THE SYLLABLE IN PHONOLOGICAL AND PROSODIC STRUCTURE
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1. Syllabic Constraints on Phonetic Representation

Although in some languages there are phonological distinctions between syllabic and nonsyllabic segments, and between accented and unaccented segments. There is reason to believe that neither syllables nor accent-groups (measures) are present in the phonological representations of words in permanent memory. Syllables and other prosodic structures are characteristically predictable from segmental phonological representation and grammatical boundaries. They are, therefore, nondistinctive. Like other derivative, nondistinctive characteristics of speech, they are less readily “available to consciousness” (Sapir, 1921) than basic, distinctive characteristics. And, unlike phonological segments, they are rarely accurately reflected in writing systems, either in so-called syllabic orthographies like kana and devanagari, or in di-vi-sions of words in alphabetic orthographies. For these reasons we assume that the prosodic organization of segments into syllables and syllables into measures arises in the phonological processing of ongoing speech.

There is, furthermore, evidence that the means of this organization exists in whatever part of the central nervous system it is that carries out phonological processing. Specifically, there is evidence that prosodic structure is re-adjusted in response to processes which alter other aspects of a representation in the course of phonological processing.

An interesting example of syllable readjustment occurs in Lardil, an Australian language (Hale, 1973). Hale expresses puzzlement over the fact that [r], which becomes [n] optionally before a nasal, becomes [n] obligatorily before a deleted nasal (439, fn.). Thus /karmukarmu/ ‘skinny’ (compare the nonfuture [karmukarmu-n] ~ [kənmukənmu-n] has an uninflected form, with final vowel apocope and consonant cluster simplification, pronounced [karmukan] or [kənmukan] – never with final [r]. But let us simply assume that this optional assimilation of [r] is obligatory within syllables. Then [kər.mu.kərm] after apocope must be [kər.mu.kərm]. At this point assimilation must affect the tautosyllabic [rm] sequence even if it does not affect the heterosyllabic sequence, giving [kər.mu.kənm]. With simplification this yields [kərmukan].

Hale notes other puzzling examples, e.g. the palatalization of [n] to [ɲ] before a palatal consonant only if it is deleted, e.g. [punτn] ‘tree species’ from [punτnč] (compare nonfuture [punτnč-a-n]). To explain this, we need only assume that palatalization is obligatory within syllables and inapplicable in larger domains. Only the apocopated form [punτnč] meets these conditions: hence (punτnč), and with simplification, [punτn]. These examples provide
evidence of an intermediate syllabication (after apocope) which is distinct from either underlying or superficial syllabication.

Examples like these (see also Stampe, 1973; Vennemann, 1972; Bailey, 1978) show clearly that prosodic organization may be imposed in phonological processing, and not just on the output of processing but also on nonterminal stages. It could, judging from this, be entirely derivative.

2. Syllabic Constraints on Phonological Representation

However, it has long been recognized that phonological representations, as well as phonetic ones, conform to canons of syllable structure. From this some have concluded that syllables must be in phonological representation after all. This is not a necessary conclusion. Constraints on phonetic representation, according to evidence cited by Stampe (1973), are systematically imposed on the phonological representations of nonalternating segments. (There are other provisos.) For example, there is a constraint in English (and most other languages) against sequences of alveolar stop followed by a stop of any other point of articulation. This constraint is imposed in the form of a process which assimilates the alveolar to the nonalveolar stop, under further conditions we will examine later: e.g. [mˈbold.r̩] ~[mˈbold.r̩] in Boulder, [in,kʰal.ˈr̩ar.o] ~ [iŋ,kʰal.ˈr̩ar.o] in Colorado. In nonalternating sequences of nasal stop plus stop, e.g. jump, drink [ŋk], timber, Django [ŋg], handkerchief [ŋk], etc., this amounts to a constraint on phonological representation: /mp/ does not contrast with */np/ in such forms.

We see no reason to believe that syllabication or other prosodic constraints that organize phonetic representation do not, likewise, also impose constraints on phonological representation. We can say that a phonological form is admissible, ceteris paribus, if it conforms, without changes, to an admissible syllabication. Without changes, because there are natural adaptations which can make virtually any form admissible: */bnɪk/ becomes [bəˈnɪk], */jʌnp/ becomes [jʌmp], etc.

