

Morpheme-specific constraints

Exceptionality (EGG 2025, Zagreb)

1 Introduction

- On our final day, we'll look at how exceptionality is handled in Optimality Theory using *morpheme-specific constraints* (e.g., Pater 2006).
- This approach has a certain affinity for the exceptionality conventions developed by Lakoff (1970) in that:
 - it treats exceptionality as a property of morphemes rather than segments, and
 - it focuses primarily on apparent negative exceptions.

2 Russian yers

- Most current-day Slavic languages exhibit vowel–zero alternations.
- In synchronic linguistics, these “fleeting vowels” are called *yers*, because fleeting vowels loosely correspond to short tense high vowels (called *ѣръ* and *ьръ*) in Church Slavonic.
- Russian has relatively robust yer alternations.

(1) Russian nouns (after Gouskova 2012):

| | nom.sg. | | gen.sg. | |
|----|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. | у <u>г</u> о <u>р</u> ь | úgər ^j | угяра | ugr ^j -á ‘eel’ |
| b. | И <u>г</u> о <u>р</u> ь | ígər ^j | И <u>г</u> о <u>р</u> я | ígər ^j -a ‘Igor’ |
| c. | л <u>ѣ</u> н | l ^j ón | л <u>ѣ</u> на | l ^j n-á ‘linen’ |
| d. | л <u>ѣ</u> н <u>ь</u> | l ^j én ^j | л <u>ѣ</u> н <u>и</u> | l ^j én-i ‘laziness’ |
| e. | р <u>о</u> в | róf | р <u>ѣ</u> ва | rv-á ‘ditch’ |
| f. | л <u>ѣ</u> в | l ^j éf | л <u>ѣ</u> в <u>ѣ</u> | l ^j v-á ‘lion’ |

- These alternations occur only within a subset of eligible roots even within near-identical phonological contexts:
 - fleeting *o* in *угорь–угяра* is consistent with either epenthesis or syncope, but
 - stable *o* in *Игорь–Игоря* seems to contradict epenthesis and shows that syncope does not apply to all surface *o*'s.
 - Furthermore, both *o* and *e* can be fleeting as shown by comparing *ров–рѣва* to *лѣв–лѣвѣ*, a further argument against epenthesis.

- Fleeting vowels are most robust in declension, but they are posited in other categories, such as prepositions, verbal prefixes, and diminutives; see the appendix of Gouskova 2012 for some examples.

Close reading

- Gouskova 2012:§1–4

3 Polish yers

- Polish also has robust yer alternations.

(2) Polish nouns (Gorman 2025):

| | nom.sg. | gen.sg. | gen.pl. | | |
|----|---------|----------|-----------|----------------|---------|
| a. | kubel | kubł-a | kubł-ów | ‘bucket’ | (masc.) |
| b. | klusk-a | klusk-i | klusek | ‘noodle’ | (fem.) |
| c. | żebr-o | żebr-a | żeber | ‘rib’ | (neut.) |
| d. | kufer | kufr-a | kufr-ów | ‘chest, trunk’ | (masc.) |
| e. | szofer | szofer-a | szofer-ów | ‘driver’ | (masc.) |
| f. | cyfr-a | cyfr-y | cyfr | ‘digit’ | (fem.) |

- As shown in (2a–c), the alternations occur across all three genders, even though gender (and animacy) determines where null desinences occur.
- As shown in (2d–f), the alternations occur only in a subset of eligible roots even within near-identical phonological contexts:
 - fleeting *e* in *kufer–kufra* is consistent with either epenthesis or syncope, but
 - the absence of *e* in *cyfra–cyfry* seems to contradict epenthesis, and
 - stable *e* in *szofer–szofera* shows that syncope does not apply to all surface *e*’s in these contexts.
- Fleeting *e*’s are most robustly attested in declension (e.g., *kubel–kubła* ‘bucket’), but:
 - there are other fleeting vowels, and
 - other categories have fleeting vowels too.
- For example, there are three masculine nouns in which *o* alternates with zero.

(3) *o*–zero alternations (Rubach 2013:1140):

| | nom.sg. | gen.sg. | gen.pl. | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|-------------|
| | kocioł | kotł-a | kotł-ów | ‘cauldron’ |
| | osioł | osł-a | osł-ów | ‘donkey’ |
| | koziół | kozł-a | kozł-ów | ‘billygoat’ |

- In the verb ‘swear’, the derived imperfective (DI) inf. *zaklinać* contains a fleeting *i* absent in 3sg. masc. fut. *zaklnie*.
- Many, many other near-minimal examples of this sort can be found in the literature.

Close reading

- Rubach 2013 *passim*

4 Further reading

- Gouskova and Becker (2013) and Becker and Gouskova (2016) describe nonce-word experiments intended to probe the representation of Russian yers.
- Scheer (2019) provides a formal critique of these experiments, and Schütze (2005:§3) problematizes the interpretation of nonce-word experiments in general.
- Rubach 2016 and Gorman (2025) provide newer analyses of Polish yers.

References

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