

A stress test for segmenthood

On the segmental status of preaspiration in Faroese and Icelandic

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This paper argues that preaspiration in Icelandic constitutes a segment of its own while preaspiration in Faroese does not. Based on data from a reading task, it is shown that preaspiration in Icelandic is lengthened when accented relative to the following consonant and is thus comparable to other segments while preaspiration in Faroese is not.

Preaspiration in Icelandic has long been assumed to be segmental in nature (e.g. Hansson 2003). This analysis is based mainly on two pieces of evidence. Firstly, the general duration of preaspiration is much longer than that of postaspiration and it is in fact comparable to that of other segments in the same position (Pétursson 1972). Secondly, preaspiration seems to take part in the “stress matrix” of the rhyme and therefore to be moraic (Árnason 2011). This entails that preaspiration receives a “half length” and is consequently expected to be lengthened when accented, similarly to other mora-bearing coda consonants.

In Faroese, the picture is less clear-cut. On the one hand, phonetic research has shown that preaspiration in Faroese is generally shorter than in Icelandic and also somewhat shorter than other coda-consonants (Helgason 2002, 2003). The role of preaspiration within the syllable, on the other hand, is still not fully clear, especially as in some dialects of Faroese preaspiration is also found after long vowels. However, preliminary data reported in Árnason (2011) indicate that preaspiration is not lengthened relative to the following consonant if the syllable is accented. If this pattern is confirmed it would strongly point to a non-segmental status of preaspiration in Faroese.

To determine the segmental status of preaspiration within the syllable in Faroese and compare it to Icelandic preaspiration a reading task was designed that contrasts accented and unaccented realisations of words containing preaspiration. Three different structural environments were tested: VHC(:), VHCC and V:HC (the last environment only for Faroese). The results show that preaspiration in Icelandic and Faroese indeed behave differently with regard to lengthening: While preaspiration in Icelandic is lengthened in the accented tokens, lengthening in the accented tokens in Faroese occurs mainly on consonant following preaspiration. These results thus support the analysis of preaspiration in Faroese as sub-segmental.