Strength in Grammar

Workshop, Leipzig University, November 10+11, 2017

Deadline: October 11, 2017

Strength of elements is a recurrent notion in grammatical theory, especially in analyses for exceptional behaviour of morphemes or phonological segments. Yet there is no agreement about the concrete nature of 'strength': Several recent proposals assume that it is an irreducible property of certain elements in underlying phonological or morphological representations (Vaxman, 2016*a,b*; Smolensky and Goldrick, 2016; Rosen, 2016) whereas others argue that strength should be derivable from the structural position of an element (Beckman, 1998; Revithiadou, 1999; Nasukawa and Backley, 2009) or from notions like contrastiveness or stability of context (Rhodes, 2012; Inkelas, 2015).

Strength is employed to explain various empirical phenomena: The choice between lexically listed allomorphs follows, for example, from a preference- or strength-hierarchy of allomorphs in a language (Mascaró, 2007; Bonet et al., 2007) or the asymmetrical behaviour that only some phonological elements are triggers and/or targets for phonological assimilation processes follows from assuming that they are stronger than surface-similar elements (Rhodes, 2012; Inkelas, 2015).

Whereas proponents of some concept of strength in grammar thus argue that it allows representational accounts for apparently exceptional behaviour in different parts of the grammar and hence makes morpheme-specific grammatical mechanisms or sub-grammars unnecessary (Pater, 2000, 2006, 2009; Inkelas et al., 2004; Inkelas and Zoll, 2007), doubts have been raised that such a notion enriches the grammar with too much predictive power. This workshop aims to discuss the arguments for and against different concepts of strength in grammar and answer questions like:

- Are there arguments for a formal notion of 'strength' in grammar or does it fall out as an epiphenomenon from indepently motivated structural differences like underspecification?

- Is strength an idiosyncratic property of certain elements in the lexicon or is it an epiphenomenon derived from structural positions?

- What other (grammar-external) factors like frequency or context-stability can predict strength?

- In which empirical areas do we observe strength or competition between elements that are otherwise surface-identical or -similar?

- Most accounts that employ strength are phonological: Does strength play a role in morphology outside of allomorph selection? Does it play any role in syntactic accounts?

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