

Phonological default in the lexical stress system of Russian: Evidence from noun declension



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Received 8 August 2013; received in revised form 16 August 2014; accepted 18 August 2014
Available online

Abstract

Russian is known to be an unpredictable stress language, where stress is not fixed to a particular location within a certain phonological domain, but rather marked lexically for a number of individual morphemes (e.g., roots and affixes). Despite its true lexical nature, when roots are unaccented or when dominant affixes delete the base accent, a default accent is argued to emerge. The default stress positions proposed for Russian, however, are far from unified: word-initial (e.g., Melvold, 1990), stem-final (Crosswhite et al., 2003), and post-stem (Alderete, 2001). In this paper, we present results from two production studies, where we investigated stress realization by Russian native speakers in novel words that crucially lacked morphological information. In Study 1, we used a group of indeclinable novel place names in a map reading and a schedule description task. Study 2 was intended to extend the findings to another set of indeclinable words, novel acronyms, in a reading task. The classes of words we used in these two studies enabled us to control for the confounding effects of morphology, a serious problem in previous experimental studies on Russian stress (e.g., Crosswhite, 2000). We also tested the potential contribution of vowel quality (back/front) in the last two syllables, type of penultimate syllable (closed/open), as well as word length (two-/three-syllable) to stress assignment. The following default patterns robustly emerged from these two studies: final stress in consonant-final words, and penultimate stress in vowel-final words. Furthermore, the type of final segment was the strongest predictor accounting for stress placement, as opposed to word length and vowel quality. The results from Study 2, which used only vowel-final acronyms, corroborated these findings: about 78% of the acronyms were stressed on the penultimate syllable, the quality of the final vowel playing no significant role in stress assignment. Contra Crosswhite et al. (2003), our results suggest that the default stress cannot be stem-final since about 85% of vowel-final words in both studies revealed penultimate stress. Instead, we argue that the default stress pattern in Russian is best characterized by a metrical system that employs trochees built at the right word-edge. Since consonant-final words must receive a vowel when inflected, our analysis provides a unified account of default stress in both consonant- and vowel-final words, and finds empirical support from diachronic and dialectal facts, as well as loan word adaptations.

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Keywords: Lexical stress; Russian; Default stress; Indeclinable nouns; Acronyms; Trochaic rhythm

1. Introduction

Stress assignment in Russian is largely unpredictable, suggesting that word stress must be stored in the mental lexicon. When Russian native speakers are confronted with a novel word, how do they assign stress to it? In particular, are there stress assignment rules that apply when a word bears no lexically specified accent? It is generally assumed that

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Russian stress is conditioned morphologically on the basis of inherent prosodic properties of roots and affixes that determine stress location in a word. However, when words are unknown and devoid of internal morphological structure, some phonological mechanism must emerge to assign stress to the word: Each phonological word has one primarily stressed syllable which constitutes the prosodic head of the word, and if this head is not determined by morphology, then it must be provided by phonology.

In this article, we investigate which *phonological* factors determine non-lexical stress placement. In particular, we ask (i) which principles govern the assignment of stress in the absence of lexical information, and (ii) whether the default stress emanates from a particular metrical structure that underlies the Russian prosodic system.

Previous research on the Russian default stress pattern and metrical structure has yielded conflicting results and incoherent description of facts. The default positions of Russian stress proposed in the literature range from word-initial (Halle, 1973, 1997; Kiparsky and Halle, 1977; Melvold, 1990; Idsardi, 1992; Revithiadou, 1999), stem-final (Crosswhite et al., 2003) to post-stem (Alderete, 2001). Analyses of the type of metrical foot in Russian also remarkably diverge. For instance, Revithiadou (1999) claims that Russian has a trochaic foot, van der Hulst (1999) and Hayes (1995) classify Russian as an unbounded lexical accent system, whereas Halle and Vergnaud (1987), Melvold (1990) and Crosswhite (2000) argue for an iambic foot.

Here we present results from two production studies that investigated the phonological default stress pattern in Russian nouns. Previous theoretical work on Russian stress (e.g., Halle, 1973, 1997; Melvold, 1990; Alderete, 2001) focused on the investigation of the accentual properties of morphemes and postulated that the default arises in the absence of inherently stressed morphemes. On a par with this view, experimental studies employed non-words to exclude morphological effects in the investigation of the default position of stress. However, non-words may also be declinable by taking inflectional endings that mark the grammatical functions of nouns in a sentence. In the present study, we control for morphological confounds in the previous studies by using (in addition to consonant-final declinable words) a group of *indeclinable* vowel-final words: (i) place names (Experiment I) and (ii) acronyms (Experiment II). We also investigate hitherto underexplored structural factors such as word length, vowel quality and the effect of consonant clusters in stress placement in a systematic way. Our results indicate a robust tendency for the default stress to appear on the penultimate syllable of indeclinable vowel-final words while consonant-final declinable words receive final stress in the absence of inflectional endings. In light of our findings as well as along with diachronic and typological observations, we claim that the phonological default stress pattern in Russian is a trochee built from the right word-edge in both indeclinable and declinable words.

The outline of the paper is as follows. Section 2 introduces the notion of the default and briefly presents previous observations on default stress assignment and its implications for the metrical structure of Russian. Section 3 discusses the declension system and nominal stress patterns in Russian. In section 4, we review some theoretical accounts of the Russian stress with a special emphasis on the default stress pattern. We discuss the conflicting results of previous experimental studies that investigated the default stress pattern in Russian and the relationship between the default stress and word frequency in section 5, and lay out the motivation and research objectives of the present study in section 6. Sections 7 and 8 present the experimental design and the results of the two production studies, respectively. In section 9, we address a number of empirical and theoretical questions that our study raises, and discuss the implications of our findings for the metrical structure of Russian.

2. Phonological default in unpredictable stress systems and foot structure

In canonical lexical stress languages, stress assignment is usually not sensitive to the phonological make-up of words, i.e. syllable structure, syllable weight or metrical structure. Morphemes (stems and affixes) are underlyingly specified for stress so that every lexical entry is stored in the lexicon together with its stress pattern. The phonological default is often argued to arise when stress is not lexically assigned. For instance, investigating default stress in Italian nouns, Krämer (2009) points out that the existence of lexical stress does not imply the absence of a default mechanism for stress placement in Italian, and suggests that default stress arises in morphologically-bare forms. In a similar vein, Revithiadou (1999) specifies morphemes in Greek as stressed, unstressed, pre- and post-accenting, arguing however that the default emerges in the absence of underlying accents (Revithiadou et al., 2011, 2013). The primary assumption that underlies such claims is that when there is no inherent accent¹ in a word, some *phonological mechanism* must assign stress, which should then reveal speakers' implicit knowledge about the prosodic structure of their language. In the Metrical Stress Theory of Hayes (1995), the emerging stress pattern, i.e. the phonological default, has been argued to be the

¹ We use the term *accent* to refer to an abstract entity, an autosegmental unit in the form of a grid mark, which is sponsored by a particular morpheme as its idiosyncratic property. An accent is phonetically realized as *stress* in a stress-accent language, or as *pitch* in a pitch-accent language (e.g., Revithiadou, 1999; Alderete, 2001; Kabak and Revithiadou, 2009).

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