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ABSTRACT

Analysing linguistic facts observed in RP and English dialects, the author presents evidence suggesting that, contrary to the established views, English typologically occupies a place intermediate between purely non-syllabic and syllabic languages.

The predominant concept of the role of the syllable in English is that it is a purely articulatory phenomenon, viz., an articulatory unit. But there are facts related to the phonological structure of English words, and especially facts of dialect variation, that are hard to accommodate with this established view.

Let me first point out the fact that /i/ in feat is in most dialects, including RP, much shorter than /i/ (apparently the same phoneme) in lead. That is only one example of the by now well-known feature of the dependence of the English vowels, not on their own place in the short--long dichotomy, but rather on the type of the syllable-final consonant - an example of the re-evaluation of the role performed by the syllable, currently developing within the structure of English.

There is also another angle to the problem. Had the English phoneme been as independent a unit as is suggested by the concept of the minimal unit of surface structure, words like feeling and Ealing would have had one and the same syllabic structure - and that throughout the entire English-speaking world. However, facts of dialect variation show that there is an important difference in syllabic structure between words like feeling, whose morphemic structure is feel+ing, and words like Ealing, with no morphemic boundary. The difference in question consists in that some dialects develop an [ə]-glide before the /l/ in the feeling words, whereas no such thing hap-

pens in the Ealing words /l/. It is plainly the consequence of the /l/ in feeling being the dark [ɫ], while in Ealing, the clear [l]. That means that in feeling /l/ belongs to the first syllable, while in Ealing, to the second. This is one of the facts that show that in English, wherever a morpheme boundary occurs after a consonant, it tends to be also the place of a syllable boundary, the final consonant of the morpheme tending to remain syllable-final even when a vowel-initial morpheme is affixed to it. Although this fact has often been mentioned in the literature, it seems that its implications for the structural role of the syllable in English have so far escaped the notice of theorists.

Nowadays our theory is benefited by an important contribution by Prof. Vadim B. Kasevich whose profound re-examination of the syllable, its structure and functional role in various languages enabled him to come up with an entirely new, indeed, a revolutionary system of language typology. According to this theory the world's languages form a continuum with two extreme types - the ideal phonemic type, the ideal syllabic type and a number of intermediate types and sub-types /2/. Should English belong to the first of these extreme, or polar, types, such facts as those described above simply could not happen, for in purely phonemic languages syllabic structure of the words is entirely independent of their morphemic structure, thus freeing the phonemes of any dependence on their place in the syllable.

A careful examination of the facts of English phonology shows that many of these have most striking analogies in syllabic and near-syllabic languages. The results of an attempt at such an examination will be reported in my book due to appear in print in Leningrad University Press in the near future³. What follows is a concise version of the analysis.

An important division between purely syllabic and non-syllabic languages is formed by the existence/non-existence of non-syllabic morphemes. In syllabic lan-

guages morphemes that do not form a syllable are impossible. In English, it would seem, we do find such non-syllabic morphemes, for such are the morpheme -s (-s¹: 3rd p. singular, present tense of verbs; -s²: plural of nouns; -s³: the possessive); the morpheme -t/-d (past tense); the morpheme -th (ordinal numbers) and, finally, the morpheme -th/-t (non-productive suffix of abstract nouns, as in length).

But all of these (except the non-productive -th/-t) have syllabic allomorphs: looks - kisses; books - faces; man's - Jones's; looked - wanted. The importance of the fact of non-syllabic morphemes having syllabic allomorphs in determining the place of the language in the above-mentioned continuum has been amply proved in the literature /4/. It should also be noted that the non-syllabic morphemes are only a very small part of the morphemic repertoire of English. Moreover, whereas this very modest number of non-syllabic morphemes does actually exist, there are no non-syllabic words in English. Compare this to such a typically phonemic language as Russian, where many prepositions are non-syllabic.

An important feature of syllabic languages is the impossibility of what Prof. V.B.Kasevich terms "re-syllabification", i.e. the process of shifting a syllable boundary from, say, a position after a consonant to a position before the consonant on adding a vowel-initial morpheme to the previous structure. Cf. the Russian examples of dom # -- do

ma. Now, we have already mentioned the fact that Modern English shows a considerable resistance to this process, retaining the syllable boundary wherever possible in the place of the morpheme boundary. This feature of English has also been uncovered by experimental investigations /5,6/.

