

Abstract

'Lukashenka's Native Tongue Defies Proper Government'

Our discussion is devoted to vowel-zero alternations in Belarussian. Alternations of that type constitute a phenomenon that has been widely discussed within Government Phonology. In this framework, such alternations are handled by means of Proper Government, hereinafter also referred to as PG (Kaye 1989). Although Proper Government has been successfully applied to some Slavic languages to account for vowel-zero alternations (Gussmann & Kaye 1993, Scheer 1998), Belarussian data suggest that, if the theory's claim for universality is to be retained, the view of the PG mechanism must be modified.

One of the essential assumptions connected with the notion of Proper Government is that alternating sites contain empty nuclei. When properly governed by the following nucleus, empty nuclei remain silent; otherwise, the default vowel is supplied as their vocalic content. However, Belarussian data hardly leave any room for the default vowel hypothesis. Consider the following examples (note that alternation sites are marked with *):

son - s*nu, ahon' - ah*n'u, bab'or - bab*ra, dz'en' - d*n'a, paczak - pacz*ka
imhla - taja *mhla, *l'od - il*du

The data seem to be incompatible with the hypothesis that the vocalic content of what is described in Government Phonology as "empty nuclei" is supplied by default. What this means is that "empty nuclei" sometimes must in fact possess latent vocalic content, and thus are not empty in all cases of vowel-zero alternation.

In view of the above data, Proper Government must be modified so as to include, as its object, not only empty nuclei but also nuclei with latent vocalic content. This, in its turn, poses before Government Phonology another challenge: how is that latent vocalic content to be represented in the representational approach adopted in this framework (Kaye et al. 1985). It is not untenable to speculate that, because Proper Government seems to operate identically on empty nuclei and nuclei with latent content, these two groups of nuclei have some common structural properties that set them apart from "regular" vowels.

It must be noted here that the problems posed by Eastern Slavic languages with respect to Proper Government have not been ignored by phonologists working in this framework (Sheer, personal communication). However, we are not aware of any work that would explicitly deal with this issue. It is our hope that we shall succeed in initializing an active discussion that would eventually solve the problem.

References

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