The Placement of Agreement Clitics in San Martin Peras Mixtec
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BACKGROUND:
San Martin Peras Mixtec is an Oto-Manguean language from western Juxtlahuaca in the Mexican state of Oaxaca with about 10,000 speakers. Despite its broad speaker base, it shows the initial signs of language endangerment due to pressure from Spanish. It is distinct from other Mixtecs; I know of no previous report of these data or data like them. The goal of this paper is to provide a formal account of this apparently anomalous agreement pattern.

THE PUZZLE:
Agreement is marked by preverbal clitic pronouns which agree with the subject’s φ-features. The puzzle is that the distribution of these agreement clitics can not be syntactically determined; it is sensitive to prosodic factors which the syntax should not have access to (Pullum & Zwicky 1986). For instance, the prosodic size of final adjuncts matters, contrasting final word-sized (ω) and phrase-size (ϕ) adjuncts (1a-2a), or being in a first conjunct (2b) or not (1b).

(1) Agreement Clitic Required

a. Rí ntachi sää ϕ[ itsyá ].
   ANIMAL fly.fut bird tomorrow
   'The bird will fly tomorrow.'

b. Ńá ndákojo ṃá Maria [ ϕ ].
   FEM wake.up.pres M.
   'Maria wakes up.'

(2) Agreement Clitic Not Necessary

a. Rí ntachi sää ϕ[ nuhúnu in tolo’o ].
   ANIMAL fly.fut bird face one while
   'The bird will fly soon (in a while).'

b. Ńá ndákojo ṃá Maria [ ϕ ] ra ϕ[ xá’a ṃá skwela ].
   FEM wake.up.pres M. and go.pres fem school
   'Maria wakes up and goes to school.'

THE ACCOUNT:
Using upstep and downstep domains as diagnostics for prosodic constituency, I show that there is a straightforward prosodic characterization of this distribution. Agreement clitics are required when the maximal ϕ would otherwise have only an ω at its left edge. But when the prosodic constituent containing the clitic also encompasses enough material to not yield a left-edge ω, the clitic is not needed (4).

(3) Prosodic Parses of (1)

a. ϕ( Rí ntachi ) ϕ( sää ) ϕ( itsyá )
b. ϕ( Ńá ndákojo ) ϕ( ṃá Maria )

(4) Prosodic Parses of (2)

a. ϕ( Rí ntachi ) ϕ( nuhúnu in tolo’o )
b. ϕ( Ńá ndákojo ) ϕ( ṃá skwela )

The difference between (3) and (4) is how much prosodic material is in the minimal prosodic constituent containing the agreement clitic. Having only an ω at the left edge of ϕ_max is marked, and avoidance of this prosodic markedness is what derives the observed distribution of agreement clitics.

I propose that these agreement clitics are always present in the input to the phonology as the result of syntactic Agree (Chomsky 2005, Preminger 2014), but the prosody determines where they are required by its own principles. By appealing to Match Theory (Selkirk 2009, Elfner 2012), I present an OT account which does two things. First, the effects seen in (3-4) are captured using Myrberg (2013)’s constraint Equal-Sisters which penalizes prosodic structures in which prosodic sisters are not of the same level on the prosodic hierarchy. Second, the importance of binary prosodic structures is highlighted, mirroring the strong binary effects uncovered by Pike (1948) in the languages lower prosodic constituents. This prevents the offending ω’s in (3) from being embedded with a non-binary ϕ.

UPSHOT:
This project claims that through a more careful understanding of this language’s prosody we can understand the observed distribution of agreement clitics. Importantly, this means that we do not need to alter our theory of Agree on the basis of this data. Furthermore, we are able to maintain the principle of Phonology-Free Syntax, which has become so crucial to Minimalist thinking.