

(M-)Words Matter: Constraining Allomorphy in Its Possible Contexts

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1. Introduction

Allomorphy is currently the focus of intense investigation within syntactic approaches to morphology, since this phenomenon is constrained by locality conditions that are most probably syntactic in nature. Within Distributed Morphology (DM), two main locality conditions are entertained for an allomorphic interaction between a trigger and a target to be possible: membership of the same Spell-Out domain (a cyclicity condition) and adjacency (a linear condition) —see Embick (2010, 2015). The standard assumption is that the first condition is sufficient to constrain the size of the domain in which allomorphic interactions may take place.

In this paper I show that things are actually more complicated once we take into account two factors. First, the difference between so-called Grammatically Conditioned Allomorphy (GCA) and Phonologically Conditioned Allomorphy (PCA). Second, the difference between three possible contexts of interaction: 1) within the phonological word (ω ; Nespor & Vogel 2007), 2) between phonological words, and 3) between the clitic and its host or cliticizing site. While context 2 is currently being investigated, little attention has been paid to context 3, in particular when set in contrast with context 1.

Specifically, and along the lines first explored by Bobaljik (2000), I observe that while PCA seems to always involve a more embedded (inner) trigger across all three contexts (to the extent that it is actually attested in context 2), the pattern for GCA varies from context to context: it allows both an outer and an inner trigger in context 1, it is not attested in context 2 (pace Bobaljik & Harley 2017), and it seems to allow only an outer trigger in context 3.

Focusing on contexts 1 and 3, I show how the standard theory of allomorphy in DM (Bobaljik 2000, Embick 2010, 2015, Marantz 2013) does not account for all the patterns, and I develop a version in which M-Words (Embick & Noyer 2001, Embick 2010) are cycles for Vocabulary Insertion.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I introduce the two types of allomorphy dealt with, and also a definition of *word*. In section 3, I show how the three contexts mentioned above pattern with respect to both GCA and PCA. In section 4, I review the standard account in DM, and show that it is unable to handle all the patterns. In section 5, I propose a variation of the standard theory, based on the idea that M-Words (maximal heads) are cycles for Vocabulary Insertion. Section 6 concludes.

2. Preliminaries. Types of contextual allomorphy. “Word”

This work deals with contextual allomorphy, in which the allomorph ϕ of a given morpheme m , that is, one of its underlying phonological representations, is determined by some factor in its linguistic context (Bonet & Harbour 2012:196):¹

(1) $m \longleftrightarrow \phi_1 / \text{context 1}; m \longleftrightarrow \phi_2 / \text{context 2}; \dots$

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¹ The counterpart of contextual allomorphy is free allomorphy, i.e., allomorphic variation that is optional and governed by extralinguistic factors like dialect or register. One classical example is the Spanish free choice between *-ra* and *-se* for the imperfective subjunctive exponent, cf. *cantara/cantase* ‘I sang’.

In any allomorphic interaction, we can distinguish a **trigger**, i.e., the factor inducing a particular choice of allomorph, and the **target**, i.e., the morpheme showing allomorphy. When the trigger is a particular root or (set of) morphosyntactic feature(s), independently of their phonological exponent, the allomorphy is grammatically conditioned (GCA). For instance, the root OX in English triggers a special exponent for the plural morpheme: *ox-en*. We know that this is a case of GCA because other nouns that are almost phonologically identical do not take this special plural morph: *fox-es*, *box-es*. Similarly, the comparative morpheme triggers a special shape of the root in a few adjectives in English, as in *bett-er*. On the contrary, when allomorphy is triggered by some phonological property, irrespective of the non-phonological features associated, we say that it is phonologically conditioned (PCA), as illustrated by the indefinite article in English: *an/*a apple*, *a/*an pear*.

Finally, with respect to the elusive term *word*, I adopt the quite standard view that it is the domain of application of certain phonological rules, like stress assignment (Borer 2013:14 ff.), although clitics must crucially be excluded (Nespor & Vogel 2007).

3. Allomorphic interactions across three different contexts

3.1. Context 1: Allomorphic interactions within the word

This context has been widely investigated from the point of view of a syntactically oriented morphology, at least since Bobaljik (2000), and I therefore do not have much to add. I will simply summarize and illustrate what is by now standard knowledge.