There is, however, one further question. If phonological */bnɪk/ is inadmissible because it does not conform to an admissible syllabication, how is it that phonetic representations like [bəˈnɪθ], a variant of [bəˈnɪθ] beneath, can arise in English? There is a similar problem regarding segments: there are, clearly, constraints in English against phonological segments (phonemes) like nasal vowels, labiodental nasals, etc. Yet these arise assimilatively in, for example, [bæ̃ɱf] Banff.

There are indeed English constraints against phonemes like /æ̃/ (denasalization, as any teacher of French or Hindi to English speakers can attest), and /ŋ/ (de-dentalization, as we can attest from people’s imitations of our daughter Elizabeth’s invented name for her blanket, /ˈmiˌmi/, as [ˈmʌˌmʌ]), just as there is a constraint against */bnɪk/ (epenthesis, as in [bəˈnɪk]). But these constraints, manifested as strengthening or epenthetic processes, are subject to a universal
and absolute order restriction: they may not apply to the output of weakening or assimilative processes. (See Donegan and Stampe (1977) under “Fortitions First, Lenitions Last.”) Since the apparently problematic forms [bæ̃ɱf] and [bniθ] arise as a result of “lenitions”, they are not subject to “fortitions” like denasalization, dedentalization, or epenthesis. But when an English speaker aims directly at Hindi /hɑ̃/, or Elizabethan /ˈɱɨˌɱɨ/, or */bnɪk/, which are not the output of lenitions, then the fortitions apply. And since these “foreign” forms do not conform, without changes, to the requirements of these obligatory fortitions, we have an explanation of their phonological inadmissibility.

3. Rules and Processes

We have so far been speaking of “natural processes” which reflect phonetic constraints. In much phonological literature these are labeled “rules” and lumped together with morphological and morphophonological conventions which lack synchronic phonetic motivation. For example, the negative prefix *in- (inalienable) participates in a number of obligatory, apparently assimilative alternations (impractical, irrelevant, illicit, immoral). But when we compare the negative prefix *un- (unalterable), we find that it is not subject to any of these obligatory changes (unpaid, unrelated, unlawful, unmentionable), but only to the optional changes described above as alveolar stop assimilation ([ɪ̃nˈbold.r̩] ~ [ɪ̃mˈbold.r̩]). Such discrepancies indicate that the alternations of in- are not synchronically assimilative at all, but merely conventional. See Donegan and Stampe (1977) for further discussion.

We have argued that phonological representations are segmental rather than prosodic. It also appears that conventional rules manipulate phonological segments (phonemes) rather than prosodic constituents. (The reason in- before velar does not obligatorily become [ŋ] in e.g. incompetent is that [ŋ] was not a phone when the rule was borrowed into English with French and Latin vocabulary.) The prefix con- takes conventional /m/, obligatorily, before /b/ as in combine (noun), combine (verb) regardless of their prosodic patterns. But it takes natural [ŋ] obligatorily only within an accentual measure: Congress [ˈkʰɑŋ.ɡrəs] versus congressional [kənˈɡrɛʃ.n̩.l̩], where [ŋ] is only optional (Chomsky and Hale, 1968; Wojcik, n.d.).

Rules precede processes in speech production, and their outputs, like phonological representations, are phonologically admissible according to the criteria of Section 2 (Donegan and Stampe, 1977). If rules are insensitive to syllabic and accentual structures, this is further evidence that these structures arise in the (natural) phonological processing of speech.

4. The Asegmental Domains of Processes

We have described stop assimilation as obligatory within an accentual measure, which, roughly speaking, extends from a primary or secondary stress to the end of the word or up to the next stress. Since prosodic domains are hierarchic, and
since assimilation is retarded by their boundaries, the process is obligatory also within syllables. It should be inapplicable or optional within domains larger than the measure. In fact it is optional, and this good luck gives us enlightening variants: *sandman ['sænd,maːn] ~ ['sæmb,maːn], demonstrates its obligatoriness in the domain syllable; and shouldn’t go ['ʃʊd.n̩t.ɡɔu̯] ~ ['ʃʊɡ.ŋ̩k.ɡɔu̯], but not *['ʃʊd.nk.ɡɔʊ], demonstrates its obligatoriness in the domain measure.

