Phonological Selection and the Bracketing Paradox
in English Adjectival Morphology

Maria Gouskova
(NYU)

Some English adjectives form comparatives and superlatives by affixation (e.g., smart-er, stupid-est), whereas others require periphrasis (most intelligent, *intelligentest). The affixation rule is often framed in terms or prosodic size: adjectives that combine with "-er" and "-est" are maximally moraic trochees (McCarthy and Prince 1986). This phonological generalization encounters two well-known problems: there are many mono- and disyllables that do not combine with the affix (mauve/?mauver, vapid/?vapider), and there are some trisyllables that do (unlikely/unlikelier, see Pesetsky 1985, Marantz 1988 et seq.). Mondorf (2009) proposes an account whereby affixation is governed in part by general markedness principles of English phonology, such as the avoidance of stress clashes and lapses and segmental OCP constraints. The alternative I pursue in this talk is that affixation is specified lexically for some adjectives but not others, and that phonological generalizations are extracted from these lexical lists ("sublexicons") and encoded in sublexical phonotactic grammars (Becker and Gouskova to appear, Gouskova, Newlin-Åukowicz, and Kasyanenko 2015). The theory is tested in two experiments. The first experiment is a nonce word rating study where the same wugs are presented as adjectives or verbs ("very wug", "to wug") and affixed with comparative or nominalizing "-er" ("much wugger", "a wugger"). People rate bare wugs as less acceptable when they are presented as verbs than adjectives, but they rate comparative wugs as less acceptable than nominalized wugs. This suggests that phonological factors in comparative formation are specific to the sublexicon of adjectives. People's ratings are moreover best modeled in terms of overall sublexical phonotactics, not just prosodic size, which underdetermines the data. The second study investigates the so-called bracketing paradox presented by English adjectives, which have stymied analyses using phonological subcategorization frames. The results are problematic both for purely phonological or purely lexical accounts, but I suggest they are due to the processing difficulties presented by negation.