GCA is very frequently found within the word. It seems that the allomorphic interaction involves a trigger that can be either more or less embedded than the target:

- (2) ama-**u-isti** / ama-s; scrip-s-**isti** / scribi-s (Latin; Embick 2010:71 ff.)
 love-PRF-2SG / love-2SG; write-PRF-2SG / write-2SG
 ‘you loved’ / ‘you love’; ‘you wrote’ / ‘you write’
- (3) ruha-**ái-m** / ruha-k (Hungarian; Carstairs 1987:165)
 dress-PL-1SG / dress-PL
 ‘my dresses’ / ‘dresses’

In (2), the presence of the perfective morpheme triggers a special allomorph in the 2nd person singular ending (*-isti*, rather than *-s*). Note that allomorphy is triggered irrespectively of whether Asp[prf] is realized as *-u* or *-s*, revealing a clear case of GCA. Under the standard assumption that agreement inflection merges on top of Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM) inflection, we can conclude that this is a case of GCA with an inner trigger. By contrast, in (3), the 1st person singular possessive morpheme triggering the allomorph *-ái* in the plural morpheme is arguably an outer trigger.²

As regards PCA, it seems that it may only involve inner triggers (Bobaljik 2000). For instance, in Korean, whether a root ends in a consonant or a vowel respectively determines the allomorph *-i* or the allomorph *-ka* of the nominative morpheme:

- (4) **pap-i** / **ai-ka** (Korean; Embick 2015:174)
 rice.NOM / child.NOM

3.2. Context 2: Allomorphic interactions between words

Whether the trigger and the target of an allomorphic interaction may belong to different words has received far less attention in the literature, but is currently a matter of debate. Carstairs (1990) argues that PCA (*phonologically conditioned suppletion*, in his terms) cannot involve different words, in spite of some apparent counterexamples from French.³

² And see Embick (2010:61–62) for evidence that a GCA-allomorph may require an inner and an outer trigger simultaneously.

³ In particular, a preceding /z/ triggering /ø/ vs /œf/ for *oeuf* ‘egg’, as in *trois oeufs* [tʁwaz ø] vs *cinq oeufs* [sɛ̃k œf]. Carstairs observes that speakers are actually developing two allomorphs, /z/ø/ and /œf/, systematically triggered in the plural and singular contexts, respectively, which would eliminate the case for the existence of PCA.

Recently, Bobaljik (2012:3) has observed that in the formation of comparatives cross-linguistically “root suppletion is limited to synthetic (i.e., morphological) comparatives” (Root Suppletion Generalization). Thus, while synthetic comparatives like *bett-er* (*good-er) are found in many languages, nothing like *more bett* is attested. Under the assumption —not adopted by Bobaljik!— that root suppletion is the same phenomenon as GCA, the result of this investigation points in the direction that GCA is not found across words.

Importantly, none of the locality conditions standardly adopted in DM (Embick 2010, Marantz 2013) to constrain allomorphy, namely, membership of the same Spell-Out domain, as defined by phasal heads (cf. Chomsky 2000, 2001; for our purposes, categorizers like *v* or *n*: Embick 2010, Marantz 2013), and adjacency, would be violated in the case of *more bett*. With respect to the first condition, the comparative is an inflectional morpheme belonging to the extended projection of the *a* categorizer and should thus be spelled out with it (Embick 2010), in the same way as TAM inflection is spelled out with the verb. This is presumably why Bobaljik (2012:68) has to propose an additional locality condition, namely that an allomorphic interaction cannot take place across an XP.

Bobaljik’s (2012) locality condition is put to work in Bobaljik & Harley’s (2017) work on root suppletion, and strikingly so, since these authors argue that root suppletion, while being local, is yet possible across words. The claim is based on the cases of verbal root suppletion in Hiaki, which are argued to be triggered by the number feature of the internal argument DP —unlike that of the external argument DP:

- (5) **Ume toto’im** sua/*me’a
 the.PL chicken.PL kill.PL/*kill.SG
 ‘Kill the chickens.’

