



snippets

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A phonological condition that targets discontinuous syntactic units: ma/mon suppletion in French

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It is usually thought that the feminine possessive pronouns *ma*, *ta*, *sa* – versions of ‘my’, ‘your’ which select for a feminine NP argument – take the form *mon*, *ton*, *son* if and only if they are followed by a word that starts with a vowel (Tranel 1996; see also Grévisse 1986 p. 159). We argue that this rule is in fact triggered by a *phonological condition that applies to discontinuous syntactic units*. This suggests (i) that phonology has access to abstract syntactic information, and (ii) that there might be phonological arguments for discontinuous syntactic units.

The standard pattern is illustrated in 0.

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) a. ma femme | a'. mon épouse | ‘my wife’ |
| b. mon adorable femme | b'. mon adorable épouse | ‘my adorable wife’ |
| c. ma très adorable femme | c'. ma très adorable épouse | ‘my very adorable wife’ |
| d. ma gentille femme | d'. ma gentille épouse | ‘my charming wife’ |
| e. mon assez gentille femme | e'. mon assez gentille épouse | ‘my fairly charming wife’ |

While (1) shows that *ma/mon* suppletion is triggered on phonological grounds, other examples suggest that the rule cannot be stated in purely linear terms:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (2) Feminine <i>mon</i> followed by a consonant | Feminine <i>ma</i> followed by a vowel |
| a. Marie a été mon / * ma , puis <u>son</u> épouse. | a'. Marie a été ma / * mon , et ensuite <u>sa</u> femme. |
| Marie has been my, then his wife. | Marie has been my, and then his wife. |
| b. Marie sera soit mon / * ma soit <u>ton</u> épouse. | b'. Marie sera ma / * mon ou <u>ta</u> femme. |
| Marie will-be either my or your wife. | Marie will-be my or your wife |

In this case, the choice of *mon* vs. *ma* is governed by the initial vowel (in bold) of its argument NP, even though this is not the vowel that immediately follows the possessive. (When the underlined possessive is replaced with *leur* (‘their’), the grammaticality judgments do not change, which shows that phonological parallelism between the two possessives *mon* and *ton* is not what is at stake.)

Five theories could be considered ((3)). Theory I is stipulative: it must postulate that a syntactic feature directly encode a phonological property of an entire NP. Theory II apparently has no independent support. Theories III, IV and V, however, could be integrated into some standard accounts of Right-Node Raising in syntax.

- (3) **Theory I:** The rule is not purely phonological: an NP that starts with a vowel has a special diacritic, +v; suppletion is selection: feminine *mon* selects a +v NP, feminine *ma* selects a –v NP.
mon^{+v} puis *ton* épouse^{+v}, *ma*^{–v} puis *ta* femme^{–v}

Theory II: The rule is purely phonological, but it accesses a representation in which some elements (represented as subscripts) have been deleted.

mon_{puis} ton épouse

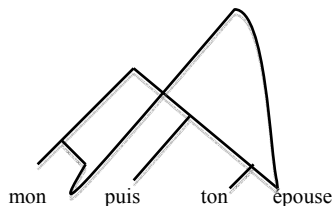
Theory III: The rule is phonological, but it accesses a representation with ellipsis.

mon ~~épouse~~ puis ton épouse

Theory IV: The rule is phonological, but it accesses a representation with movement – possibly *via* across the board extraposition out of a conjunction.

[mon t puis ton t] épouse

Theory V: The rule is phonological, but it accesses a representation with discontinuous constituents (McCawley 1982).



Theories III and IV won't easily extend to the case of parentheticals. While the examples in 0 are marked, they give rise to clear contrasts; and some acceptable forms are found in naturalistic contexts. Theory III is not applicable here: ellipsis is implausible because the NP appears to be interpreted only once. A version of Theory IV could postulate in 0 a rightward movement of the NP [= *ton t_{obligation}*, *si j'ose dire, obligation*] or leftward movement of the possessive [= *ton, si j'ose dire, t_{ton} obligation*]; but it's not clear what triggers this movement. Theories I, II and V could handle these facts: without further addition for Theory I; with the assumption that the parenthetical is at some level ignored by the phonology for Theory II; and with the assumption that parentheticals may be attached higher than their surface position for Theory V (McCawley 1982).

- (4) a. Il est de **ton/*?ta**, si j'ose dire, *obligation* de me prêter assistance.
It is of your, if I dare say, duty to lend me assistance.
- b. C'est à cette époque que j'ai réalisé **mon/*?ma**, disons-le, **homosexualité**.
It is in that period that I became aware of my, let us say it, homosexuality.
(With spelling changes, from <http://meio-school.bbgraf.com/personnels-de-l-ecole-f59/yosuke-habara-fini-t162.htm>)
- c. J'ai des doutes sur **mon/*?ma**, disons, **employabilité**.
I have doubts about my, let-say, employability.
(From <http://vj.legiteam.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=14851&start=20&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=&sid=b06b04c78fd1fc27be6cdb7cf7f0889>)

Each theory faces challenges. We have already mentioned weaknesses of Theories I-IV. For its part, Theory V would have to posit that a phonological rule is sensitive to sisterhood rather than linear adjacency – which requires some theoretical elaboration.

References

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