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Review: Wiese, Phonology of German

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Wiese, Richard (2000) *The Phonology of German*. Oxford University Press, paperback ISBN 0-19-829950-8, x+358 pp., \$35.00.

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This book was announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/12/12-391.html#3>

This book presents a comprehensive overview of the phonology of German, with many in depth analyses of phonological and morphological phenomena. The book's primary focus is theoretical rather than descriptive, and so the material is organized according to theoretical rather empirical issues. As a result, the description and analysis of some phenomena range over several chapters. For example, parts of the analysis of German schwa are presented in Chapters 4 (Prosodic Morphology), 5 (Aspects of Lexical Phonology and Morphology), and 7 (Phonological Rules and Alternations), besides additional mentions in Chapters 1 (Introduction) and 6 (Underspecification). The book is especially concerned with prosody, morphology, and the interaction between the two. Half of the book's chapters are organized according to these topics, and the author spends much time on morphological (and phonological) processes that are crucially dependent on prosodic structure. For example, the alternation between the derivational nominalizing suffixes '-heit/-keit' is argued to depend on foot structure, so that -keit is attached to "adjectives ending in a branching, polysyllabic foot" (p. 98) and -heit is a default morpheme.

'The Phonology of German' will be most valuable to phonologists, morphologists, and researchers in German linguistics. The many analyses illustrating crucial interactions between morphology and prosody have a clear relevance for theories of morphology and the morpho-syntactic interface, so this book might also be of interest to researchers in those areas. Moreover, I think that 'The Phonology of German' would make an excellent supplemental text for an introductory or intermediate phonology course. The book contains many clear examples of the relation between empirical phenomena and theoretical claims, and provides a great model of linguistic argumentation. While many phenomena are analyzed in detail, other topics receive a more brief treatment, and several questions are left open. This should generate ample material for student research, and many references are provided. This book will likely be quite inaccessible to those without at least (the equivalent of) a semester of phonology. Although the author briefly introduces and often argues for the theoretical frameworks he adopts, much of the terminology and many underlying assumptions about phonology and linguistics are not explicitly defined or explained. This is certainly not a book I would recommend, as the cover suggests, to a non-specialist reader for an "introduction to the sound system of German." The book will be useful for people learning German as a foreign language only inasmuch as they have some background in phonology.

The following summarizes the content of each chapter.

Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter lays the ground for the material to follow. The object of inquiry is declared to be Modern Standard German, as defined by pronouncing dictionaries (such as the Duden-Aussprachewoerterbuch (Duden 1990)). The very basic assumptions and aims of generative phonology are introduced, and the contents of the book are summarized.

Chapter 2. The Phoneme System of German

This chapter introduces the inventory of phonemes in German. There is some brief discussion of the issues that arise in attempting to determine whether certain segments or sequences of segments are in fact phonemes of German (and how to treat them generally). These are the status of segments acquired from foreign borrowings; affricates and diphthongs; the phonetic similarity of allophones; the choice of phoneme in relation to allophones; and the status of schwa. The chapter ends with a classification of all of the proposed phonemes in terms of distinctive features.

Chapter 3. The Prosodic Structure of German

This chapter introduces levels of phonological structure above the segment. These levels are both motivated using evidence for German, and used to explain existing problems in German phonology. Moving upwards from the segmental level, the first topic is feature-geometry. A particular featural architecture is argued for, based on suggestions in the

literature and evidence from German. The next topic is syllables and syllable structure. It is proposed that a syllable is a structural unit that dominates skeletal positions, whose number and arrangement are language specific. The association of segments with skeletal positions may vary, allowing an account of ambisyllabicity, gemination and degemination, vowel length, and affricates. There is some discussion of whether additional structure is needed between the syllable and the skeletal tier. The author considers, criticizes, but reluctantly adopts a hierarchical onset/nucleus/coda syllable structure (moraic theory is relegated to a single mention in a footnote). The section concludes with a discussion of extra-syllabicity and the procedures for syllabification. The next section is an in depth treatment the foot and its role in German phonology. A foot is defined as a single syllable with strong stress, or a sequence of two syllables where the first has stronger stress than the second. The author argues for the foot as unit of prosodic structure by showing that it is crucial for the analysis of several phenomena in German, including the distribution of glottal stop, plural formation, and the formation of clippings. Moving up, the next section argues for the existence of the phonological word as unit of prosodic structure. Evidence comes from various phenomena, including syllabification in compounds and affixed words, word stress, and gapping. The latter is of considerable interest since it shows that deletion in coordinated structures is sensitive to (prosodic) phonological information, a finding of clear relevance for syntax and/or theories of a syntax phonology interface. The chapter ends with some discussion of phonological and intonational phrases.

