

Old English compensatory lengthening and the problem of hiatus

The paper addresses the problem of compensatory lengthening and hiatus in Old English. The analysis reveals that traditional descriptions which associate the change of quantity with the loss of a melodic segment miss some important generalizations. The paper argues that the Old English compensation can most insightfully be accounted for in the framework of autosegmental theory where quantity adjustment can be analysed on a separate autonomous tier independent on the phonological component. A thorough examination of Old English substantives proves that the loss of a melodic segment, which has so far been perceived as a direct impulse for length compensation (e.g. Campbell 1959, Hogg 1992) plays only a mediate role in the process.

Old English compensatory lengthening, being an instance of a non-local quantity adjustment process, proves to be a good illustration of the Hayesian postulate that the moraic theory can account for the change in a more restrictive and adequate manner than either of the two remaining autosegmental theories: the CV-model or the X-skeleton model. The first part of the paper is a brief summary of the three autosegmental approaches. A set of examples from Old English proves that such properties of the CV-theory as its ability to indicate the source of length are not, as it has been suggested, an advantage, but a handicap of the theory and an unnecessary complication, which calls for the application of some purely technical devices.

The paper then compares and contrasts the X-skeleton theory with the moraic theory and shows that although both of them are an improvement over the linear type of phonology the former is burdened with some empirical problems. The moraic theory makes predictions about the prosodic structure and stress system of weight-sensitive languages and as such can best account for the process of Old English compensatory lengthening, which is shown to constitute a part of the syllabification pattern of the language

The analysis is based on the model of moraic structure proposed by Hayes (1989). The analysis of data, which have been divided into two sets according to syllable weight reveals that the Old English compensatory lengthening involved two independent and only partly compatible mechanisms i.e. double flop and CL by vowel loss. The final section of the paper shows an interesting interaction between compensatory lengthening of the latter type and another well known Old English phenomenon, i.e. hiatus.

Finally, it is suggested that viewed from non-linear perspective the process of compensatory lengthening constitutes a part of the wide range of Old and early Middle English quantity changes in stressed syllables which were a consequence of the general tendency to optimize syllable quantity. Thus, compensatory lengthening as an implementation of a language specific moraic structure would be another argument in favour of phonology viewed as a coherent system rather than as a set of rules.

Bibliography

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