

Contrastive Specifications in Stratal OT

Sara Mackenzie

Memorial University of Newfoundland

This talk provides an analysis of dental harmony patterns in related Nilotic languages which is carried out within the framework of Stratal Optimality Theory (e.g. Kiparsky 2000) and which crucially relies on contrastive feature specifications. Dholuo, Anywa and Pāri are related Nilotic languages with restrictions on the co-occurrence of dental and alveolar stops. I argue that dental harmony is motivated by a constraint barring the co-occurrence of segments with distinct specifications in the feature [distributed]. Only segments with differing contrastive specifications in the harmonic feature are barred from co-occurring. Differences between languages provide evidence for a theory in which contrastiveness of features is determined both by the shape of the phonemic inventory and by language-specific feature hierarchies (Dresher 2009).

Previous work showing how specifications consistent with the contrastive hierarchy can be achieved in OT (e.g. Mackenzie and Dresher 2003, Dresher 2009) has argued that contrastively specified outputs serve as inputs to later levels of evaluation. I show that a single ranking and single level of evaluation can account for both contrastive specifications and dental harmony in Nilotic. This is consistent with claims in work on Stratal OT that strata are limited to the stem, word, and phrase levels with generalizations over both the inventory and morpheme forms being determined at the stem level. Because dental harmony in Nilotic is realized as a morpheme structure constraint, Stratal OT predicts that contrastive representations and dental harmony be determined at the same level of evaluation.