Natural classes and reality – the case of Hungarian <j>, <v>, and <h>

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The behaviour of the sounds orthographically represented as <v> and <h> in Hungarian has always been an embarrassment for taxonomical descriptions of the language. <v> is an approximant in onsets but an obstruent in codas, both phonetically and phonologically (Kiss and Bárkányi, 2006), and while it undergoes voicing assimilation, it does not trigger it. <h> triggers voicing assimilation, but does not undergo it, and has two distinct phonetic realisations, an approximant and a fricative, which are only partly predictable, and subject to variation. Former descriptions (Vago 1980; Siptár and Törkenczy 2007) made various concessions to accommodate these segments into a system of natural classes. The present analysis includes the segment <j>, and argues that the differences and similarities between these three segments render such strict categorisation extremely difficult, and strongly suggests a different stance on the Hungarian consonant system, based on family resemblances (Wittgenstein, 1953/1977).

Some of the main issues – beside the voicing asymmetry – are listed in the table below. To single out two of the environments, both <j>, <v>, and <h> are realised as approximants (the latter glottally without any buccal friction) between a sonorant segment and a consonant. All of them are realised as fricatives word-finally, after an obstruent (as in 'dob[j]' with <j>). There are, however, intermediate cases where one or two pattern with approximants (sonorants), and the others with fricatives (obstruents). This is chiefly because some of these environments strongly favour approximation, whilst others favour frication, with possible additional devoicing (as in 'kö[ɲɣ̊]' with <v>).

environment	<j>		<v>		<h>		Class
[+son]__V	[j]	ka[j]a, töm[j]én	[ʋ]	ko[ʋ]a, po[ɲʋ]a	[ɦ]	pu[ɦ]a, lom[ɦ]a	appr.
$\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \# \\ [-son] \end{array} \right\}$__V	[j]	[j]uk, kop[j]a, szab[j]a	[ʋ]	[ʋ]ak, ud[ʋ]ar, öz[ʋ]egy	[h]	[h]at, nát[h]a, jog[h]urt	appr.
V__$\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \# \\ [+con] \end{array} \right\}$	[j]	ba[j], da[j]ka, ra[j]z	[v]/[f]	sa[v], bo[v]den, é[fs]ak	[x]	do[x], ja[x]t, i[x]let	appr./fric.
$\left[\begin{array}{c} +con \\ +voi \end{array} \right]$__$\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \# \\ [+con] \end{array} \right\}$	[j]/[j]	fér[j], szom[j], dob[j]	[v]~[ɣ]~[f]	ked[ɣ], kö[ɲɣ̊], el[ɣ]	[x]	bo[jx], e[ɲx]	appr./fric.
[-voice]__$\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \# \\ [+con] \end{array} \right\}$	[ç]	rak[ç], kap[ç]	n.a.		n.a.		fric.

This intricate patterning, coupled with the voicing assimilation behaviour and couched in the phonetics, indicates that any fitting classification of these three segments has to cut through natural classes, most notably the obstruent/sonorant distinction, to avoid the charge of arbitrariness. Our aim is to give an account based on family resemblances, using on phonological and phonetic descriptions, as well as corpus data on the frequencies of the relevant environments.

References

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