The phonological conditioning of morphosyntactic variation


Speakers encounter a number of morphosyntactic choices in language production, giving rise to variation between lexical items, word orders, and constructions, as in the English possessive:

(1) the car’s wheel ~ the wheel of the car

Previous work has shown that morphosyntactic variation of this kind is conditioned by numerous factors, ranging from syntactic and semantic to usage-based, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic (e.g., Bresnan et al. 2007; Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012). In some cases, prosodic factors (e.g., prosodic phrasing) have been suggested to affect word order choices as well (e.g., Zec & Inkelas 1990; Zubizarreta 1998), but for the most part, the influence of phonology has largely been discounted in previous work as a contributor to morphosyntactic choice due to theoretical and empirical limitations (e.g., Zwicky & Pullum 1986; though cf. McDonald et al. 1993; a.o.).

In this talk, I argue that lower-level phonological factors, including segmental and metrical well-formedness preferences, are at work in conditioning morphosyntactic choices. Such effects have been heretofore relatively unavailable for study because they involve probabilistic patterns in natural language use, requiring ecologically-valid datasets and sensitive quantitative methodologies. Here, I present the results of three corpus-based studies. The first examines phonological effects on lexical choices in English forename-surname pair formation (e.g., Susan Smith versus Suzanne Smith), drawing on a large-scale corpus of Facebook usernames. The second looks at the influence of phonological factors on spoken English possessive variation (e.g., the car’s wheel ~ the wheel of the car) in the Switchboard Corpus, relative to other known syntactic, semantic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic factors that also affect this choice. The third case study turns to cross-linguistic evidence from a web text corpus of Tagalog adjective-noun word order variation (e.g., magadang baba’e ~ baba’eng maganda ‘beautiful woman’), which involves phonologically-conditioned surface allomorphy that contributes to the choice of word order. The results from the three case studies demonstrate that morphosyntactic choices can optimize for segmental (e.g., phonotactic) and metrical (e.g., rhythmic) well-formedness. While the influence of such low-level phonology is small relative to higher-order semantic and usage-based factors such as animacy and frequency, their influence remains robust across languages as well as across variable phenomena, in lexical, word order, and construction variation. The interaction reported in this talk between phonological information and morphosyntactic choices raises theoretical implications for considering the architecture of the morphosyntax-phonology interface in both formal and psycholinguistic models of language (cf. Zwicky & Pullum 1986; Levelt 1989).