

Abstract

The unstressed vocalism in East Slavic has attracted the attention of phonologists – both traditional dialectologists and generative linguists – as involving an example of dissimilation. In this paper I argue that an approach in terms of dissimilation alone is simplistic and that the vowel patterns in question arise as a result of complex interaction of three factors, viz. dissimilation, assimilation and vowel reduction.¹

Although the paper deals with Russian and Belorussian data, its implications go beyond the field of Slavic linguistics. Couched in Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 1993, henceforth OT), the analysis demonstrates the value of a constraint-based approach in accounting for the interaction of phenomena like dissimilation, assimilation and reduction, and in explicating the relationship between closely related linguistic systems. Of particular interest for non-Slavists is the proposed treatment of assimilation. In OT, the focus has been on voicing assimilation in consonant clusters (Lombardi 1999). In the present study I extend Lombardi's approach to the interaction of syllable peaks and onsets with regard to the features [high], [low] and [cor].

¹ After this paper was completed, I became aware of Crosswhite (2001). She considers featural dissimilation irrelevant for all dissimilative *akan'e/jakan'e* patterns, and thus adopts a more radical position than the one proposed in the present paper.