Doubly conditioned rounding in Laal:
Conditional licensing and correspondence chain

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This presentation aims at proposing an account of a typologically rare doubly conditioned phonological process attested in Laal (unclassified, southern Chad). In this language with maximally disyllabic words, the first vowel of the root is rounded in the presence of a round V₂ (most of the time a suffix) only if two conditions are met: both vowels are of identical height (Height condition), AND the root contains a labial consonant in any position (Lab condition):

1. /bɪr-ʊ/ > bùr-ú ‘hook-pl’ (Height, Lab > rounding)
2. /tɔb-ɔ/ > tɔb-ó ‘fish.sp.-pl’ (Height, Lab > rounding)
3. /jìŋ-ʊ/ > jìŋ-ù ‘harpoon-pl’ (Height, *Lab > no rounding)
4. /mèn-ú/ > mèn-ú ‘hoe-pl’ (*Height, Lab > no rounding)

This doubly conditioned assimilation poses problems to an analysis in terms of spreading from the suffix vowel. In particular, why should spreading to V₁ of the [round] feature borne by V₂ be conditioned by a parameter that is external to the two vowels involved (the presence of a labial consonant in the root)?

I propose instead to analyze this process as a case of conditional (i.e. coerced) licensing: the redundant V-place feature [round] borne by the root labial consonant(s) is sometimes forced out of its inertness. How? By being licensed by V₁. When? When V₂ is round AND both vowels are of identical height. I hypothesize that this process is driven by the articulatorily process of word-level plateauing of V-place gestures, achieved when both vowels have identical place features (only height and rounding are subject to plateauing in Laal). When one of the two round features in the word is redundant, it may only trigger plateauing (by being realized by V₁) if another gesture (in this case, that associated with vowel height) is also plateaued in the same word.

I also propose a (very tentative!) formal analysis couched in Optimality Theory, which draws from Itô et al.’s (1995) notion of feature licensing, as well as the notion of similarity-driven correspondence proposed by Walker (2000a,b, 2001), Hansson (2001) and Rose and Walker (2004). In addition, I propose the notion of correspondence chain, and the possibility to state constraints over correspondence chains additionally to corresponding segments. A correspondence chain is defined in terms of transitivity between several correspondence relations: If x↔y and y↔z, then x↔y↔z, i.e. x, y and z are in an (indirect) correspondence relation.
References


