Categories and Projections in Prosodic Structure

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The standard theory of prosodic structure postulates a rich and multi-level hierarchy of categories that are designed to serve as domains for phonological processes in various languages. Even though projected from syntactic/semantic structure, these domains often do not coincide with grammatical constituents.

While this line of research has been very productive and successful, evidence has accumulated in recent years that some aspects of the theory are not entirely accurate, in particular when viewed from a cross-linguistic perspective. On the one hand, work in minimalist syntax (phase theory, etc.) has reshaped the conception of the syntax-phonology interface, and with it the question of domain mismatches. On the other hand, there are strong indications that the standard model, and the underlying research program valuing the postulation of new descriptive categories over restrictiveness, has led to a hierarchy with too many categories, but still provides too little structure in some respects.

The strategy pursued in this paper is based on the general idea that a proper understanding of the relational side of prosodic structure (minimal vs. maximal projections, heads vs. non-heads, etc.) allows for a radical simplification on the categorial side. Taking up earlier proposals and using evidence from Japanese and other languages, we argue for the following interrelated hypotheses:

(i) Universal Phonology distinguishes only a small number of genuinely separate categories (such as "phrase" and "word").

(ii) Additional layers arise through prosodic adjunction to these categories, they do not constitute further distinct categories.

(iii) In the resulting prosodic parse of an utterance, each category defines its own network of projections where the usual tree-structural notions apply (such as "minimal" and "maximal projection").

(iv) Phonological and phonetic processes are part of the realization of this structure, signaling important boundaries by selecting different subconstituents as their domains.