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Casting doubt on the Onset-Rime distinction

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Abstract

If the syllable is composed of Onset and Rime constituents, and if this constituency is taken seriously, then each segment must uniquely belong to either Onset or Rime, and the boundary between the constituents should be clear and consistent in any given language. Pre-nuclear glides provide a test-case for this prediction. It turns out that in a single language these glides may behave in some ways as part of the Onset, and in other ways as part of the Rime, casting doubt on the reality of these constituents. We find not only inter-speaker variation, but also intra-speaker variation. The facts succumb to explanations based on simple linear phonotactics, with no appeal to sub-syllabic constituency, reinforcing the findings of Pierrehumbert and Nair [Language and Speech 38.1 (1995) 77]. The data are drawn primarily from English and from Mandarin Chinese, and the analysis is worked out in Optimality Theory.

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Keywords

Syllable structure; Glides; Variation

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