

Exceptionality: probing the phonological exceptions in Meiteilon compounds

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Exceptions are elements which do not fall into the generalizations made of a language. Exceptionality in a language can take place in any module of grammar like phonological, morphological or, syntactic domain. Theoretically, exceptions are argued to be a gradable and context dependent phenomenon (Simon and Wiese, 2011). Additionally, Pater (2007) argues that a phenomenon established to be an exception, with respect to the general rules which governs the whole system in a language, could be non-exceptional within a subset of construction in a language. In purview of this idea, this present paper investigates the phonological exceptions found in nominal compounds of Meiteilon, a Tibeto-Burman language. Here, grounded in the theoretical framework of Distributed Morphology (DM) (Embick and Noyer, 2007; Embick, 2015; Borer, 2016), the paper argues that the seeming phonological exception is due to the difference in morphosyntactic configuration from which the compounds are constructed. Specifically, I argue that the structural difference results to difference in mapping of morphosyntactic units to prosodic units, thus leading to formation of different phonological domains. In other words, I argue that a difference exists in the prosodic word mapping of compounds where phonological processes apply and the ones where the processes do not apply. As phonological materials, in DM, enter later in a derivation, such difference in phonological domains then results to application of different phonological processes at the time of lexicalisation. On a broader perspective, this paper aims to present a perspective on the theoretical argument of information for construction of phonological constituent being read from syntax (Dobashi, 2003; Ishihara, 2003; Nespor and Vogel, 2007; Selkirk, 2011).

Meiteilon has three common phonological processes, namely; Voicing Assimilation (VA), Nasal Place Assimilation (NPA) and deaspiration or Loss of Aspiration (LoA), which apply at morpheme boundaries in both nominal and verbal inflectional constructions. While VA systematically alters the onset of inflectional suffixes in both nominal and verbal domains but does not alter the roots, the processes of NPA and LoA apply in restricted construction of both the domains. Ashem (2017) argues that such restriction in application of NPA and LoA within the verbal domain is caused by the difference in morphosyntactic configurations. Based on the same logic, the current paper also argues that difference in morphosyntactic configuration is the reason why there is difference in phonological realization of nominal compounds.

As for the non-alteration of roots, Ashem (2016) argues that it is due to Root Faith (McCarthy, 2005) being high in Meiteilon. Further, Ashem (upcoming) argues that the domain for application of VA is argued to be a Prosodic Word in the language, which is defined in line of Edge alignment algorithm (Selkirk, 1995). To put it precisely, the left edge of Root is aligned with the left edge of a Prosodic Word in Meiteilon. So the domain of a prosodic word will extend till another root appears. Thus, such an account helps to explain why all the affixes are affected by VA. Moreover, it will follow from this analysis why the process of VA does not apply in nominal compounds of the language. In other words, since compounds consist of two roots, both the roots being marked for root faith will resist any phonological alteration. And, this is exactly what we see in compounds as given in (1).

However, the puzzle arises as Meiteilon also has nominal compounds where the process of NPA is seen to take place though without VA as shown in (2).

As for such constructions, I argue that since such compounds are formed through merging of two roots, the interaction is between two equal units. Further, as the roots are embedded within a bigger prosodic unit namely Major Prosodic word (Selkirk, 2011), the phonological segments are open for interaction. Thus, the positional information of the phonological units, as in the onset, being positionally stronger one than the coda, plays an important role. Here, adopting the notion of Positional Faithfulness (Lombardi 1999), I argue that higher phonological faithfulness associated with onset of the second root triggers the alteration of preceding root's coda. Though, this analysis helps account the application of NPA, a further puzzle arises with respect to the compounds where the onset of the second root alters. Further such compounds do not have any difference in phonological environment from the compounds where no phonological processes apply as illustrated in (3).

Such compounds indicate that either the argument for roots being associated with higher phonological faithfulness is wrong or there is a difference in the prosodic domain marking of the compounds where the onset of second root do not alter. As the evidence for higher root faith is also observed in non-compound (attributive adjective) construction as well, I pursue the second option. One way to proceed with presenting an argument following the latter option is to argue that second element of the compound does not get mapped to a prosodic unit. Such an argument in turn implies that the entire structure is interpreted as just one unit. The argument for a different interpretation of compounds with phonological processes are validated as the elements present in the compounds do not have their reading but have a completely different reading. In contra, the meaning of each unit in compounds where no phonological processes apply stay intact. Thus, I argue that the compounds where all processes apply are derived from phrasal structure where the entire phrase is 'reified' as a single root (Johnson, 2002; Sato, 2007; Harley, 2008; Embick, 2015). Hence, at the point of lexicalization, such structural configuration leads to treating the entire phrasal unit as a single unit, all the structures will be mapped as a single phonological unit. The above analysis, therefore, explains why some nominal compound constructions in Meiteilon seemingly looks like construction with phonological exceptions.

EXAMPLES:

1	a	No Voicing Assimilation	wa + ton → wa-ton/*wa-don ‘bamboo tip’ bamboo edge
	b	No Nasal Place Assimilation	k ^h on + t ^h aŋ → k ^h on-t ^h aŋ ‘echo’ voice carry
	c	No Deaspiration	t ^h a + k ^h ay → t ^h a-k ^h ay/*t ^h a-gay ‘fort night’ month half

2	a. kon + pak → kom-pak/*kom-bak ‘flat bowl’ utensil flat	b. kom + kut → koŋ-kut/*koŋ-gut ‘pit’ pit dent
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3.		Application of Phonological Processes	No Phonological Processes
	VA	sən+kon → səŋ-gon/*səŋ-kon ‘cow shed’ cow shed	ləy + kəŋ → ləy-kəŋ/*ləy-gəŋ ‘dry plains’ earth dry
	NPA	kon + pak → kom-pak ‘flat bowl’ utensil flat	NPA ⁱ
	LoA	t ^h əw + t ^h ok → t ^h əw-dok/*t ^h əw-dok ‘event’ duty occur	t ^h aw + t ^h i → t ^h aw-t ^h i/*t ^h aw-di ‘oil waste’ oil waste

ⁱ There is a word where the coda nasal does not assimilate to place feature of the following obstruent. The word is *ləmta* ‘name of a month’ in lunar calendar. I have not attempted to analyse this word because I am not sure whether the word is a compound or a single word.

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