

Are frequent, early and easy clusters also unmarked?

Katarzyna Dziubalska-Kołaczyk (Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan)

In my talk I will consider phonotactics from three aspects: frequency, language acquisition and speech production. Both theoretical and methodological issues will be discussed and illustrated with the studies of consonant clusters. Phonological theories generally assume that unmarked clusters would demonstrate similar behaviour across the domains implied by the three aspects specified above. In particular, they are expected to be more frequent, acquired earlier than the marked ones and easier in production. It seems, however, that these are nonidentical sets of clusters in each case. On the other hand, marked clusters, i.e. those problematic for a theory, seem to overlap. Additionally, morphotactic clusters, which are by default more prone to be marked, behave differently than the marked phonotactic clusters, in particular, they are acquired earlier.

For example, 5 most frequent initial CC- clusters in Polish are *pʃ*, *pr*, *st*, *mj*, *sp*. Some data on language acquisition mentions *sp*, *fʃ*, *vw*, *st*, *sw* among those acquired early, and the morphotactic among them prior to the lexical ones (e.g. lexical *fʃ* would be reduced much more often than the morphotactic one). Assessment of all those clusters from the perspective of speech production is a complex task, involving detailed phonetic description focused on coarticulatory effects and gestural coordination. Importantly, production-based criteria interact with the acoustic/auditory ones. Additionally, such descriptions are always theory-grounded and therefore provide divergent assessments of “ease”. What can be noticed, however, is that *st* and *sp* clusters figure in both of the above sets. It is well known that s+stop clusters are notoriously unaccountable for across models of phonotactic markedness. Sonority-based models generally fail to explain their occurrence, and numerous phonetic accounts have come to rescue and point to the uniqueness of those clusters. Still, phonologically speaking, they are marked, and require a special treatment in interpretation. As we have shown, they are also frequent and early, possibly also easy.

In the talk, I will draw from the recent research by myself and colleagues in order to discuss the difficulty in avoiding circularity in characterizing markedness as well as the omnipresent methodological bias connected with the choice of data (both experimental and collected) used to support claims concerning phonotactics.