Morphology-sensitive Stress in Southern Hill Nisenan

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Introduction: We analyze stress placement in the Southern Hill dialect of Nisenan, a Maiduan language, as spoken by William Joseph (a.k.a. Bill Joe). In the Northern Hill and Central Hill dialects, stress is assigned to the initial syllable of every word (Eatough 1999:4, Shipley & Smith 1979:171). Bill Joe's speech, on the other hand, exhibits variable stress placement with a right-edge tendency (Uldall 1954:13-14), which lead Shipley & Smith (1979:171) to characterize it as "aberrant and problematic". Analyzing a corpus of Bill Joe's oral narratives from the 1930s, we show that, while different from neighboring dialects, his stress system is highly regular, with surface variability arising from morpheme-specific restrictions on the domain of stress assignment.

Data: All data is drawn from a ∼21,000-word corpus of Bill Joe's oral narratives (Uldall & Shipley 1966). Nisenan is a highly-inflected suffixing language; most words are multimorphemic, and ∼15,000 words in the corpus are multisyllabic. Most exhibit one stress (90.5% of tokens), with fewer having 2 stresses (9.2%), and even fewer having $3-5$ (<0.4%). We focus on multisyllabic words with one stress.

Generalizations: We argue that stress is assigned to the rightmost 'eligible' syllable, and that morphological structure determines eligibility: Specific morphemes are consistently excluded from the domain of stress assignment, and any syllable whose nucleus is furnished by an excluded morpheme is ineligible for stress. The data in (1)[1] consist solely of morphemes that are included in the domain of stress assignment (boxed on the first gloss line) while those in (2) contain morphemes that are ineligible for stress (bolded on the second gloss line). Crucially, the behavior of a given suffix is highly consistent across the corpus.

Additionally, a few disyllabic suffixes disallow stress on their final syllable. For example, the penultimate syllable is stressed when the word ends with the 2nd person different subject marker *-menc'e*, i.e. *'isip-ménc'e* '(you) go out'. Morphological analysis of Bill Joe's dialect is ongoing; these may prove to be multimorphemic strings.

(1) *Stress falls on the rightmost syllable within the domain of stress assignemnt (boxed on line 1); all morphemes are included in that domain.*

a. me.yís	b. me.yi.c'é	c. me.yi.c'e.té
mey-is	mey-ic'e	mey-ic'e-te
give-1SG.OPT	give-DS	give-DS-CONTR
'I will give'	'give'	'no matter what (they) give'

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[1] We present Nisenan language data using the Shingle Springs Rancheria Language Program's orthography and the following abbreviations: 1 = '1st person', 3 = '3rd person', CONTR = 'contrastive', DS = 'different subject', FUT = 'future', HAB = 'habitual', OPT = 'optative', PST = 'past', Q = 'question marker', REAL = 'realis', REP = 'reportative', SG = singular, SS = 'same subject'.

(2)   *Stress is still assigned to the rightmost syllable within the domain of stress assignment,*
      but some morphemes are excluded (bolded on line 2).

a.   [méy]wes
     mey-**wes**
     give-FUT
     'will give'

b.   [mey.ha.há]t'om
     mey-haha-**t'o**-m
     give-HAB-PST-REAL
     'always gave'

c.   [méy]t'o.ma.toy
     mey-**t'o**-m-**atoy**
     give-PAST-REAL-REP
     'gave (it is said)'

d.   ['ɨ.síp]wes.ka
     'ɨsip-**wes**-**ka**
     go.out-FUT-3SG.Q
     '(it) will come out?'

e.   ['ɨ.sip]we[si.c'é]
     'ɨsip-**wes**-ic'e
     go.out-FUT-DS
     '(they) will go out'

f.   ['ɨ.mit]we[sín]
     'ɨmit-**wes**-in
     go.in-FUT-SS
     '(they) will go in'

Taking into account the morpheme-specific restrictions uncovered thus far, the proposed stress pattern accounts for 91.6% of the single-stress multisyllabic tokens in the corpus (and 83% of all multisyllabic tokens).

Discussion: This paper demonstrates that Bill Joe assigns stress according to a straightforward algorithm, with a small set of morpheme-specific behaviors interacting to produce the variable surface pattern erroneously referred to in past scholarship as "problematic". Understanding Bill Joe's stress system will elucidate the systems of less well-documented southern Nisenan speakers, which also show right-edge tendencies (e.g. Kroeber 1929:282). This work will help Language Program staff at the Shingle Springs Rancheria, a Nisenan heritage community, assign stress to novel utterances in ways that are authentic and faithful to the speech of past speakers. It also highlights the value of the digitization and quantitative analysis of language resources, which can reveal generalizations that eluded past scholars working without the benefit of computational resources.

References:

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