Another typological characteristic of syllabic languages (one that is closely linked with the above-mentioned) is the predominance of the (C)VC syllable type in such languages, almost to the exclusion of the CV syllable type. Now, English shows a clear trend towards the (C)VC type of syllable forming the most frequently occurring type. Experimental results reported in /6/ are most persuasive. The preference of the English to place the syllable boundary, not before a consonant, but after it has been well proved by B.Malmberg in experimenting with nonsense sequences, such as ipi, opo, apa /7/.

In syllabic languages the vowel is closely linked to the following consonant and is fairly independent of the previous, a fact which is related to the above-mentioned composition of the syllable. In English we observe many instances of the vowel being closely con-

nected with the following - and not the preceding - consonant. If a vowel's variation is subject to any influence of a consonant - it is always the following consonant, and not the preceding, which exercises this influence. Examples are numerous. The realization of historical /ð/ as /s:/, and not as /æ/, occurs in RP and in the South in general before a certain group of consonants, as /s, θ, f/ and sometimes /n + C/. In the case of historical /ɔ/ a long vowel also develops before the same consonants, but more frequently in the North. In many southern dialects, including RP, /æ/ is lengthened before /d/ and some other voiced consonants /8/. Cf. also the well-known development of historical short vowels before /r/ in r-less dialects. The influence of etymological /r/ is now being mirrored in the way vowels are influenced by the following /l/ (cf. [fiə lin] mentioned above). Many illuminating examples of the influence of the syllable-final /l/ on the preceding vowel were cited by Dr.P. Trudgill. Thus, in his investigation of the development of East Anglian correspondences to the RP /əʊ/, P.Trudgill found out that the process of approximation of the /u:/ in no and /ʌ u/ in know into a form of [əʊ] is hindered by the following /l/, where no movement towards a more RP-like sound is noted /9/.

A very important feature of syllabic languages is the difference in ways of variation (diachronic and synchronic) of syllable-final and syllable-initial allophones of consonants. In this, English shows many instances of similarity with syllabic languages. In RP, for example, only syllable-initial /p,t,k/ have aspiration, whereas only syllable-final /t/ is glottalized or (again only in syllable-final position) a glottal stop develops before a group of voiceless stops. It was only syllable-final or syllabic /r/ that was vocalized in the so-called non-rhotic, or r-less dialects. And it is precisely the same position where /l/ is now being vocalized in London speech and in a number of counties nearest to London, especially to the south-east of London. The realization of /ð/ as either [d] or [v] (London) depends on whether it is syllable-initial ([d]) or syllable-final ([v]). Examples where the variation of a consonant is independent of its position in the syllable are very few. Among them are affrication of /t/ or the realization of /θ/ as [f] in London speech.

To sum up. There are many features of the English syllable demonstrating that in Modern English it is something more than merely an articulatory unit. These features are:

- the scarcity of non-syllabic morphemes and the fact that all of them possess syllabic allomorphs;

- The trend for a morpheme boundary to coincide with the syllable boundary;
- the resistance of English to re-syllabification;
- the close contact of vowels with the following consonants;
- the dependence of vowel variation only on the following consonant;
- the difference in variation patterns of syllable-initial and syllable-final allophones of consonants.

None of these facts are entirely new to theorists. But their typological importance, it seems, has been overlooked. These facts have been discussed in the literature in connection with different theoretical problems. Considered together, these facts show that the syllable in English is developing into a peculiar unit of surface structure, somewhere in between the phoneme and the morpheme, and that it is moving in the direction of coalescence with the morpheme. The purely asemantic syllable of the non-syllabic, phonemic languages is being gradually ousted by the syllable which is typically a morpheme.

To be sure, English greatly differs from such purely syllabic languages as Vietnamese or Chinese, but it shows in many ways a trend to develop into a type intermediate between non-syllabic (phonemic) and syllabic languages.

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