A crucial assumption in this analysis is that the internal object is directly merged with the verb root. Since there is no XP barrier between the root and the DP, Bobaljik’s (2012) locality condition is not violated, and the number feature inherited by the label of the DP may serve as context when Vocabulary Insertion takes place at the root.

While Bobaljik & Harley’s (2017) contention that these are true cases of suppletion seems solid enough, their conclusion that the trigger is the number feature of the object DP, i.e., a separate word, is not unescapable. Thus, Thornton (2015, this volume of proceedings) argues that a number projection (#) is sandwiched between *v* and the root, and that it is this functional head that hosts the number features of the direct object. The root head-moves to this functional item, creating a sufficiently local and word-internal context for suppletion (i.e., GCA) to be effected. Thornton argues that this low verbal number head is actually visible in reduplicative plurals in Niuean and Hiaki itself.

My own contribution to the discussion on whether contextual allomorphy is found across words is based on a survey of analytic plural marking in nouns. The choice of this marking is motivated by the fact that plural marking features prominently in discussions on allomorphy (Carstairs 1987, Embick 2015) and also by the fact that, from a DM perspective, the Num(ber) head (Ritter 1988, a.o.) is interpreted in the same Spell-Out domain as the noun (*n* + ROOT). Crucially, if no allomorphic interactions are found between different adjacent words within the same Spell-Out domain, the locality conditions pointed out in the introduction are not enough in constraining allomorphy.

- (6) [NumP Num [_{nP} n ROOT]]

After linearization and head movement, the above representation becomes $\overbrace{\text{ROOT} - n - \text{Num}}$ (synthetic plural) or $\overbrace{\text{Num}} \overbrace{\text{ROOT} - n}$ (analytic plural).

My database comprises the cases of expression of nominal plurality in the languages marked with the value “plural word” for the feature “coding of nominal plurality” in the World Atlas of Linguistic Structures (Dryer 2013). Specifically, 102 of the 170 languages classified with that value were examined through perusal of the corresponding grammar. Here are some examples:

- (7) mādā gē (Gula [Sudanic]; Nougayrol 1999:92)
babouin PL
- (8) mga bahay (Tagalog [Austronesian]; Corbett 2000:134)
PL house
- (9) nōai ngail (Port Sandwich [Austronesian]; Crowley 2002:653-655)
river PL

In some cases the free-standing pluralizer coexists with an affixal one, which may show GCA. For instance, in Erromangan (Austronesian; Crowley 1998:61-65), free-standing *ovo* alternates with prefixal *ov(o)-*, used with a small set of nouns:

- (10) ovon nei; ovon kuri / ov-ahiven; ovo-teme
PL tree; PL dog / PL-woman; PL-people

However, not a single instance of GCA was found involving the free-standing pluralizer and the noun. As regards, PCA, Sa'a (Austronesian) is described by Ivens (1918:140) as featuring a non-affixal pluralizer that is realized as *mo* before nouns beginning with /o/ and as /mu/ before nouns beginning with /h/ or vowel other than /o/. However, he does not offer any examples.

Finally, a famous apparent case of PCA across words is that involved in a small set of prenominal adjectives in French that change shape in the masculine singular according to whether the following noun begins with a consonant or a vowel (Tranel 1990):

- (11) bel/*beau [bo] **homme** / beau/*bel **garçon**
'handsome man' / 'handsome boy'

Pak (2008:238 ff.) argues that these adjectives do not involve allomorphy, and proposes that a set of dedicated phonological rules (Readjustment Rules, Chomsky & Halle 1968) can account for the alternations.

In sum, there is not enough evidence to claim that either GCA or PCA are allowed across words.

3.3. Context 3: Allomorphic interactions between a clitic and its host

I do not know of any previous work exploring the patterns of contextual allomorphy within the Clitic Group (Nespor & Vogel 2007:145 ff.). My observations here are based on the morphological behaviour of clitics in Romance and Tibetan languages. Importantly, since clitics may be cliticized onto clitics (as in Romance, cf. Catalan *li ho dona* DAT.3SG=ACC.N=give.3SG 'gives it to him/her'), by *host* here I understand the innermost constituent, to which the clitic attaches.

