

## Offset Syllabification in French and Dutch: Evidence from Acquisition

The current research tackles the issue of word-final consonant syllabification from the perspective of language acquisition. The notion that word edges do not necessarily align perfectly with syllable edges is a recurrent theme in phonological theory. In metrical phonology, for example, extrametricality is an indispensable analytical tool. In Government Phonology, word final consonants cannot be codas due to the Coda Licensing Principle, which states that codas must be licensed by an adjacent onset (see, e.g., Kaye, 1990). Based on CV typology, vowel length phenomena and stress factors, Harris and Gussmann (2002) reach a similar conclusion.

A more nuanced proposal has been put forward in Piggott (1999). After an extensive typological survey, Piggott concludes that languages can differ in how they syllabify of final consonants. The diagnostic is whether final consonants pattern (in terms of their distribution) with word-internal codas, or with onsets.

Using this diagnostic, there are reasons to assume that Dutch and French differ in how word-final consonants ('offsets') are syllabified. French offsets display typically non-coda-like behavior, in that, contrary to word-internal codas, they can carry independent voicing specifications, they can license nasals, and, most saliently, they can accommodate consonant clusters that would be ill-formed if analyzed as codas: some examples are words such as *livre* [livʁ] (book) and *table* [tabl] (table).

Dutch offsets, on the other hand, are much more coda-like. They cannot independently license voice, always conform to sonority well-formedness principles, and offsets and word-internal codas are the only position where dorsal nasal /ŋ/ is licensed. Thus, these two languages lend themselves for a test case.

If we take Piggott's (1999) proposal seriously, we expect it to be active in acquisition, as well. For example, if French offsets are really onsets, we expect them to be acquired in a fashion likewise to word-initial onsets. Such an effect would not be expected in the acquisition of Dutch. Furthermore, this effect is expected to be strongest for features that contribute to the sonority profile of the syllable.

The current study looks at the acquisition of French and Dutch segments in onsets and offset position. The order of acquisition of the distinctive features produced in these positions is taken as evidence for their prosodic status. It is found that indeed, the order of acquisition of distinctive features in French onsets and offsets is remarkably similar.

Focusing on Manner of Articulation features, we even see a (near-)perfect parallel: One child, for example, acquires her manner features in both onset

and offset position in the following order: [lateral] → [nasal] → [continuant] → [rhotic]. The Dutch children, on the other hand, display a different order for each position. Most acquire onset manner features in the order [nasal] → [continuant] → [lateral]/[rhotic], and offsets in the order [continuant] → [nasal] → [lateral/rhotic].

Manner features are most important in determining the place of a segment on the sonority scale, and they thus determine the sonority profile of the syllable. With this in mind, the current result is important for theories of acquisition (children are sensitive to abstract phonological structure), for theories of feature classification (manner features and place features pattern differently), and for theories of syllabification (the order of acquisition of distinctive features is a diagnostic to establish the status of word-final consonants).

## References

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- Kaye, J. (1990). 'coda' licensing. *Phonology*, 7.
- Piggott, G. (1999). At the right edge of words. *The Linguistic Review*.