The hierarchy of prosodic domains is reversed where their boundaries condition rather than impede a process. “Demarcative” features (Trubetzkoy, 1939), like glottalization of initial vowels, apply in wider domains if they apply in narrower ones. In Hawaiian this process has just the domain sentence, e.g. [ʔ]aloha (Pukui et al., 1975); in English it has the domain phrase, e.g. [ʔ]apples or [ʔ]oranges, and thus also the wider domain sentence; in German, it has the domain measure, e.g. ver[ʔ]einigt ‘united’, and thus the wider domains phrase and sentence. We cannot, unfortunately, do justice here to the interactions of these domains with grammatical structure.

In English, sonorants are nasalized adjacent to a nasal, both regressively and progressively. The two are not quite symmetrical in our speech, because only regressive nasalization affects stressed sonorants: ['hɑ̃m.ə̃ˌfɔ̃ũ̯] homophone but [hɑˈmɑf.ə̃.n̩] homophony. The regressive domain is obligatorily the syllable and optionally the measure: ['ɑẽr.l̃ə̃(n)d] ~ ['ɑ̃ẽr.l̃ə̃(n)d] Ireland, ['wɪl.ȷ̃ə̃m] ~ [ˈwɪlˌjə̃m] William, ['bɑr.ə.ɕ̢ɪ̃n̩] ~ ['bɑ̃r.ə.ɕ̢ɪ̃n̩] borrowing, [dəˈlɪ̃r.i.ə̃m] ~ [dəˈl̃ɪ̃r.ı̃.ə̃m] delirium. The progressive domain is obligatorily the measure: [kə̃nˈtʰɪ̃ŋ.ɕ̢ɪ̃.w̃ə̃.n̩] continually, contrast [kə̃nˌtʰɪ̃ŋ.ɕ̢ɪ̃ˈweš.n] continuation. No partial domains occur: *['bɑr.ʒ̢ɪ̃n̩] (a part-measure), *['bɑ̃r.ʒ̢ɪ̃n̩] (a part-syllable).

We have not found a process limited to the domain segment. We believe that segments per se play no role whatever in natural phonological processing. There is already evidence that they are not even the minimal domain of processes – that parts of segments as well as wholes are subject to most processes (Stampe.1972; Donegan, 1973, 1976. 1978; cf. Andersen, 1972, and several others).

It is possible to understand the processes cited as applying simultaneously to the entire stretch of phonetic representation having the stated feature(s), within the bounds of the stated prosodic domain. With various grammatical addenda, this interpretation seems adequate for all nonprosodic processes.

5. Prosodic and Nonprosodic Features

The choice of nasalization as an example in Section 4 responds to a long tradition of “suprasegmental” and even “prosodic” treatment of this and other features which tend to take wide domains (Harris, 1951: ch. 10; Firth, 1948; Leben, 1973; Goldsmith. 1976a; Clements, 1977). In juxtaposing nasalization with ordinary consonant point-of-articulation, we hope to suggest that nasalization is
not formally different from other articulatory or phonatory features: all these features are governed by processes whose domains are prosodic constituents.

Nasality covers many more segments than point-of-articulation, to be sure. But recall that the process governing regressive nasalization has an obligatory domain of a syllable only, while that governing point-of-articulation has an obligatory domain of a measure. The difference in segmental coverage has less to do with the difference between nasality and point-of-articulation than with the different kinds of segments covered: sonorants can occur in endless succession (lalala …), but a sequence of four stops (shoul[dn’t g]/o) is rather a rarity.

Nasalization and most other articulatory and phonatory features have in common a tendency to be assimilated which distinguishes them from, rather than allies them with, the truly prosodic features. Except for tone, whose manifold functions we cannot do justice to here, the prosodic features – syllabicity, stress, and duration – are not subject to assimilation at all.

