

Emmerich Kelih, *Die Silbe in slawischen Sprachen. Von der Optimalitätstheorie zu einer funktionalen Interpretation*. München-Berlin-Washington D.C.: Sagner 2012, 188 pp. (Specimina Philologiae Slavicae 168)

Reviewed by **Emília Nemcová**.

The book under review is both an excellent historical survey of the syllable problem and a methodological analysis of different approaches. While the majority of linguists believe that a linguistic unit is a strictly defined real entity having crisp boundaries - a belief which is a remnant of older “essentialistic” times - the author adheres rather to the conjecture of L. Hřebíček saying that “Let there be some (hypothetical) text constructs composed of some (hypothetical) components. If the size of the components is a function of the size of the constructs, according to Menzerath’s law, then both the constructs and the components are textual units and they lie on two different levels” (cf. Altmann 2001: 11). Since the best criteria for establishing a linguistic unit are laws, and syllable length depends on word length, the “existence” of syllables can be considered as given, though some philosophies and linguists deny its theoretical relevance on different grounds. Of course, there are different models of syllable, but these are merely means of description.

In the first chapter the author succeeds in integrating the syllable in Köhler’s (1986, 2005) self-regulation cycle representing the best way to a theory of language and text. This is done *passim*, hence the book is at the same time both a survey of some results and an introduction to theoretical thinking and to a deductive approach in linguistics. Syllable has the same fate as all other linguistic units: one discusses their definitions (there are dozens of definitions of word and sentence, too), rules of forming, criteria for separation based on some rules and describes the inventories or types. This is, of course, necessary, but it is only a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for theoretical work. Theoretical work begins with hypotheses and their testing. Rules are not part of a theory. In the best case they are criteria, and as such they are conventions.

In the second chapter different conceptions and definition of syllable are presented: for structuralism, it is Pulgram (1970), for generative phonology it is Hooper (1972, 1976) who begins to deviate from the conception of crisp boundaries and begins to measure. The measurement is the basis of Vennemann’s (1988) approach who presents a dynamic syllable and whose approach can further be developed, and Lehfeldt’s (1971) method who applies a probability approach for syllable segmentation. His algorithm has been programmed and applied in several languages.

Vennemann (1982, 1983, 1986, 1988) elaborated a number of preference rules - which are erroneously called laws and criticized on this reason by Kelih - representing tendencies of syllable formation. Many of these tendencies could be statistically tested. Kelih criticizes Vennemann’s conception of a “better” syllable which should perhaps be replaced by “more frequent” or “easier to pronounce” or something else that is measurable.

Optimality “theory” is a classical case of a search for “essences”: what is syllable and how to separate it from the next one. But even if we know it, nobody says what is the aim of this procedure? What are the results useful for? Usually, one sets up a hypothesis and samples data which are relevant for its testing. If the data force us to reject the hypothesis, we first check the data, then the criteria and at last, the hypothesis. In inductive/exploratory research we produce data and search for a “regularity” under which it could be subsumed and we generalize stepwise. But in optimality theory one cannot recognize either an existing or a future theory. Kelih is frugal with his criticism but evidently this is a case of proto-scientific approach asking merely “what is there?”

The third chapter revives the one hundred years old discussion concerning sonority. Is it an intuitive concept or can it be objectively measured? Can it be used for syllable definition

and separation? Or is it a conglomerate of several properties? Some authors treat it as a crisp property, other ones speak about approximations and probability. Perhaps the theory of fuzzy sets would bring an acceptable solution to several problems.

The chapter on phonotactics - a concept appearing in the whole book - is very critical. Are there mirror-effects, asymmetries, positional preferences, correlation with phonetic distances, links to other properties, how to take a sample, etc.? Kelih is keen on showing the main deficiencies in statistical processing (or better: non-processing) of data. But even if one of the hypotheses has been positively tested in one language, is the trend a general phenomenon? How many languages must be included in the sample in order to render both types of errors small? Or would it not be better to strive for a theoretical approach from which individual hypotheses could be derived? In that case the hypothesis would be at least theoretically corroborated. The whole discipline, strongly supported by universalists, has a methodological shortage: it searches for universals, not for laws. All laws are universals but not vice versa. There is a long way from a universal to a law but in qualitative linguistics even rules or frequent events are called laws as mentioned above.

Chapter 5 brings a survey of trials to use statistics, in most cases for classification. The author shows the results and their weaknesses. Deviations are "explained" by the authors using some ad hoc criteria. One does not try to derive a function containing parameters for boundary conditions, one relies on absolute numbers. Nevertheless, these first steps in Slavic languages were the initiators of more sophisticated approaches in this century. The only reasonable hypothesis is the statement that the more syllable types there are in a language, the longer are they on the average. This relationship is clearly linear as shown on p. 137.

The last chapter is, from the point of Quantitative Linguistics, of course, the most progressive. After it has been shown that the syllable is a "legal" linguistic unit having all properties required by Altmann (1996), its placing in theory is performed by stating its relationship to different other language properties. It fits into the Köhlerian control cycle which contains additional links and interrelations to other linguistic properties. From the synergetic point of view there is no other and better way to "theorify" a linguistic entity. The author specifies a number of hypotheses linking the syllable and its properties with other entities. Unfortunately, functions, data and tests are not given - this is a task for generations of linguists - but if a theory of syllable is to be set up, the book under review furnishes us all necessary requirements. As a matter of fact, any future quantitative or synergetic approach can rely on it.

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