Metathesis in phonological theory: The case of Leti.

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Abstract

This paper examines two types of metathesis in the Austronesian language Leti. The first is motivated by a requirement that all phrases end in a vowel, and the second, by syllable well-formedness conditions: syllables have onsets and tautosyllabic consonant clusters are avoided.

The analyses in this paper are cast within the framework of Correspondence Theory (CT), and bear directly upon the constraint LINEARITY, which penalizes the reversal of precedence relations among segments in a string. Through the interaction of LINEARITY with syllable structure and phrasal alignment constraints, a unified account of the Leti facts is provided. Further, it is argued that violations of LINEARITY are evaluated in a gradient manner. Constraints on metathesis are also shown to be needed to account for the observation that it is consistently the final vowel and consonant of a given morpheme that metathesize, even though metathesis involving other segments would result in equally well-formed Leti words.

This study is of significance not only with respect to the theoretical implications it has for Correspondence Theory and, in particular, the constraint LINEARITY, but in addition, for further advancing our understanding of metathesis which is not only poorly understood, but perhaps misperceived as a marginal or even nonexisting process. This view is contradicted by Leti metathesis which is not only regular and productive, but may be driven by purely phonological considerations.

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