consonant can often be any consonant or even a complex onset of rising sonority, i.e., sOR (Obstruent, Resonant). Thus, sonority stays level or even falls before it rises from the second C to the R or the nucleus. This and similar observations have been met with a variety of proposals. Some assume more structure within the syllable preceding the rhyme (Pike & Pike 1947, Cairns & Feinstein 1982), others more complex segments (Steriade 1993, 1994, Wiese 1996), yet others an additional constituent, the appendix, preceding the onset, that might be associated with the syllable or a higher prosodic constituent (Haugen 1956, for a recent overview and defense of the appendix see Vaux & Wolfe 2009), and Kaye (1992) proposes “magic licensing” in Government Phonology, reiterated by Goad (2012, 2016) as the proposal that the unruly consonant is the coda of an empty syllable. If one expands the empirical subject of study by the range of consonants in C1 and to word-final clusters, there are even more proposals on the market, such as extra-prosodicity, degenerate syllables and recursive syllables.

In this talk I examine a range of languages with word-initial sC clusters. sC clusters display properties that justify treating them as structurally special, but none that justify association with higher levels of the prosodic hierarchy and none that justify treating them as codas. They are restricted by and restrict the following consonant in laryngeal contrast, place and manner in a variety of ways. These special phonotactic constraints also exclude an analysis of sC as complex onsets, i.e., the same as OR clusters, since some languages treat sO and sR clusters differently – the latter, but not the former, in the same way as OR.

The most promising proposal yet is the assumption of more elaborate hierarchical structure preceding the rhyme, which has been made in various forms (e.g., Pike & Pike 1947, Selkirk 1984, Cairns & Feinstein 1982, Cairns 2009) but largely ignored. I develop a new proposal on the basis of these, that layers the syllable into the syllable and the core syllable. It allocates two positions to the onset of the core syllable, the nexus and its adjunct. The nexus is also contained in the preceding Margin constituent, that consists of the preonset and the nexus.

The left periphery of the syllable



First, it is only in the core syllable that Sonority Sequencing is mandatory. Second, languages differ (parametrically or, preferably, by constraint ranking) in whether they allow the Margin

constituent (i.e., sC), the adjunct (i.e., OR) in the onset, both or neither (no syllable-initial clusters). Furthermore, languages differ in the strictness of markedness constraints on the Preonset (one sibilant or several or fricatives etc.) and on cooccurrence constraints on the segments associated with the two Margin positions (e.g., restricting the nexus to plain stops if in the Margin), as they differ in the types of sonority rise in complex onsets (sonority distance maximization or dispersion; Parker 2012).

In conclusion, closer inspection of cross-linguistic variation in word-initial sC clusters reveals that syllable structure preceding the nucleus is more complex than usually admitted in theories of the syllable.

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