

Cue vs prosodic licensing – competing explanations and a false dichotomy

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The past couple of decades have witnessed the development of a deep divide among theorists regarding the necessary conditions for contrast in phonological systems. The traditional position held that syllable position was a primary determinant of where segments could occur, a view that came to be known as ‘licensing by prosody’ (e.g. Ito 1986). The rise of ‘phonetically-based’ approaches in the 1990s spawned a competing view, dubbed ‘licensing by cue’ (e.g. Steriade 1997), according to which segments appear in positions where their perceptual properties are most salient. Since by the end of the last century, phonetics research had failed to identify consistent and reliable phonetic correlates of syllabic constituents, these two views were largely assumed to be mutually exclusive. Prosodic licensing was purely ‘phonological’; its adherents rarely gave significant attention to the speech signal. Cue licensing offered phonetic explanations for cases that were problematic for prosodic accounts. Works on both sides of this divide concentrated on illustrating the superiority of their own position, rarely exploring the hypothesis that perceptual and structural explanations may be compatible.

The dichotomy between cue and prosodic licensing is, in my view, a false one. When confronted with the failure to find phonetic correlates of syllabic constituents, two possible conclusions could be reached. We may assume that (1) phonetic correlates of prosodic structure do not exist, or (2) that phonetics research was based on flawed hypotheses about phonological constituency. Apparently, most scholars came to the first conclusion, exemplified in Hayes et al (2004:23), who write that “nothing about perception, articulation, or processing leads us to expect any licensing asymmetries among syllable positions”. As a consequence, “phonetically-based” phonology has largely eschewed constituent structure, instead of seeking possible areas of compatibility with prosodic licensing.

We may, however, adopt an alternative strategy built on the second of the two conclusions mentioned above. Onset Prominence (Schwartz 2009) is a representational theory that unites segmental and structural specifications, going beyond the false dichotomy to offer explicit hypotheses about structure that may be tested by means of experimental phonetic study. The key building blocks of the onset structures are auditory properties that produce quasi-discrete landmarks in the signal, offering a speech based link with the defining property of phonology: discreteness.