Accents According to Nature: Underlying Representations from Sanskrit to Saussure

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Roadmap:

I. Saussure on underlying accents; on generative grammar (I.2); on diachrony (I.3); passages in support (I.4); passages complicating (I.5)
II. Analogues of underlying accents 1: Pāṇini, prakṛtyā, and prātiśākhyas
III. Analogues 2: Ancient Greek grammarians on levels of representation (κατὰ φύσιν τόνος)

I. Saussure on underlying accents

1. For the first (?) time in Western linguistics, the youthful Saussure (1879:236–37) reconstructs an UR:

2. In more modern terminology (and translating his a, into PIE *e) his middle example can be recast:

   UR       /yeug-téy-es/
   [pretonic ø-grade/devoicing] *yuktéyes
   SR       *yuktéyes > Skt. yuktáyas (nusquam invenitur, JL)

3. Saussure’s devoicing as UR mapped to SR is immediately akin to, e.g., lex Stang (Schindler 1973:153):

   /dyéw + m/, /gʷow+ m/ ➔ “Outputformen” [dyēm], [gʷǒm]
4. Or two levels in Hale (2014:6–7). Proto-Indo-Europeans build phonology: take the ‘phonemic’/ªdyew/ + /m/, “put the result through the phonological computation system, which will produce the phonetic target [dyēm].”

5. Yet building morphophonology, such as Saussure practiced it, remains underused.

6. Saussurean flowchart. I find these levels of representation in flow- or decision-chart form helpful.

7. In these levels of representation, Saussure anticipates developments associated with generative grammar; he was ahead of his time. I have never seen these passages cited in a history of linguistics; they deserve pride of place.

1. genau im Sinne der generativen Grammatik?

8. Saussure (1879:188) posits three laws to account for the accent of “flexion forte” esp. in the verb.

10. Watkins held that in these processes, mapping UR to SR, the kernel of IE morphophonology resides (*id.* 25, “In diesen Prozessen liegt der Kern der idg. Morphonologie.”)

11. Watkins (1973:104) returned to this passage: Saussure’s rigorously synchronic statements were “cast in the form of synchronically ordered rules, be it noted.” Watkins concludes that “his task as historian was to free the ancient vowel system from ‘the modern humus which various accidents had heaped up.’ Once so freed, the original system could be and was described as a synchronic fact.” [Watkins translates from Mémoire p. 50, “il s’agissait de dégager l’a ... de tout l’humus moderne que différents accidents avaient amassé sur lui.”]

12. Pinault 2012 discovered a slightly later letter to L. Havet where Saussure elucidates this paragraph (following Pinault 2012:84-5 [=Saussure folio 366, p.4], with the editor’s transcription):

<<Toutes les alternances de formes plus pleines avec des formes moins pleines consistent dans des expulsions d’e”>> voilà la 1er principe, mais il est intimement lié à <ou plutôt il contient> cette autre notion-ci: <<l’e lui-même ne connaît pas de degré.>>

13. Saussure contrasts morphological replacement with phonological weakening: “J’ai en conséquence protesté contre cette idée de Brugman [sic] que l’e est comme un o dégradé.”


15. Envoi: As Anna Morpurgo Davies puts it, “The Mémoire is full of unbelievable riches – most of which, sometimes in an altered form, have become part of what we now find in our basic handbooks; some are still to be rediscovered.” (Davies 2004: 21–22) I submit that this insight is one worth rediscovering.
I.3 Saussurean diachrony

16. Saussure (1879:230) treats “Thèmes en -ta,i (flexion faible)” (=our *-ti-stems) under accent, syllable structure (the heart of flexion faible or forte), and vocalic alternations in “proethnic” PIE.

- Greek: Mostly zero-grade root, recessive accentuation: βάσις, πίστις, φύξις
- Germanic: id., but with Verner’s Law Variants (Go. ga-kiṇpi - ga-mundi, dēdi- etc.)