Chapter 4. Prosodic Morphology

This chapter provides a detailed examination of the crucial role that prosodic structure plays in German morphology. The first section deals with three derivational and inflectional affixes ('-ei', 'be-' and 'ge-', '-heit/-keit') whose behavior can be accounted for only by reference to prosodic structure. For example, it is argued that the participial 'ge-' prefix can be attached only to phonological words consisting of a single foot. Again, this is of relevance for theories of morphology and the morpho-syntax interface. An interesting result of this section is the simplification of allomorphy in German. Prosodic conditions on affixation allow the elimination of dubious allomorphic suffixes such as '-erei' and '-igheit', which are (more naturally) treated as sequences of affixes with independent attachment conditions. The next section offers a brief prosodic analysis of conditions on compounding. The status of schwa in inflectional morphology is discussed in the final section. It is argued that inflectional affixes are subject to prosodic constraints which differ for nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Schwa may be inserted by an independent schwa epenthesis rule (treated later in the book) in order to satisfy these prosodic constraints.

Chapter 5. Aspects of Lexical Phonology and Morphology

The topic of this chapter is the theory of Lexical Phonology. After a brief introduction to the theory, German derivational affixes are assigned to two classes based on evidence such as affix ordering and stress shifting. A level ordered model of the German lexicon is

proposed, and the Strict Cycle, Elsewhere, and Structure Preservation Conditions are introduced. The Lexical Phonology framework is applied to German plural formation, which is notoriously complex. It is claimed that plural morphology is essentially regular in German; however, the various plural suffixes are located at different lexical levels. German linking morphemes ('fugemorpheme') are also analyzed. The chapter ends with a discussion of some problems with the Lexical Phonology approach, including bracketing paradoxes in German.

Chapter 6. Underspecification: An Analysis of Markedness and Defaults

This chapter argues that segmental representations ought to be underspecified, consisting only of minimally necessary, non-redundant features. After phonological rules have applied, default and markedness rules assign values to missing features to derive a complete featural representation. The vowel and consonant systems of German are reanalyzed in these terms, with various markedness rules proposed. This results in an interesting treatment of German 'r', which is argued to have only one class feature, [+continuant]. Evidence for this analysis comes from 'r's considerably variable realization, both across and within German dialects.

Chapter 7. Phonological Rules and Alternations

This chapter, the longest in the book, contains many analyses of phonological rules and alternations in German, based upon the theoretical framework(s) developed in the

preceding chapters. The chapter begins by introducing a non-linear rule formalism (with feature spreading, linking and delinking, etc.). The rest of the chapter is organized into the following sections: Rules of Vowel Alternation, Rules in the Consonant System, Syllables and Related Matters, and Phonotactic Constraints and Principles, and Phonology or Phonetics. Noteworthy analyses include that of German Umlaut, where it is argued that a 'floating' [+front] feature, associated with a particular root by lexical specification, spreads to the rightmost vowel in the domain of a phonological word. Other classical problems in German phonology are addressed, including final devoicing, dorsal fricative assimilation, schwa, and 'r'-vocalization. The second to last section introduces the sonority hierarchy and discusses the restrictions on consonant clusters in German, with special attention paid to the distribution of 's' and 'sh'. In the final section it is suggested that discreteness can be a criteria with which to distinguish phonological from phonetically based rules.

Chapter 8. Word Stress, Compound Stress, Phrase Stress

This penultimate chapter describes stress patterns in German. After a numerical-value theory of stress is dismissed, stress is defined as a prominence relation between the units of prosodic structure that were defended in the preceding chapters. Being strictly relational in this way, it follows that stress is binary: some unit of prosodic structure is either relatively stronger or weaker than another unit of the same type. With this definition in hand, the chapter goes on to describe the patterns of stress in successively larger domains: simplex words, complex words, compounds, and phrases. Stress patterns

are derived by means of various stress assignment rules, which interact with syllabification rules, syllable structure, lexical strata, cyclic rule application, and other parts of the phonological theory outlined in preceding chapters.

Chapter 9. Concluding Remarks

This 1 1/2 page chapter concludes the book by asserting the place of phonology in cognitive science, and pointing to two problems that the author takes to be paramount in phonology. The first of these is the question of the boundaries and possible interactions between phonology and phonetics. The second concerns a tension found in all generative linguistic theory: how to decide which principles, rules, representations, etc. are universal (and thus presumably a part of Universal Grammar), and which are language specific or variable.

