How phonology and morphology interact: The case of French liaison

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French liaison is an alternation involving the use of a special consonant-final form before vowel-initial words. For instance, the adjective grand 'great' is generally pronounced as [gʁɑ̃]. But when preceding a vowel-initial noun, it may be pronounced as [gʁɑ̃t] with a final [t], as in grand ami [gʁɑ̃t#ami] 'great friend'. French liaison has been a central topic in linguistics, due to the complex interaction of factors that shape its use (see Côté 2011 and Bonami & Delais-Roussarie 2021 for an overview). Despite decades of research, it remains an active area of research and some basic issues are still unresolved. In this talk, I address two ongoing debates about the way phonology and morphology interact in French liaison.

The first debate concerns the status of liaison as a phonological or morphological alternation. Under the phonological analysis, liaison is allophony: liaison consonants are special phonemes that alternate between a consonant allophone and zero (e.g., [t] ~ ∅), the zero allophone being derived from the consonant phoneme through deletion (/t/ → ∅). Under the morphological analysis, liaison is allomorphy: liaison words have two underlyingly listed allomorphs, a consonant-final allomorph and a shorter allomorph that lacks this consonant (e.g., grand 'great' /gʁɑ̃t,gʁɑ̃/). In the first part of the talk, I use evidence from lexical statistics to argue in favor of the morphological analysis. I show that liaison interacts with lexical frequency in a way that is not compatible with a deletion account. Rather, liaison has a lexical signature that is typical of suppletive allomorphy: it affects a rather small number of lexical items with high token frequency.

The second debate concerns the role of phonological optimization in French liaison. Tranel (2000) analyzed liaison as a strategy to avoid a vowel hiatus. But Morin (2005) showed that an intervocalic context is neither necessary nor sufficient for the liaison form to be used. Instead, he proposed a usage-based account where French liaison is a purely morphological/lexical phenomenon and where phonological constraints play no role. In the second part of the talk, I defend the Tranel's (2000) analysis by showing that hiatus avoidance is important to account not only for the basic phonological conditioning of liaison but also for a morpheme structure constraint on liaison morphemes. Furthermore, I argue that Morin's problematic cases can be explained using independently motivated morphological and morphophonological constraints.

All in all, the evidence presented in this talk suggests that French liaison is best analyzed as a pattern of allomorphy that is both phonologically and morphologically optimizing.