Beginning with GCA, this type of allomorphy may be triggered by the clitic in the host, but not the other way around. I present two cases. The first one, from Balearic Catalan, involves the preposition *amb* 'with', which, when cliticized onto a DP headed by the masculine singular or plural article *es*, triggers the allomorph *so* (*sos* in the plural; Bonet et al. 2015):

- (12) {es/*so}=plat / **amb**={so/*es}=plat
the.M.SG=dish / with=the.M.SG=dish
'the dish' / 'with the dish'

That this is a case of GCA, and not PCA, can be deduced from the fact that words with the same ending as *amb* 'with' in their underlying representation, like the first person singular of the present tense of *tombar* 'topple', *tomb*, do not trigger the *so* allomorph when concatenated with the definite article:

- (13) Tomb {es/*so}=plat.
topple.1SG the.M.SG=dish
'I topple the dish.'

Other examples come from Tibetan languages. Perry (2016:161) observes that in Gyalsumdo (Manang District, Nepal), the ergative/genitive clitic *gi* may trigger the allomorph *ḡai* in the first person pronoun:

- (14) $\eta\grave{a}=la$ / $\eta\grave{a}i=gi$
 1SG=DAT / 1SG=ERG

Similarly, in Nepali, the genitive marker *ko*, when cliticized onto the demonstrative, provokes the appearance of the allomorph *tyas* (Joe Perry, p.c.):

- (15) $tyo\ manche=ko$ / $tyas=ko$
 that person=GEN / that=GEN

Turning to PCA, the cases are more familiar. However, the directionality of the allomorphic interaction is the inverse one: it is the host, more embedded, that may trigger PCA in the clitic. Thus, for instance, the personal masculine article in Central Catalan is *en* when cliticized onto a name beginning with a consonant, and *l'* when the name begins with a vowel:

- (16) $\underline{en}=\text{Marc/Pere}$ / $\underline{l'}=\text{Andreu/\u00c0scar}$
 the=Marc/Pere / the=Andreu/\u00c0scar

Similarly, Pak (2016) argues that the definite article in English shows allomorphy under cliticization onto the following word:

- (17) $\underline{a}=\text{book}$ / $\underline{an}=\text{apple}$

While by all means awaiting further empirical enlargement, this small set of data from typologically and genetically unrelated languages suggests that allomorphic interactions between the clitic and the host involve outward sensitivity (i.e., an outer trigger) in the case of GCA and inward sensitivity (an inner trigger) in the case of PCA.

3.4. Interim summary

To sum up, the three contexts pattern differently with respect to the directionality or outward/inward sensitivity of allomorphic interactions.

PCA consistently involves inward sensitivity, a result already known in relation to Context 1 and here extended to Context 3 —and Context 2, if we consider alternations like *beaubel* in French as cases of PCA across words. The case is therefore reinforced for a localist, serialist approach to the retrieval of morphophonological information for linguistic expressions (Bobaljik 2000, Embick 2010). In particular, Vocabulary Insertion should apply in a bottom-up fashion, and not simultaneously for a given domain, be it a word, a Spell-Out domain, or a clitic group.

GCA, on the other hand, patterns *unevenly* across the contexts. It may involve either inward or outward sensitivity in Context 1, but seemingly only outward sensitivity in Context 3. With respect to Context 2, there are reasons to believe that it is not possible. Focusing on Contexts 1 and 3, this also has repercussions on cyclicity in Vocabulary Insertion. Specifically, in Context 1, the non-phonological features of a given morpheme *m* should still be available after Vocabulary Insertion has applied at *m*. By contrast, the non-phonological features of a clitic should be available when Vocabulary Insertion applies at an adjacent morpheme of its host, but not the other way around.

In the next sections I show how the current standard theory of DM cannot account for these asymmetries, and I propose an alternative.