Prosodic features are perceived relatively, mainly in terms of the relative contrast between neighboring segments, syllables, etc. (Lehiste, 1970a). Non-prosodic features are perceived absolutely, presumably because the nonlinear relation between their genesis and its acoustic result partitions “phonetic space” into discrete categories. Intensity, duration, and pitch have a linear relationship, and thus a nondiscrete and relative character.

But the primary distinction of the prosodic features is in their relationship with the rhythmic organization of speech, and, for that matter, of verse and music. The more prominent values of intensity, duration, and pitch may serve as the nuclei of syllables and measures which are spoken at regular time intervals, usually in a rhythmic alternation with less prominent elements. None of the nonprosodic features ever have nuclear, temporal, or rhythmic value.

6. Putting the Words to the Music

To bring out these characteristics of prosodic features more vividly, let us consider some syllabifications of a word like freedom. We say this is a two-syllable word, [ˈfrɪə̃m], but in fact it can be spoken, given some lenitive processing, as one syllable, [ˈfr̩ɪə̯̃m]; or with fortitive processing, as three [fr̩ˈriɾ.ə̃m]. It can be put into Pig Latin as [ˈir.ə̃m,fr̩ə̯] or into Idig as [ˈfr̩r.ə.ɡiˌdɪɾ.ə.ɡə̃m]. It can be sung to the tune of “Yankee Doodle Came to Town” as [ˈf.r.i.i.iˌi.iˌdə̃m]. What does all this mean? Obviously, no particular syllabication is in the segmental representation of the word. Nor is any in (for example) the tune of Yankee Doodle. The tune gives us a certain number of syllables (notes) with a certain accent pattern, but not the segments of the word freedom or even, given that word, precisely the syllabication above. We could sing [ˈf.r.r.r.i.iˌi.iˌdə̃m], or even [ˈf.r.r.r.i.iˌi.iˌdə̃m]. What is syllabication, then? Clearly, it is the mapping of a segmental representation onto a prosodic pattern.
It is not the words or the music; to use what now should not seem merely to be a metaphor, it is the way the words are put to the music.

7. Syllable Structure

7.1. Sonority. Some syllabifications are more natural than others. Of the above renditions of the word *freedom* to the tune of Yankee Doodle, the original one was clearly the most natural. This is not an absolute matter; it is relative to what phonetic difficulties our language has made us overcome. To the Japanese speaker, *freedom* would not be pronounceable as [ˈfrir.ɐ̃m] but only as something like [ɸu.ɾi.da.mu]. Phonetic difficulties, however, do fall into various hierarchies, and we now turn to some which govern syllabication.

Let us regard syllables as having two “slopes”, one (the “rise”) including everything up through the syllabic, and the other (the “fall”) including the syllabic and everything which follows it. For example, the rise and fall of [klaŋnz] are [kla] and [ŋnz], respectively. The reason for including the syllabic in both slopes is simply that the principles governing both slopes include the syllabic. We remark here that there is little to recommend any particular internal analysis of syllables; virtually any linear breakdown of a syllable can be found in the evidence of alliteration, rhyme, secret languages, singing Yankee Doodle, etc.

The best known principle is that the rise and the fall optimally contain segment sequences which increase and decrease, respectively, in relative sonority (intrinsic perceptual prominence – cf. Donegan, 1978); the fall [ɕɛ̃r̅nz] *irons* may be monosyllabic, but if its segments are scrambled, the fall breaks up; [ɛ̃r̅nz] (yarns?), [ˈɑe̯n.r̅nz] (Einar’s?), etc. (Stampe 1973).

Some speakers break up *irons* into [ˈɑɛ̯.r̅nz]. This is because the preferred slope is steep (Schambach, 1978); note that the optimal rise is the “universal” syllable [pɑ], consisting of minimal and maximal sonorant. This is a form of the principle of the attraction of opposites. Since the syllable bond consists in the subordination of less-prominent to more-prominent segments, the greater the contrast, the greater the subordination. Put this way, the sonority hierarchy can account not only for preferred word beginnings and endings, but also, word-internally, for preferred syllabic divisions.

