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Early and Late Spell-out: Evidence from Austronesian Nasal Substitution

Nasal Substitution is a phonological process in many Austronesian languages in which a prefixed nasal assimilates in place to a following stem-initial consonant which subsequently deletes, or alternately, the nasal and obstruent undergo fusion. Nasal Substitution can be contrasted with Nasal Assimilation, in which there is no fusion. In this paper I examine two cases where there is a Nasal Substitution and Nasal Assimilation contrast, and posit that the contrast is borne of a structural difference that is reflected in the phonology.

Karo Batak is a language in which we see Nasal Assimilation only occurring on derived measure nouns, and Nasal Substitution occurring on verbs in the active voice.

Measure Nouns: *beka* ‘burst, split’ → *mbeka* ‘half’
taktak ‘fall, drop’ → *ntaktak* ‘drop, droplet’

Active Verbs: *begi* → *megi* ‘to hear’
tukur → *nukur* ‘to buy’

In this case we can see that the distinction is borne of a fairly salient structural difference; measure nouns and active verbs quite plainly belong to different categories.

In Timugon Murut, however, there is a contrast between Nasal Substitution and Nasal Assimilation that occurs on a single class of verbs. When these verbs are used in a continuative aspect, only Nasal Assimilation occurs. When the same verbs are used as dynamic transitives, Nasal Substitution occurs. Here the structural difference seems to be far more subtle, dependent on some kind of AspectP.

Continuative: Mangkakai manuk no ra tana’
scratch chicken that obj. ground
‘The chicken scratches ground’

Dynamic: Mangakai manuk no ra bugas
scratch chicken that obj. rice
‘The chicken scratches rice’

I propose that in both of the above cases, the difference between Nasal Assimilation and Nasal Substitution is a difference between early and later spell-out respectively, triggered by differences in the structure. Nasal Assimilation would occur when the verb spelled out early, and then moved - that movement would make the phase-boundary formed by spell-out ‘soft’, and therefore allow the prefix to see inside enough for assimilation (but not fusion). When the verb moves first and is then spelled out together with the prefix, that ‘closeness’ triggers Nasal Substitution.

References

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