4. The standard analysis

Context 1 is, as mentioned, the most widely explored within DM. Two assumptions serve to predict the asymmetry between GCA and PCA that we observe in this context. Basing the exposition on Embick (2010), Vocabulary Insertion is first assumed to take place from the most to the least embedded items (Carstairs 1987, Halle & Marantz 1993, Bobaljik 2000, a.o.). This ensures that when an exponent is inserted at morpheme m_1 the phonological information of the next morpheme in line m_2 is still not available, accounting for the fact that PCA involves only inner triggers. Additionally, non-phonological information should not be erased until Vocabulary Insertion has taken place at all the morphemes of a

given domain. This assumption is not made explicit in Embick (2010),⁴ that is, the theory of cyclicity entertained in that work is compatible with the assumption that when Vocabulary Insertion has taken place at m_1 , the non-phonological features associated with m_1 are erased. Notwithstanding that “domain” is not exactly the same as “word”, this condition seems necessary to yield the desired result that GCA may involve either inward or outward sensitivity.

With respect to Context 2, an aspect of the theory developed in Embick (2010) and, particularly, in Embick (2007), serves to predict the unavailability of allomorphy between words (pace Bobaljik & Harley 2017). First, Embick (2010:16) formulates the hypothesis that “Contextual allomorphy is possible only with elements that are concatenated”. Indeed, contextual allomorphy for a morpheme m boils down to the insertion of a particular exponent ϕ for m , determined as retrievable in a particular context by the relevant Vocabulary Item. Importantly, an insertion context may only refer to some concatenated element C , that is, an element that bears a relation of linear adjacency with m :

$$(18) \quad m \longleftrightarrow \phi / C_$$

Embick (2007:322) assumes the hypothesis of Sufficient Ordering, stating that terminal nodes or *Subwords* belonging to different maximal heads ($X^{0\max}$) or *M-Words* cannot be concatenated. Since Vocabulary Insertion may only take place at the level of the Subword, this hypothesis, coupled with the one mentioned above, yields the prediction that no allomorphic interaction may take place between words (= M-Words; see the discussion in Embick 2010:35 ff.).

Context 3 appears to be the trickiest one. On the one hand, it is out of discussion that allomorphic interactions are possible between a clitic and its cliticization site; on the other hand, these interactions are not wholly similar to those attested in Context 1: while PCA is, as expected, strictly inward sensitive (i.e., the host can be a trigger, but not the clitic), GCA seems to be strictly outward sensitive (the clitic can be a trigger, but not the host). Zwicky & Pullum’s (1983) classical difference between affixes and clitics seems to resonate here.

The fact that we do find allomorphy in this context has of course not gone unnoticed to DM theoreticians, who have proposed that clitics can come to be concatenated with their hosts by some mechanism, after which Vocabulary Insertion at the clitic may refer to some feature of the host. For instance, Pak (2016) argues that the alternation between *a* and *an* for the English indefinite article is a case of allomorphy, involving the existence of two Vocabulary Items that compete for insertion at the morpheme D[-def]. Importantly, however, D[-def] must first form one same unit with the following word, which Pak solves by proposing an instance of Local Dislocation (Embick & Noyer 2001), bringing together the article and the following word. Similarly, Embick (2010:88) puts forward an Article Cliticization rule for French, to account for the variation between *le/la* (DEF.SG.M/F), used before consonants, and *l’*, used before vowels. However, these proposals account only for the cases of PCA. What about GCA, illustrated in (12), (14), and (15), and its asymmetric pattern?

5. The M-Word cycle

My proposal for dealing with the patterns of allomorphic interactions attested in the three contexts involves adopting the basics of the theory of the syntax-morphology interface as developed in Embick (2010) —and see also Embick (2015). However, I introduce two modifications:

1) I eliminate Embick’s (2007) Sufficient Ordering hypothesis, whereby Subwords of different M-Words cannot be concatenated. They can, if an operation is triggered (Pak 2016).

2) That stipulation gone, I take M-Words to be cycles for Vocabulary Insertion. In particular, Vocabulary Insertion takes place M-Word per M-Word, in a bottom-up fashion, and all non-phonological information is erased after each cycle.

Let us see how these modifications allow us to account for the patterns described, beginning with Context 1. Within the M-Word, PCA is expected to be only inward sensitive, since Vocabulary Insertion takes place Subword per Subword, in a bottom-up fashion. With respect to GCA, since non-phonological features are not erased until the M-Word cycle of Vocabulary Insertion is completed, we expect it to be both inward and outward sensitive, as is the case (needless to say, under adjacency).