Let us look at this in some detail. The onsets of prosodic sequences are intrinsically stronger in articulation (hence more perceptually prominent) than the offsets. This means that, ceteris paribus, a consonant is more likely to go with a vocalism to its right than one to its left; hence VCV is syllabified V.CV. But VC₁C₂V will be syllabified VC₁.C₂V, with C₁ bonded to V rather than to C₂, because C₁ is less prominent than V. Finally, VrdnV and VndrV will be syllabified Vrd.nV and Vn.drV, respectively, because [r] is more prominent than [n].
A slope which is accepted externally, e.g. the Vnd of *hand,* may be rejected internally – ['hæ̃nd.aʊt] hand-out is due to the intermediate morphological domain compound as opposed to simple word (*hand,* handy). This interplay of grammatical domains with the sonority hierarchy is richly illustrated by Allen’s (1973) treatment of syllabication in Greek and Latin poetry.

The principle of maximal prominence contrast also helps govern phonological processing and change. It is apparent in such dissimilative consonantal developments as Lat. [januārium] januārium, Fr. [ʒɑ̃vʁ] janvier, Port. [ʒɐ̃nɐ̃jo] janojero, Ital. [ʒɛnnaio] gennaio ‘January’; Germanic *ward-, Romance *gward-, Fr. [ʒʊːd] garde ‘guard’; Lat. [wiːwɨɾe] vivere, Fr. [vivʁ] vivre, Span. [biəɾ] vivir, and so forth. It is implemented in vowels in dissimilations like MEng. [hwɪt] (Nottingham Charters hwuyt), Canadian and Mid-Atlantic [(h)wɔɹt] white; and in syllabicity reversals like early Fr. [ɾɔ̃], later [ɾwe] roi ‘king’; Old Swed. [sɛːq] sea beside Icel. [ʃjaː] sjá ‘to see’; MEng. [uʌ̯n] > [wan] one, etc. (see Donegan, 1976, 1978).

7.2. Accent. Extrinsic prominence (accent) can override intrinsic prominence (sonority), as shown by syllabifications like [əˈtʰɑ̃m.ɪk] atomic beside [ˈæɾ.ə̃m] atom, [ˈɛ̃nˈtʰɑæ̯ɾ] entire beside [ˈɛ̃ɾ.ə̃.ɾi] entity, and others cited in Section 4. (The syllabifications are clearly delineated by nasalization – see Section 4 – and, in particular, by the nasalization of the flap, which resists nasalization in domains larger than the syllable.) Words like entity, camping [ˈkʰæ̃p.ɪŋ], etc., illustrate the intersection of accent with sonority contrast; compare the distinct syllabication of voiced stops in ['hæ̃n.di] handy, ['æ̃m.br] amber.

On the basis of intrinsic prominence alone, we would expect diphthongs like /iu/ to be pronounced as rising [ju] rather than as falling [iʊ] (according to the more-prominent onset principle cited in 7.1), and where the second element is more sonorant than the first, as in /nɑ̄/. But accent on the first element preserves [iʊ] in [sɪʊ] sue, [diʊ] due in many English dialects. (Contrast the unaccented development of /iʊ/ to [ju] in [ˈɪs.ju] ~ [ˈɪʃ.u] issue, [ˈɑɾ.dʒu.ə̃s] ~ [ˈɑɾʃu.ə̃s] arduous.) Likewise, [nɑ̄] remains in accented general U.S. [sɔ̄q] saw, urban [sɔ̄q] saw, southern [nɔ̄l] oil (cf. its occasional reversal in unaccented goin’ [ɡñōn] ~ [ɡwɑ̄n]).

