

BOOK REVIEWS

PHONOLOGY AND SYNTAX: THE RELATION BETWEEN SOUND AND STRUCTURE

(Current studies in linguistics, 10)

Elisabeth O. Selkirk

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“Phonology and Syntax”, unqualified, suggests a general treatment of these two topics which always seem so separate in method and logic. The subtitle hints that the author may reverse the syntactic tradition, because phonology is sound but syntax has structure.

The title, the size of the book, and the author’s previous work should excite any reader who is waiting for a natural language interface that really uses voice or is working on a speech processing system that understands what is being said. I was eager for an opportunity to study this book. Integrating, or even gracefully interfacing, the discourse/semantics/syntax stuff with the phonetics/phonology/prosodics stuff has yet to be done in a satisfying way.

The author’s view: The “standard theory” of the phonology-syntax relation has been outlined in Chomsky and Halle’s *Sound Pattern of English* (1968), but is now in need of revision. The author’s “revised theory” of the phonological representation is that it consists of (a) a **prosodic constituent structure** (including a sequence of syllables), (b) a set of **autosegmental tiers**, (c) a rhythmic structure, the **metrical grid**, and (d) a specification of the **associations or alignments** between these various aspects of the representation. The ‘revised theory’ of the relation between syntax and phonology is that it is a mapping from a syntactic representation into a fully specified phonological representation with these properties” (p. 8). Sandwiched between the introductory and concluding chapters are six chapters that treat selected aspects of phonological representation. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 introduce metrical grids and apply them to word stress and to phrasal rhythm. The fifth chapter treats pitch accents and intonation; the sixth is about syntactic junctures and timing; and the seventh concerns cliticization of function words. Each chapter is about 50 pages long, and there are 30 pages of footnotes.

The negative view: Selkirk is fashion-conscious. She tries on pieces of several popular trends in phonology, without facing the conceptual and methodological clashes that result. On the other hand, she does not challenge the core concepts of the “standard theory” either. She attempts to unify some positive contributions of autosegmental, metrical, and lexical phonology, and the re-emerging pitch-accent view of intonation. Selkirk’s

obvious appreciation of these new directions gets in the way of developing her own independent and coherent view. Selkirk does not take this book-length opportunity to clarify recent phonological history. Most of the topics covered in the book are more clearly presented in the original sources (e.g. Liberman and Prince 1977, or Pierrehumbert 1980). The book is quite hard to read and seems not to have had the benefit of proper editing. There may be important insights that are obscured by the intricate prose, or it may be that some of the ideas are so intricate they cannot be expressed clearly. (She has a parenthetical remark (on page 387) that is interrupted by two long (am I really doing this?) embedded parentheses.)

The positive view: Chapters 6 and 7 make the book worthwhile. After the obese filigree of chapters 1 through 5, Selkirk gets down to a couple of topics of her own. As with the rest of the book, her writing shows an intense involvement with the subject, but in chapters 6 and 7 the style is simpler, the argument is clearer, and the attitude is more modest. Chapter 6 argues that “an abstract *phonological* representation of [timing] is converted into a phonetic representation ... that provides explicit quantitative information about the duration of segments and pauses.” (p. 300) This view is counterposed to Klatt’s work and especially Cooper’s work on timing. Selkirk’s argument is appealing enough that I was tempted to get out of my chair and run an experiment. Chapter 7 treats the de-stressing and reduction of function words. Although I can’t accept some of the purported data or the mode of analysis, Selkirk’s is the best treatment of the topic that I can remember having seen. In fact, chapters 6 and 7 form a nice 110-page monograph. The work is original and the attitude is open; if the first five chapters had to come out first, so be it.

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