17. The clincher is Vedic: “Les probabilités sont malgré tout pour que le ton frappât le suffixe.” Why?

18. Diachronic change: mati-, kirti- of RV become later (prose) māti-, kīrti- in RV gāti- ‘the way’ (V.64.3a, tr. Jamison-Brereton), Saussure (1879:230–31n.2) sees accent change, contra Brugman’s *gṇīti.

19. Lundquist 2015 in wake of Kiparsky (2010:162 n.27) and Kümmel (2014:165–66) all apparently and unfortunately writing in ignorance of Saussure (I hope I added some philological details, at least!)

20. On how I valued these doublets, some seem happier (Jasanoff 2017:8–9 with n.25, i.a.), while Ringe (2017:58n.48) critiques. Vedic subdialects “are not necessarily direct descendants of Rigvedic or of each other, so that the traditional interpretation of the pattern as leveling in different directions is not certainly false.” Ringe asserts a “fossil” in PGmc. e-grade and VLV *dēdiz ‘deed’ (but cf. Vine 2004).

21. Ringe (2017:58, 60-1) reconstructs an underlying morpheme */-tey-/ and PK paradigm but does not specify the mapping from UR to SR. Gives nom.pl. *mēnteyes against, e.g., the dative singular *mṇṭeyey; but what motivates mobility? Keep with Saussure’s example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saussure (1879:206 for paradigm)</th>
<th>Ringe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SR *yuktéyes, yuktéyei</td>
<td>SR *yéukteyes, yuktéyei</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22. Two time-depths: Saussure's PIE and Ringe's pre-PIE (not certainly false, but is earlier). Cf. Pedersen (1926:23–25) on the initial proposal that already by PIE “des innovations et des actions analogiques nombreuses” fundamentally changed the pre-PIE picture to the point where “tout le système a été refait” by “une longue série d'actions analogiques et d'innovations.” (Cf. Pedersen 1933:21)

I.4 A passage in support: Saussure’s *Cours de lituanien* (1901–2)

23. Saussure in his Lithuanian teaching introduced a “nouvelle classification, afin de distinguer le plan concret de la réalisation effective de l'accent dans la flexion d'un niveau abstrait...” (Piccini 2020:96).


25. Applied to Greek along the lines sketched by Gunkel (2014:7), i.a., under “[m]orphemes themselves have accential properties...The last inherently accented morpheme imposes its accent on the entire derivative.” (approach pioneered by Steriade 1988; 2013). Gunkel illustrates with Gk. -άδ-, -ικός (to φυγ-)  
   - “l'accent en puissance” with Gunkel's UR: /pʰugáđ-ikó/ 
   - “l'accent en acte” with Gunkel's SR: φυγάδικός ‘of/for exile’ (not **φυγάδικος).


I.5 A passage complicating this reading: A tale of two Saussures

27. Ferdinand in the *Cours* (1971:229) set the terms for a debate: a “European” (= word-and-paradigm) and a “Hindu” (= morpheme-based) morphology, as “According to the dominant tendency in each linguistic group, the theoreticians of grammar tend toward the one or the other of these methods.”
28. Brother René responded (tentatively) that “the method of Hindu grammar is the only satisfying one” (Anderson and de Saussure 2018, 27–28 nn.1-3): words are made up of smaller parts.

29. Arguably – and the editor, “amorphous” Anderson (2018:241), argues the point at length – Ferdinand by the time of the *Cours* has landed on a different vision, one that might not countenance morphemes, much less accentual properties on morphemes [Anderson classifies as a type of “realizational-inferential morphology” after the taxonomy in Stump 2001:1-3)]

30. And the “Hindu grammarians”? Or, “Where Does the *Āṣṭādhyāyi* Fit?” (Lowe 2024 §4.3, surprising conclusion ad 105-6). Different debate for another day. We turn to Sanskrit analyses of accents in UR.

