WORD PROSODY AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF ORAL/NASAL CONTOUR CONSONANTS IN KAINGANG

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1. Introduction

Oral/nasal contour consonants ([m^b], [b^m]) are relatively common in the world’s languages. Not only are they common in the indigenous languages of Latin America, but they also occur in African languages, indigenous Australian languages, Austronesian languages, and others. In most, if not all, Amerindian languages complex consonants are in complementary distribution with ‘plain’ consonants, either nasal consonants (as in Kaingang), non-sonorant voiced stops (as in Barasana, see Gomez-Imbert, 1997), or both (as in Maxacalí, see Wetzels, 2007), or they are in free variation with voiced stops (as in Cayapa, see Lindskoog e Brend, 1962) or nasal consonants, as in Warí (see Everett and Kern, 1998). For this reason, these sounds are usually derived from either underlying nasal consonants or from non-sonorant voiced stops. In this paper, we will have a closer look at the contour consonants of Kaingang. We will not be concerned directly with the issue of their underlying representation, although we will assume, in line with general practice, that the contour property itself is not phonologically distinctive, but a surface (phonetic) phenomenon. Instead, we will look into the distribution of the different contour types ([m^b], [b^m], [^bm^b]) that this language possesses and we will show that their surface occurrence is indicative of Kaingang prosodic structure, in which the concepts of tauto-syllabicity, ambisyllabicity, and extrasyllabicity, as well as the interaction between syllable structure and word structure, play an explicative role.

1. Not always, see, for example, Ospina (2007) for Yuhup (Maku) and, for discussion, Wetzels (to appear 2008).
2. The language

The Kaingang occupy some thirty different localities, distributed over their historical territory in the Southern Brazilian states of São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul. The actual population numbers an approximate 29,000 individuals. The name Kaingang also refers to the traditional language of these people, for which four variants are distinguished: the dialect of São Paulo, the dialect of Paraná, the Southern dialect, and Xokleng, which is considered an independent language of the group. Davis (1968) classifies Kaingang as a member of the Jê family, a fact confirmed by Rodrigues (1986:48).

This study is mainly based on Wiesemann’s (1964; 1972) grammatical description of the dialect of Paraná. Other variants of Kaingang have been studied by Teixeira (1988), who describes the phonology of the southern group, and by Cavalcante (1987), who compares the phonologies of Paraná and São Paulo.

3. Consonants and vowels of Kaingang

In this section we will discuss the Kaingang phoneme inventory, as a background for the discussion on syllable structure that we will address in section 4.

3.1 Consonants

The Kaingang phonemic system lacks a triple opposition between voiced, voiceless, and nasal consonants, a characteristic that it shares with a considerable number of indigenous languages of the Americas. Instead, it distinguishes a series of voiceless consonants, henceforth represented as the /P/ class, and a series of consonants that have nasal [m], pre-oralized [ᵐᵐ], post-oralized [ᵐᵇ], and circum-oralized [ᵐᵇᵐᵇ] allophones in complementary distribution, henceforth referred to as the /M/ class. Wiesemann (1972: 39) defines the /M/ series as [lenis], as opposed to the /P/ class, which she defines as [fortis], whereas Kindell (1972: 201) defines the /M/ class as [voiced], the /P/ class as [voiceless]. Since the question of the precise phonological definition of these sounds is irrelevant for the problem at hand in this paper², we reproduce in (1) the system of consonantal phonemes proposed by

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² See Wetzels (to appear 2008) for more extensive discussion of the phonological feature definition of contour consonants in a number of indigenous languages of South America.