

VOWEL PATTERNS IN ROOTS IN TIV EXPLAINED WITHOUT UNDERSPECIFICATION

Markus Hiller

hiller@ids-mannheim.de

What sequences of vowels are possible in underived uninflected stems (also called *roots*) in Tiv (Niger-Congo; Nigeria) adds up to a fairly complex pattern (see e.g. Sibomana 1980). Pulleyblank (1988) argues that that pattern requires underspecified representations to explicate.

Assimilation-as-licensing theory (AaLT; the basic idea in Beckman 1997 made explicit) proposes to analyze assimilation — in this case: vowel harmony — in Optimality Theory (OT) without a dedicated assimilation constraint but rather as a side effect of autosegmental representation. The basic typology predicted by AaLT is exemplified in a nutshell in the Tiv vowel pattern by the different features involved in it. Thereby, that pattern is accounted for while assuming fully specified representations.

Here as elsewhere, what underspecification theory represents by presence vs. absence of specification, OT represents by constraint ranking of faithfulness above markedness vs. vice versa. However, the two theories do not correspond exactly: Where for underspecification, contrastiveness is an all-or-nothing decision, OT rankings are relative, being able to account for conditional contrastiveness. Overall, the two analyses cut in similar but slightly different places — and AaLT turns out to be a better fit with the same given Tiv data.

References

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