**II.1 Analogues of underlying accents 1: What the Hindu grammarians said**

31. In the Pāṇinian spirit: “morphemes are endowed with accent properties of their own and the place of accent in a word is determined compositionally by a general principle on the basis of the morphemes that make it up.” (Kiparsky 1982:56)

32. Not only morphemic properties but resolution in cases of conflict, such as CULMINATIVITY [Esp. Yates (2017:107–10), akin to Pā. 6.1.155. On resolution, see *vipraṭiṣedhe* ‘in case of conflict’? Pā.1.4.2; al.).]

33. On -ti-stems in particular, whose fortunes we’ve followed, cf. Lundquist (2015:47 with n.8) after Thieme (1935:39–41) on the rules Pāṇini sets up (3.3.96) for an accented suffix in the ancient language (*mantre*) and the change to barytone in the forms of his speech.

34. Pāṇini on bahuvrīhi compounds, where accent persists through derivation by *prakṛtyā* ‘by nature’:

**6.2.1 bahuvrihau prakṛtyā pūrvapadām**

“Dans un composé possessif le membre antérieur garde l’état (accentuel) primitif”

35. On levels of representation in Sanskrit grammarians generally: two levels of representation is *de rigueur*, and we witness change (progress, *avers* Thieme) within the tradition (see esp. Lowe 2024:86):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prātiśākhya system of change</th>
<th>&gt;</th>
<th>Pāṇinian system of replacement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$X_i \rightarrow \text{ṣekhara } Y_j$</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>(In place of [$\text{sthāne}$]) $X_k \rightarrow \text{ādesa } Y_l$,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pāṇini does not speak of a sound or any other grammatical element as being ‘changed into’ or ‘becoming’ another one by a grammatical operation. Throughout his grammar, he keeps strictly to the notion of ‘substitution’ (ādesa). As for Meillet [ref. to *Intra.*] so for him, the elements of language are ‘éléments de substitution’. I think we should recognize that in this he shows a remarkable degree of theoretical insight. He is far above the customary usage of historical linguistics that designates as a ‘sound change’ what should, correctly, be said to be a ‘sound substitution’. (Thieme 1958:45)

III. Analogues 2: Greek grammarians on levels of two representation (κατὰ φύσιν τόνος)


37. Yet Greek grammarians recognized levels of representation: every word has an ‘accent according to its nature’ (κατὰ φύσιν τόνος), or its ‘own accent’ (ἴδιος/κύριος τόνος; on these terms, Probert *fthcm*.)

38. This accent can be modified by rules, such as “lulling” rules, knocking oxytones to grave (καλὸς $\rightarrow$ καλὸς ἀνήρ) or putting clitic accents to sleep (καλὸς γέ $\rightarrow$ καλὸς γε).

39. We see “two levels of description: a level at which each word has its ‘natural accent’, and then a level that we arrive at by applying rules.” (Probert 2019:51–52. Rule ordering? See Probert 2024)
40. Example following Probert (2019: exx.3.1-2)

\[ \text{ὅς οἱ ὀνειρικὸς χεῖρας τετᾶτο τρυφαλεῖς.} \]

(Iliad 3.371–2, showing natural accents, bold emph. JL)

\[ \text{ὅς οἱ ὀνειρικὸς χεῖρας τετᾶτο τρυφαλεῖς.} \]

(Iliad 3.371–2, showing surface accents in context)

41. Conclusion on the Greek material: Not oriented towards derivation but clearly using two levels of representation. These levels proved helpful to native speakers, early (often pedagogical) grammarians.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

42. A forgotten chapter in the history of morphophonology? Two levels of representation for accents have proven helpful: Gk. κατὰ φύσιν τόνος, Skt. prakṛtyā, Saussure’s “l'accent en puissance.”

43. Many handbooks use two levels for segmental phonology; very few for the suprasegmental.

44. More than of merely antiquarian interest: these tools are solid equipment for working on “new” languages too (Yates 2016, 2017, 2022 on Anatolian). For synchronic PIE and for morphophonological analyses of the daughter languages, I consider these well-honed tools up to the task.

REFERENCES


