Monpositional syllabic consonants: Evidence from Slovene and English

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In various versions of (standard) Government Phonology and Strict CV (or CVCV) Phonology, a number of proposals have been made for the representation of syllabic consonants, with two major solutions. Certain authors, e.g., Szigetvári 1999, Scheer 2004, Garami 2019, argue for a left-branching structure, in which a consonantal head spreads onto a vocalic position on its left, eventually occupying a VC sequence. In contrast, Rowicka 1999 and Blaho 2004 (among others) assume the mirror image of that situation, i.e., a right-branching structure composed of a consonantal head and a vocalic target in a CV string. Moreover, independently of each other, Caratini et al. 2011 and Polgárdi 2015 suggest that the choice between VC and CV is subject to parameter setting: syllabic consonants in Germanic languages (specifically, English and German) behave as left-branchers, while there is evidence to analyse them in Slavic languages (Czech, Slovak, Serbian) as right-branchers. At the same time, both studies explicitly argue against the monopositional representation, when the syllabic consonant solely occupies a V position.

In the present paper we aim to pursue the idea appearing in Toft 2002 (and subsequently adopted in Balogné Bérces 2005), that syllabic consonants may not have a uniform structure within a phonological system: data from Southern British English (Toft 2002) and tapping accents of English (mentioned in Toft 2002 and analysed in detail in Balogné Bérces 2005) lead to the conclusion that syllabic /n/ is indeed a left-branching structure including the historical consonantal position, but syllabic /l/ is a monopositional nuclear element in synchrony. The primary argument we use here is that while syllabic /n/ produces a consonantal environment for a preceding /t/, which may undergo glottalling as a result even in a tapping accent (cf., e.g., General American button), syllabic /l/ will trigger tapping (e.g. bottle, cf. Betty). We propose to extend the monopositional analysis to syllabic /r/ in rhotic accents of English, and show that it behaves as a short, zero-stressed vowel (schwa) when unstressed (cf. better). When stressed, however, syllabic /l/ patterns with long/"tense"/"bimoraic" vowels: not only does it trigger no tapping (cf. words like taciturn), but distributional evidence (Hammond 1999: 143–147) also indicates that stressed syllabic /r/ behaves as a complex “bimoraic” sequence. In CVCV phonological terms, this leads us to assume that it occupies a VCV sequence.

To supplement the English (Germanic) example with illustration from a Slavic language, we also discuss Slovene. In contrast to other Slavic languages (we have Polish, Czech and Slovak within the scope of our investigations), the syllabic consonant of Slovene, /r/, enjoys surprising freedom in its distribution: not only does it appear word-finally and preconsonantly (e.g., vrh ‘top’), but it is also possible at the beginning of the word (e.g., rdeč ‘red’), where other Slavic languages typically treat historically yer-related sonorants as “trapped” rather than syllabic, i.e., as non-nuclear. We attribute this to its monopositional structure: it behaves as a vowel (hence the distributional freedom); it may even receive stress, in which case it behaves as a long vowel similarly to the “plain” vowels of Slovene.

Throughout the discussion, CVCV phonological representations are assumed.

References


Caratini, E., T. Scheer, O. Rizzolo & M. Ziková 2011. There are two kinds of syllabic consonants: (Germanic) left-branchers and (Slavic) right-branchers. Poster presented at OCP8, Marrakech, 19–22 January 2011.


1 As a reviewer points out, a related proposal is made in Szigetvári (2011: 72f), claiming that English syllabic /r/ (or an r-coloured schwa) is singly linked to a V position, while other syllabic consonants occupy VC sequences.

2 Liquids in word-initial position in examples like Czech šdá (‘to die’), Russian rta (‘mouth GenSg’), Slovak rmut (‘haze NomSg’) are ‘trapped’, which means that they do not form syllables. These examples are not discussed in the current paper.