

Abstract

Within the field of English phonology, one particularly vexing problem is posed by the question of the exact nature of lexical primary stress and the conditions determining its assignment to a particular syllable in a particular lexical item. So far, the issue of stress assignment has mostly been approached by studies within the generative paradigm, which usually conceptualise stress placement as a synchronic grammatical operation involving the application of derivational rules. These rules specify the conditions for the positioning of stress, customarily in terms of morpho-syntactic (lexical category) and phonotactic (syllable structure and weight) criteria. The domains in which these rules operate are understood to be the stem or word level. Larger domains, in particular the level of concrete utterances, are usually not taken into consideration, not least because, within the generative framework, factors that take effect on the utterance level are discounted as aspects of performance, having no impact on the structure of linguistic competence.

In contrast to the standard generative approach, the proposed dissertation project will consider the question of lexical stress placement from a diachronic rather than a synchronic perspective. Its main objective is to probe the possibility that the allocation of lexical stress might partly be a function of the regular occurrence of lexemes in certain utterance contexts which bias the placement of stress in specific ways due to the general prosodic Principle of Rhythmic Alternation. This principle posits that there is a universal eurhythmic preference for syllable sequences in which prosodically strong and weak syllables alternate, so that both stress clashes and stress lapses are avoided. Thus, the stress patterns of polysyllabic lexemes in English are expected to show significant interactions with the prosodic properties of other words (or word classes) in whose immediate vicinity they tend to occur. Contextual biases for stress placement are hypothesised to have become influential during the Middle English period, which will therefore be the temporal focus of the study.

By formulating the research agenda in this way, the proposed project breaks with a central tenet of classical generative approaches, namely that aspects of performance cannot feed back into competence. However, such an approach is highly compatible with more recent theoretical frameworks which are currently applied and debated in the field of linguistics, in particular usage-based models and language evolution.

In terms of methodology, the project is decidedly empirical. In line with usage-based approaches to language, it seeks to identify and evaluate the influence of linguistic (and extra-linguistic) factors on linguistic processes by referring to actual empirical data, i.e. collected specimens of linguistic performance. The texts included in existing corpora of Middle and Early Modern English will play a central role during data retrieval, notably the relevant compartments of the Helsinki Corpus. Additionally, the project requires the construction of a new corpus consisting of verse texts, whose rigid metricality will help to determine the position of lexical stress in individual lexemes at various points in time. The set of methods that will be used for data analysis encompasses both qualitative and quantitative aspects: the qualitative component mostly concerns the coding of the corpus data with information deemed relevant for stress assignment, while the quantitative and statistical component will determine the strength with which various factors, in particular utterance context, have affected the prosody of English words over time.