7.3. Quality. The attraction-of-opposites principle extends to quality as well as prominence. Sounds with similar timbres repel each other. Greek accepted word-initial [pt], [kt] but not *[tt]; [pn], [kn], but not *[tn]; [pl], [kl], but not *[tl]. Many languages reject homorganic glide-vowel rises; they either delete the glide, e.g. [tɯː] for [twuː] two, dialectal [ɪst] for [jɪst] yeast, or they re-syllabify, as in the Japanese borrowed words [iˈe.su] ‘Jesus’ (from [ˈje.su]), and [uˈo.tsu.kɑ] ‘vodka’ (as if from [ˈwɔːt.kɑ]). The same repellence accounts for timbre dissimilations, as in dialectal [ɡɐʊ̄] ~ [ɡū] ~ [ɡē] go, or the Romance developments

7.4. Exceptions. The above principles find various exceptions, due to the intersection of conflicting principles. There are systematic exceptions to the principle of maximal contrast due to assimilative phonological processes and changes which, for articulatory reasons, reverse the dissimilative, polarizing tendencies mentioned. And there are exceptions to the increasing-decreasing sonority curve in the classic definition of the syllable, which amounts to a claim that all sonority peaks are syllabic. While the claim is true in many languages and, in fact, states an obviously optimal pattern, it confronts many exceptions. For example, there are nonsyllabic sonority peaks (italicized) in Ger. [ʃtʊmpf] stumpf ‘blunt’, in Fr. [teɑtR] theatre ‘theater’, in Icel. [vatn] vatn ‘water’ and [thɑgl] tagl ‘tail’ – even arising by dissimilation in [kʰɑrl] ~ [kʰɑ(r)dl] Karl and [hɔrn] ~ [hɔ(r)dn] horn ‘horn’ (Einarsson, 1945) – and of course in nonsyllabic prenasalized obstruents in many languages, e.g. Fijian. One may cite the tendency of nonsyllabic peaks to reduce their sonority (e.g. by devoicing in French and Icelandic), or to be deleted (e.g. Fr. Canadian [teɑt], or to become syllabic (e.g. langur ‘long’ from Olcel. langr). But the exceptions remain.

But if, as we claimed in Section 6, the syllable consists in a mapping of segments onto a prosodic pattern, there is no reason to expect that any purely segmental pattern for the syllable, like the sonority curve, should be universally adequate. The fact that it “works” for many languages is a reflection of the universal preference for minimal sonority in nonsyllabics and maximal sonority in syllabics. While we marvel that the Icelander pronounces vatn and tagl as monosyllables, he might well marvel that we pronounce button and toggle as disyllables, since his language permits no sounds with such low sonority as [n] or [l] to be treated as syllabic. Indeed, English does not permit these either, as stressed syllabics. The differences are a matter of degree.

Yet it should be noted that the “exceptional” non-syllabic peaks are limited to phonemes with some intrinsic independence: most are continuants, and the most widespread one, [s], is readily pronounceable as an isolated syllable and possesses a high degree of intrinsic audibility, if not much carrying power. This is necessary because, as peaks, these sounds are cut off by less sonorant sounds from the articulatory and perceptual support of the sonorous syllabic.

8. Timing

The regular prosodic pattern of speech imposes isochrony on prosodic constituents: on syllables, as in isosyllabic languages like French or Spanish, or on measures, as in iso-accentual languages like English. Where there are distinctions of syllable duration, as in Japanese, there is isochrony among short syllables and isochrony among long ones, and rhythmic regularity forces the shorts and longs into a simple mutual ratio such a 1:2 (“isomoric” rhythm).

Isochrony exists, of course, in the intention and perception of speech rather than in its actuation. There is clever experimental evidence that, although inequities in the number and quality of segments in prosodically equivalent utterances introduce inequities in their timing, the intended (Kozhevnikov and Chistovich,
1965) and perceived (Lehiste, 1977d) timings are in fact equal. Grammatical structure introduces another sort of “irregularity”. Since perception is, in essence, causal analysis (Donegan and Stampe, to appear), the listener, discounting segmentally caused irregularities, can analyze others as reflecting the grammatical intent of the speaker.

