

*A concrete review of abstract phonology: reanalysing abstract contrasts and opacity in Bondu-so tongue root harmony*

Jade J. Sandstedt  
Nord University

This talk explores a number of controversial consequences of previous abstract analyses of Bondu-so (Dogon: Mali) vowels and vowel harmony, particularly for the explanation of phonological opacity – cases where phonological generalisations are rendered non-surface-true by the application of subsequent rules. Bondu-so has been analysed as displaying three typologically- and theoretically-unusual characteristics: 1) a complex bidirectional [ATR] vowel harmony system with a unique bleeding relationship between leftwards and rightwards harmony, 2) a three-way [ATR] contrast on suffixes which is incompatible with privative or monovalent phonological features, and 3) abstract or covert [ $\pm$ ATR] contrasts on high and low vowels which display distinct phonological behaviours but which never surface, resulting in widespread opaque phonological patterns (Hantgan & Davis 2012; Heath 2014; Green & Hantgan 2019). I show that each of these unusual generalisations stems from the crucial mischaracterisation of underlying vowel contrasts and the direction of harmony in surface-ambiguous data. With a re-classification of the data, Bondu-so harmony patterns are characterisable as regular, derivationally transparent leftwards [RTR]-harmony with harmonically neutral non-contrastive high and low vowels – requiring no abstract contrasts, directional harmony asymmetries, or opacity of any kind. Following this non-abstract reanalysis, Bondu-so is revealed to be typologically and theoretically fully consistent with other harmony languages. The debated Bondu-so vowel patterns represent therefore an important contribution to the ‘abstractness controversy’ – revealing important analytical and methodological issues in abstract approaches to phonology – and illustrates how essential accurate empirical generalisations are in linguistic analysis.