Syllable-division, Duremes and Juncture in English

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The descriptive technique leading to the formulation of so-called 'junctural' contrasts has been applied since its conception to a variety of languages, and might seem by this time an indispensable item in any phonological tool-kit. Yet in the description of English, where junctural terminology has been perhaps most insistently utilized, what might be called the 'basic' phenomenon of 'plus juncture' remains highly controversial. Its incidence has been stigmatized as 'optional'[1], 'dispensable'[1], 'vestigial'[2], 'sporadic'[2] and – by implication – inefficient[3], impossible[4] and useless[4]. Its use as a segmentator has been assailed as productive of most undesirable consequences. In some quarters, therefore, the whole technique is in danger of falling into disrepute. I hope that the necessarily brief observations that follow will help to clarify, rather than further confuse, the position.

The feature which, according to several American accounts, unites plus juncture with the other, 'terminal', junctures is one of timing, described in a recent survey as 'a stretching of preceding segmental phonemes'[5]. In some places, we are told, where no such stretching is audible, a 'plus' may nevertheless be instrumentally demonstrated; its presence is then in practice to be inferred from the occurrence of particular marginal allophones at the stated point. Now if juncture is to be given phonemic status, it is easy to understand the motivation behind the insistence on a constant feature of some kind: but a strong case can be made for regarding the allophonic variation in question on the one hand, and prolongation

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[1] See Lit. 6, pp. 59–60.

[2] See Lit. 1, p. 28.

[3] See Lit. 4, pp. 171–176.

[4] See Lit. 2, p. 4 for juncture as viewed by "production-phonemics".

[5] See Lit. 8, p. 17 and the reference thereat.

phenomena on the other, as two primarily different things. Such a view requires, of course, that the allophonic variation be conditioned by something else; and the only possible candidate in this context is our old friend, syllable-division.

Here it must suffice to suggest that syllable-division is, as it were, the prerequisite for juncture, and establishes a point at which junctural contrasts may operate. These contrasts may then be viewed as essentially durational and be taken to comprise a system of 'duremes' whose several exponents would be different degrees of prolongation operative over a stated domain. The commutational possibilities would vary from place to place in structure, and at some points syllable-division alone, without additional prolongation, would be in question. I say *additional* because the allophonic variation correlated with the location of a syllable boundary may itself involve duration.

Thus duremes would occur only at points of syllable-division manifesting durational features not accounted for either by syllable-division itself or by any other factor such as stress. The precise terminology is less important than the distinction involved: if syllable-division is taken as the limiting case of juncture, it may be known as 'syllable juncture' and the duremes (or the *other* duremes if syllable-division is a kind of zero dureme) may have other names such as 'plus juncture', 'double-plus juncture', etc., where the 'plus' would have greater appropriateness than hitherto and be made to earn its name.

If in this way syllable-boundary and dureme were kept clearly distinct, difficulty would no longer arise over those cases where the boundary is relatively obvious but no prolongation seems either auditorily or instrumentally detectable. For example, it need occasion neither surprise nor dismay that 'an' in 'an aim' appears to have a shorter, rather than a longer, 'n' than 'name' in 'a name'[6]. If, of course, we re-define plus juncture, as is perhaps the trend, so that its domain extends both ways, we may escape from this particular difficulty, but we may still need to show that either phrase is longer overall than a single word of similar segmental and syllabic structure.

So much for the relationship between juncture and syllable-division[7]. In American doctrine, however, there has been a close

connexion between juncture and intonation in that some features of the pitch patterns of English have been attributed to terminal junctures, themselves sometimes defined primarily in terms of contrastive degrees of prolongation greater than that credited to plus juncture. Now the British configurational tradition in intonational analysis is quite different from the system of pitch levels espoused by most American linguists, and this is not the place to argue their relative merits. It would seem, however, infinitely more satisfactory to let the intonation patterns stand on their own feet than to posit that they arise in part from supposedly contrastive timings.

In conclusion, a few words on the communicative relevance of junctural phenomena in English, which bears closely on the general viability of junctural formulations. On this score controversy centres around syllable and/or plus juncture, and the terminals may be disregarded. It seems imperative, in this connexion as in many others, to insist on the relativity of the phonetic distinctiveness of the exponents of phonological contrasts. Even two phonologically parallel minimal pairs may differ greatly in discriminability: the fact that in English the location of a syllable boundary with respect to, say, a nasal is less readily perceptible than is the case with a voiceless plosive[8] does not mean that we must abandon all thoughts of establishing contrasts at such points, still less that we must renounce such contrasts altogether. We should do well inter alia to re-examine all points where analogy predicts a syllable boundary which in practice is not easily perceptible. In any case, those who would discredit juncture offer us no acceptable alternative: whatever may be necessary at the moment, we cannot in the long run honourably remain satisfied with orthography-based delimitations unless these can be genuinely validated for speech. In the absence of such validation we must continue to search for some kind of phonological truth, though where alternative interpretations are available we shall naturally prefer that which is most congruent with our grammatical analysis. The search will be materially shortened if all participants avoid over-generalization and make clearer than has hitherto generally been the case what precisely in their view is the relationship of juncture to the other variables of phonology and for precisely what phonetic features it may be held accountable.

[6] See Lit. 3.
[7] See further, however, my earlier remarks in Lit. 5, pp. 104–135, especially 126 ff.

[8] See Lit. 4, p. 175.

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