Syllabification Rules and the Reality of Output Lexical Representation in Child Phonology

Pornsiri Singhapreecha
Kurt Queller

Abstract

Transcripts of the speech of a 3;4 year old child simultaneously acquiring English and Thai reveal an unusual but highly consistent process whereby [s] is lengthened before obstruents, in words like ˈstoreθ and ˈmonsterθ. This lengthening is argued to result from the child’s attempt to resolve a conflict between his syllable structure constraints and his desire to give overt phonetic expression to the sibilants in the word models. Analysis in terms of CV-phonology (Clements & Keyser, 1983) shows that the geminate-like sibilants can indeed be understood as arising from a syllabification-based process which involves autosegmental spreading of consonantal melody features into an epenthesized skeletal v-slot.

This process, which bears formal similarities of the typologically rare rule type which Lieber (1987) calls ōreverse compensatory lengthening,ō provides a good account of an otherwise puzzling aspect of the child’s phonology. However, neither it nor any other rule can account directly for the presence of the prolonged [s] pattern in the child’s forms for words such as ˈinvisibleθ. Such forms are only explainable with reference to an output level word schema, constructed by the child on the basis of the rule-derived forms. In contrast to the claims of Smith (1983), but in line with the proposals of Menn (1983), these findings provide strong evidence for the psychological reality of phonologically derived output-level lexical representations.