⁴ But see his endnote 2 to chapter 2.

Context 2 is also accounted for. An allomorphic interaction can only arise between concatenated Subwords. Concatenation is allowed between Subwords belonging to different M-Words, but an operation has to be triggered to effect this. In the default case, Subwords belonging to different M-Words are certainly not concatenated, presumably because M-Words are also cycles of linearization. This accounts for the lack of allomorphic interactions between words.

Context 3 involves the cases in which some operation brings a Subword belonging to a certain M-Word to be concatenated with a Subword belonging to an adjacent M-Word. Crucially, however, this takes place while the M-Word boundaries, here represented with overbraces, are kept. I first illustrate with the case of the English indefinite article D[-def], cliticized onto the following M-Word X:

$$(19) \quad \overbrace{D[-def]} \overbrace{x_1 - x_2 - \dots - x_z} \Rightarrow \overbrace{D[-def]} - \overbrace{x_1 - x_2 - \dots - x_z} \Rightarrow \\ \overbrace{D[-def]} - \overbrace{C/V - \dots} \Rightarrow \overbrace{a/an} - \overbrace{C/V - \dots}$$

Cliticization here involves establishing a concatenation relation (represented by “-”) between the Subword of the indefinite article and the first Subword x_1 of the following M-Word X. The respective M-Word boundaries are, however, maintained. Vocabulary Insertion takes place bottom-up, applying first at the different Subwords comprising X. After it has applied at the last Subword x_z , the Vocabulary Insertion cycle corresponding to X finishes, and non-phonological features are deleted. The mechanism then targets the next M-Word, the one corresponding to the indefinite article. Since the Subword D[-def] is concatenated with x_1 , its Vocabulary Items may make reference to properties of x_1 , but only phonological properties. In this case, whether x_1 begins with a C or a V will determine the choice of *a* or *an*, respectively. Inward sensitive PCA is thus accounted for. Note, importantly, that the phonological information of D[-def] has not yet been retrieved when Vocabulary Insertion applies at x_1 , correctly predicting the fact that PCA cannot be outward sensitive (i.e., sensitive to the clitic).

Let us now consider a case of cliticization involving GCA: the case of Balearic Catalan *amb* ‘with’ cliticized onto the definite article yielding *amb so* ‘with the’ —see (12):

$$(20) \quad \overbrace{AMB} \overbrace{D[m.]} \Rightarrow \overbrace{AMB} - \overbrace{D[m.]} \Rightarrow \\ \overbrace{AMB} - \overbrace{so} \Rightarrow \overbrace{amb} - \overbrace{so}$$

A cliticization operation concatenates the Subword (= terminal) corresponding to the preposition *amb* ‘with’ onto the Subword corresponding to the definite article. Vocabulary Insertion applies first at the M-Word cycle corresponding to the latter. Since the preposition is concatenated with this Subword, its Vocabulary Item may make reference to it in the insertion context:

$$(21) \quad D[m.] \longleftrightarrow so / AMB-$$

The cycle completed, all non-phonological features are erased from the M-Word corresponding to the article. When Vocabulary Insertion takes place at the preposition, it can only refer to phonological information of the host (as in the case of the indefinite article in English seen above), but not to non-phonological features. This is how the asymmetry associated to GCA in Context 3 is derived: it involves only outer triggers (the clitic).

6. Conclusions

In this paper I have examined the two types of contextual allomorphy, GCA and PCA, in three possible contexts: within the word, between words and between the clitic and its cliticization site. Empirically, I have provided further evidence from analytic plurals crosslinguistically that Context 2 does not allow allomorphic interactions. Additionally, I have shown that that Context 3, while being equivalent to Context 1 in allowing only inward sensitivity in PCA, differs from it with respect to GCA, which is inward and outward sensitive in Context 1 and only outward sensitive in Context 3. I have shown that a variation of the standard theory, in which Subwords belonging to different M-Words may come to be concatenated, and M-Words are cycles for Vocabulary Insertion, accounts for the patterns described.

Further research must target Context 3, primarily to ascertain the validity of the generalization suggested by the data presented here.

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