

An unexpected source of footing in Québec French

Heather Goad

McGill University

(in collaboration with Guilherme D. Garcia and Natália Brambatti Guzzo)

There is much debate about the formal status of prominence in French. Some researchers argue that it reflects stress: a right-headed foot is aligned with the right edge of the stress domain (e.g. Charette 1991, Scullen 1997). Others argue that prominence is part of the intonational system: the final H tone of a LHiLH* contour is assigned to the right edge of the phonological phrase (e.g. Jun & Fougeron 2000). The former approach is challenged by the observation that the domain in which stress is computed is the phonological phrase (Dell 1984), not the prosodic word, as expected of languages with stress. The latter approach renders French cross-linguistically unusual: it lacks the foot, arguably an obligatory constituent in the prosodic hierarchy (Selkirk 1995). In this paper, we probe the existence of feet in (Québec) French through another process: variable high vowel deletion (HVD). We first report on an experiment with auditorily-presented stimuli in which native speakers judged whether words with and without HVD in various locations sounded natural. The results show that HVD preferentially applies in even-numbered syllables from the right edge of the word (see Verluyten 1982; cf. Cedergren 1986), seemingly consistent with iterative footing. We then test whether these results could instead be due to HVD being constrained by the phrase-initial Hi tone of the LHiLH* contour. We report on an experiment in which two- and four-syllable nouns with HVD in the initial syllable are placed in phrases of different profiles. If tonal profile plays a role, HVD in four-syllable nouns in phrases where the noun is in isolation or preceded by a determiner alone should be dispreferred, since the initial syllable of the noun is assigned the optional Hi tone in these contexts. Our results do not confirm this: HVD is favoured in four-syllable nouns over two-syllable nouns, regardless of phrase type. We explain this finding by expanding our previous proposal: HVD is regulated by foot structure, but is dispreferred when it targets the head foot in the prominence domain. Although both experiments point to the same foot-based analysis of Québec French, we question whether second language learners could ever arrive at an appropriate understanding of footing in French, given that the evidence for this constituent does not involve lexical stress and requires understanding of the preferred contexts for application of a variable phonological rule. In contrast to our expectations, we find that learners can arrive at native-like judgements of auditorily-presented stimuli, demonstrating command over both the process and the subtle conditions that regulate the variation.