The fundamental tempo of speech seems to vary little from language to language, and we suppose it is set at the rate of comfortable articulation of typical syllables. We find impressive differences in the rate at which we can repeat different articulations, and we suspect that this is the reason behind a number of constraints on syllable structure. The most general constraint we find is that within a slope, most feature values switch only once; reversals of voicing (*[zka]*), nasality (*[mjũ]*) timbre (*[qew]*) etc., are rare or nonexistent. Presumably the tendency of certain features to extend their domain is, at least in part, due to temporal constraints. If nasality is apt to spread over adjacent sonorants, this is surely not unrelated to the markedly slower tempo at which nasality values can be switched in sonorants [ɑɑ̃ɑɑ̃ …] than in nonsonorants [dndn …].

We suspect, further, that dissimilative constraints against certain consonant rearticulations within a syllable, e.g. aspiration as in Grassmann’s Law; glottalization, exemplified by root structure constraints in Caucasian (Catford, 1977); and voicing, e.g. Dahl’s Law in Bantu (Kimenyi, 1977); etc. are due to similar timing constraints.

9. Length

We close this phonetic-prosodic account of the nature of syllables with a few remarks on length. Quantitative verse is based on the length of syllables, never just the length of their constituent segments, and the same is true of speech prosody. Although a syllable with a long syllabic is always long, there are long syllables without long segments, e.g. *ar* and *rum* in the dactyls | — ❀ ❀ | of the Aeneid: |Ar.ma vi|rum.que ca|nō. It has been customary in phonology to treat length as a property of segments. We believe there is much evidence against this, but cite only one example here: compensatory length adjustment.

The common analysis of vowel lengthening in examples like OEng. mǣdɛn > mǣdɛn ‘maiden’ as a segmental reflex of assimilation, [æɡ] > [ææ] = [æː], is not satisfactory in some cases. One type is Old English *holthes* > *hōles* ‘hole’s’, where the lost segment and the compensated segment are not adjacent. We believe that the correct analysis assigns *holthes* a syllabication *holh.es* (this can be established by other facts, mainly concerning vowel breaking before *l*, in Old English; cf. Campbell, 1959), and the first syllable a long duration (i.e. more than one beat of the prosodic pattern). When *h* is “deleted”, the rest of the
syllable, and particularly the vowel – the most extendable segment – is simultaneously lengthened to conform to its prosodic matrix.

Another type of example with similar implications is the change of a falling diphthong to a rising one with simultaneous lengthening of the second segment, as in MEng. *spiwen* > Mod. [spjuː] *spew*. The common appearance of length in such syllabicity reversals is not generally thought of as compensatory lengthening, but in fact the length appears only when the original diphthong was long. When the same /iu/ diphthong was reversed in unstressed, hence short, syllables in English, as in [ˈɪs.juː] *issue*, the syllabic of the rising diphthong was *not* lengthened. When [iw] becomes [ju], the first segment loses its prosodic value because the onset of a syllable does not figure in its duration. (No vowel is ever lengthened to compensate for the deletion of a *preceding* consonant.) The lengthening of the second segment of the reversed diphthong occurs, we believe, to maintain the long prosodic value onto which the original diphthong was mapped in the prosodic matrix.

This approach to length may provide a way of understanding why languages sometimes undergo across-the-board changes in syllable quantity and structure which simultaneously involve many apparently unrelated processes. The vowel shortenings, deletions of final consonants, monophthongizations and reversals of diphthongs, metatheses, and change of vowel-nasal sequences into nasalized vowels which occurred in the histories of Romance, Slavic, and other languages (Martinet, 1955; Shevelov and Chew, 1959) might find a unified explanation beginning with a simple change in prosodic mapping. In these instances, the shift would have involved a change from a mapping in which syllables with long vowels or with consonantal closures, formerly mapped onto a double beat, were now mapped, like other syllables, onto single beats in the rhythm of speech. The segmental phonological processes would then eliminate long vowels, postvocalic consonants, and falling diphthongs – all of which would be difficult to pronounce in the time allotted a short syllable. If this approach is correct, it suggests that the syllable, which has not enjoyed a very solid place in linguistic theory, may in fact be the basic element in the relationship of language and speech.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We wish to thank Alan Bell and Greg Lee for insightful discussions of the issues covered here. Part of the research reported here was supported by grants from the Ohio State University Graduate School and College of Humanities.
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