

Kristján Árnason: Quantity, stress and the syllable in Icelandic

An analysis of quantity in Modern Icelandic is suggested, where length of vowels is predictable on the basis of the form of the postnuclear consonantism within the syllable. Vowels are short before two or more consonants, but long otherwise. Considerations of simplicity of the length rule lead to a definition of the stressed syllable in Icelandic which can be called 'final maximalistic'. Thus hestur is analyzed with two postnuclear consonants in the first syllable, but vasi with one, giving a simple environment for the length rule. This runs counter to the tendency, attested in many languages, to favour open syllables. It is suggested that stress is responsible for this ontogenetically, and that the phonological axiom can be stated as the stressed syllable.

Two or more consonants ^{as long} following a stressed vowel belong to the stressed syllable/as that does not lead to a coda where a p,t,k or s is followed by a j,v or r. Thus one gets nepfi with a long first vowel. This constraint can be accounted for in terms of a hierarchy of 'strength' or 'adherence' of consonants.

In addition to giving a relatively simple model of the situation in Modern Icelandic, this analysis seems to supply a good basis for a historical and comparative explanation of the synchronic situation. The Icelandic situation can be said to be typically Scandinavian (excluding Danish), with syllabic quantity basic and segmental length derived.

But some phenomena can be found in Modern Icelandic which don't fit entirely into the model. This can be taken as indication that later development has disrupted the system described above. Or it might be taken to show that the model is a panchronic abstraction but does not reflect synchronic facts. (This latter interpretation would lead to scepticism concerning the form of modern linguistic argumentation, fundamentally based on the notion of simplicity and logical beauty.)