Postscript 2000

This postscript addresses Optimality Theory (OT). It was added to the 2000 paperback edition of 'The Phonology of German' because OT has become more prominent and been more extensively developed and applied since the book's original 1996 edition, and thus deserves at least some mention. The postscript is short (only 5 pages) and organized into sections that correspond roughly to the chapters of the book: Prosodic Structure, Morphology and Morphophonology, Prosodic Word Formation, Rules Vs. Constraints, and Stress Patterns. Each section provides a brief summary of proposals made in the OT

literature regarding these topics in general, and of OT analyses of particular phenomena such as final devoicing.

'The Phonology of German' is an excellent book, which accomplishes everything it sets out to do. The argumentation is strikingly clear and straightforward, a broad range of topics are covered without sacrificing detailed treatments, and many references are cited, facilitating further research on any of the topics covered. I can advance only one criticism, which involves the notion of 'standard' languages invoked by the author, and his consequent decision to use 'pronouncing dictionaries' as a source of data. Weise states that "...the standardized form of present-day German, termed Modern Standard German, is chosen as the major object of the present study. ...the main media concerned with establishing a standard are pronouncing dictionaries of Germany." (p. 1) But it is not clear what is meant by a 'standard' language or whether such an entity even exists, for German or any other language. What is colloquially referred to as 'standard' language seems in most cases to be some combination of a particular enshrined dialect or dialect group (e.g., Northern German dialects, Seoul Korean, the dialects of London and southern England, upper-Midwestern English) and a prescriptive target that most or all native speakers do not actually produce (see Lippi-Green (1997) for interesting discussion of 'standard' American English). To my knowledge, no convincing evidence has been presented that shows any 'standard' language to correspond either to the linguistic usage of some actual speech community, or to a linguistic system likely to be internal to the mind of some individual. This is not to deny that the study of 'standard' languages cannot yield useful insights into the beliefs that a community holds about

language, and the ways in which these beliefs influence how language is used for social purposes. However, 'standard' languages--whatever they may be--are not appropriate objects for linguistic inquiry of the sort undertaken in this book.

A related issue concerns the book's use of pronouncing dictionaries as a source of data, something that is problematic both in theory and in practice. First, the use of pronouncing dictionaries points to the inadequacy of the notion of 'standard' language, as discussed above. These dictionaries prescribe "received," "public" or "formal" German pronunciation, promoting "a pronunciation of German which is free of dialectal and other variation." (pp. 1-2) This suggests that some or even the majority of the German speaking population do not in fact pronounce things as such; otherwise prescription would be unnecessary. But these dictionaries are taken by the author to define Modern Standard German, which begs the question of just what actual linguistic entity is referred to by 'standard.' If Modern Standard German corresponds to nothing but the prescriptions of dictionary writers, then it is not an appropriate object of inquiry, as noted.

Of course, a practical problem with dictionary data is that it is sometimes plainly wrong or contradictory, naturally so if dictionaries are mostly prescriptive rather than descriptive. In such instances, the author is inconsistent, sometimes abandoning the pronouncing dictionaries and sometimes not. For example, the author claims that the dictionaries' prohibition of g-Spirantization in a certain environment constitutes evidence for the lexical status of the g-Spirantization rule, even while noting that "speakers even of the standard pronunciation certainly do not follow this normative rule [lack of g-

Spirantization in said environment] in all cases." (p. 208) But later the author states that a dorsal fricative is in fact not velarized in a certain environment, "contrary to...the pronouncing dictionaries." (p. 210) Or, noting two variable pronunciations of a word, a footnote mentions that "the pronouncing dictionaries actually require" just one variant. (fn. 37, p. 221)

Clearly one cannot fault the author for failing to provide a comprehensive phonological analysis of every modern dialect of German. However, we need not resort to untenable notions of 'standard' language or to collecting data from prescriptive dictionaries. Rather, I believe that a preferable approach would be to simply select some dialect or dialect group and collect data from it, acknowledging when data from other sources is necessary. Then other matters unrelated to linguistic structure--such as the dialect's relative social status, number of speakers, and consequent 'standardization'--can be considered separately.

These are quibbles, of course, and do not detract from the overall quality of 'The Phonology of German'. The issues raised above will not be noticed by, and are perhaps not relevant for, most of the people who would read this book. But there is some risk involved in basing linguistic description and analysis upon notions like 'standard' language. There is always the possibility of arriving at misleading or incorrect conclusions. But more serious in my view is the possibility that the scientific prestige of linguistics (such as there is) will be thereby lent to the mythology of prescriptivism.

References

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