

Floating contrastive features in Estonian: Underspecification and “palatalization”

In Standard Estonian, a number of bisyllabic stems whose first syllables are heavy appear as monosyllabic in the nominative singular. In a number of other case forms (such as the partitive), these do surface as bisyllabic, but the vowel in the second syllable is not predictable based solely on the first syllable:

- (1) a. *kruus* ‘gravel’ (part. *kruusa*) b. *kruus* ‘cup, mug’ (part. *kruusi*)
 c. *nutt* ‘crying’ (part. *nuttu*) d. *nutt* ‘round object’ (part. *nutti*)

The vowels which can appear in the second syllable, however, represent a subset of the language’s full vowel inventory (Viitso 2007:21). Furthermore, Estonian is said to have phonemic palatalization of /s/, /t/, /n/, and /l/ (indicated with an acute accent, cf. 1b, d). There do exist minimal pairs for this (cf. 1a, c), however, in the case of words with the palatalized variants, the vowel in the second syllable of, for example, the partitive case, is fully predictable as /i/.

I present an analysis of the Estonian vowel system whereby whereby the unpredictable vowels in the second syllable of bisyllabic stems are represented with floating features, minimally specified following Dresher (2009). When this vowel is /i/, its contrastive feature docks with any “palatalizable” consonants, where it is realized phonetically as a high-vowel on the preceding nucleus offglide and a raised tongue body during the hold of the consonant (Lehiste 1960, 1965).

References

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