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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 mon followed by a consonant Feminine ma followed by a vowel

a. Marie a été mon / *ma, puis son épouse. a’. Marie a été ma / *mon, et ensuite sa femme.
   Marie has been my, then his wife. Marie has been my, and then his wife.

b. Marie sera soit mon / *ma soit ton épouse. b’. Marie sera ma / *mon ou ta 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’ puis ton épouse ‚’, ma’ puis ta femme”
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 obligation, si j’ose dire, obligation\} or leftward movement of the possessive \{= ton, si j’ose dire, l\*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)

   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=b06b04c78fd1c27be6cdbe7cf7f0889)

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