

GENtrifying OT: Evicting impossible candidates

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Optimality Theory seems to be at a crossroads. While some recurrent problems (most notably opacity) still have not received a satisfactory treatment, the original model has proliferated, with many different types of addenda having been proposed (for example O-O Correspondence, Stratal OT, Comparative Markedness, Sympathy Theory, Dispersion Theory, and so forth). Some of the original appeal of OT thus might have been lost.

In my talk, I want to propose a different way of looking at this problem, by taking a closer look at what GEN, the generator function in OT, does and whether filters on GEN are a possibility within the framework and a possible solution to some of the problems that are dogging OT (proliferation of constraints and empirical inadequacy). It is common in OT to assume that there are no filters on GEN at all, in accordance with Freedom of Analysis. I will argue, however, that this idea is based on a fundamental misconception of the nature of GEN. Most practitioners of OT would probably agree that candidates generated have to be well-formed linguistic objects in some sense; a Tromsø street map should probably be excluded from the candidate set.

The deeper insight behind this is that every phonological theory has to have two subtheories, a theory of representations (what is a well-formed linguistic object?) and a theory of operations (what are the possible changes from input to output?). In that sense, the core of OT, constraint interaction, is merely a theory of constraints on output representations. The exact shape of these representations remains unclear.

Implicit to much work in OT seems the assumption that a good theory of constraint interactions obviates the need for elaborate representations. What the set of representational primitives is remains unclear as well, however. Much work tacitly seems to assume SPE-type representations, at least on the segmental level (but not on the suprasegmental level), without ever arguing for why such representations may be empirically more justified than elaborate autosegmental representations (for example versions of feature geometry).

This paper will therefore reconsider issues of representations (and spend some time on operations as well), pursuing the question of what including autosegmental theory in particular into OT might gain, by comparing autosegmental models of segment organization with “simpler” ones, and the consequences for constraint interaction. It will be argued that OT needs a more refined theory of representations (and a more principled discussion of possible operations), thus lifting a burden from the constraint set and the evaluator function. This means that the generation of the candidate set itself will be subject to additional conditions, but none which violate Freedom of Analysis.