



Proper name subcategory: a prominent position

Aziz Jaber ^{a,*}, Osama Omari ^b

^a Yarmouk University, Department of English Language and Literature, 303 Village Building, Irbid, 21163, Jordan

^b Yarmouk University, Department of English Language and Literature, 305 Village Building, Irbid, 21163, Jordan



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ABSTRACT

Proponents of positional faithfulness theory in phonology have identified root-initial syllables, stressed syllables, roots, category nouns, and somehow final syllables as prominent positions that exhibit asymmetrical effects in resisting neutralization themselves but triggering it in other, less privileged, positions and categories. Based on data mainly from Jordanian Arabic, but from other languages as well, this paper establishes the proper name subcategory as a prominent licenser that phonologically manifests itself in the same ways as other well-established prominent positions. The proper name subcategory maintains a full inventory of sounds whereas other categories use only a subset of that inventory. It also resists neutralization to which other categories submit, and it licenses neutralization resistance to other categories such as loanword proper names. Additionally, the proper name subcategory tolerates marked structures that are either prohibited or neutralized in other categories.

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1. Introduction

The study of neutralization has been gaining great momentum in phonological theory, in Optimality Theory in particular, for the role neutralization plays in accounting for the asymmetrical behavior of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ positions. Neutralization can be roughly defined as a pervasive phonological process that may take different shapes to erase a phonological opposition or contrast (Selkirk, 1994). However, it has been observed that some positions, characterized as weak, submit to neutralization; others, known as privileged or strong, resist it (Beckman, 1999). We refer to this as “neutralization asymmetry.”

In Optimality Theory, there are two accounts of neutralization asymmetry; namely, Positional Markedness which “assumes that a marked structure either must or is not allowed to occur in particular positions” (Zoll, 2004: 365) and Positional Faithfulness which assumes the existence of strong licensors that “... permit a wide range of marked segments, trigger directional phonological processes, and resist the application of otherwise regular alternations” (Beckman, 2004:311). In the positional faithfulness literature, a dichotomy between phonologically strong and weak positions has been established based on their asymmetrical behavior towards contrasts and neutralization processes (Beckman, 1999, 2004; Casali, 1996; Gnanadesikan, 1997; Moreton et al., 2017; Selkirk, 1994; Smith, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2014; Zoll, 2004, among others). When a position shows asymmetrical behavior in terms of licensing contrasts or resisting neutralizations that other positions submit to, this position serves as a strong position that requires special phonological treatment and special context-bound

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: aziz@yu.edu.jo (A. Jaber), osama.omari@yu.edu.jo (O. Omari).

constraints to capture its behavior. Therefore, prominent positions, or licensors if you wish, share a quality that their weak counterparts lack, Privilege. According to Smith (2010:1) “phonological privilege is understood to mean the ability to support a greater array of phonological contrasts.” Major among these prominent positions are root-initial syllables, stressed syllables, roots, the category noun, and, somehow, final syllables. These positions have been established as privileged on phonetic, psycholinguistic and cognitive grounds (Beckman, 1999:3).

Adopting positional faithfulness theory, this paper argues for establishing the proper name subcategory as a strong position. Based on data drawn mainly from Jordanian Arabic (JA, henceforth),¹ this subcategory appears to behave phonologically as the other well-established strong positions in resisting and triggering neutralization, maintaining contrasts, and licensing resistance to other categories, such as loan words. We will also show how cognitive, psychological, philosophical, and linguistic realms provide independent support for this privilege of proper names over other categories such as common nouns.

The organization of the paper is as follows. After this brief introduction, Section 2 shows how different interdisciplinary fields such as cognitive science, neuropsychology, linguistics, and philosophy of language lend support for establishing the proper name subcategory as a prominent position. Section 3 investigates how the strong proper name subcategory behaves regarding high vowel syncope in JA. In Section 4, a brief conclusion is given.

2. Prominence of proper names

In this section we show how proper names act distinctively from their common noun counterparts, citing evidence from cognitive science, neuropsychology, linguistics, and philosophy of language, paying special attention to some phonetic and phonological characteristics and processes that are restricted to proper names. Evidence collected illustrates the special status of proper names in the noun category.

2.1. Cognitive science and neuropsychological evidence

One of the major goals of the study of language processing in cognitive science is to find a satisfying answer to the question of how linguistic knowledge, phonological; syntactic; semantic; and perceptual, of words, is represented in the human brain. Seeking an answer to this major question, Müller and Kutas (1996) did an experiment on the comprehension of proper names, common nouns, and one's own name, all occurring as first words in different sentences. Their findings support the popular hypothesis in neuropsychology that “PNs [proper names], especially people's ONs [own names], are processed in some sense differently than CNs [common nouns].” (p. .225) [clarifications added]. This asymmetrical behavior of proper names in terms of comprehension manifests itself in the laboratory results of the recordings of the three noun subcategories. Both proper names and common nouns elicit ERP (Event-Related potential) waveforms, but with a significant difference. The N1 and P2 components,² which are typical signatures of responses to stimulus input produced in the brain and recorded in the scalp, were significantly larger for proper names than for common nouns. This indicates regardless of “[w]hether our ERP data reflect a difference between names and nouns in the extent to which they capture attention, arouse an emotion, evoke a memory, or reside in different anatomical loci, they do offer a physiological grounding for proposed linguistic and evolutionary distinctions between PNs and CNs” (P.225). Put differently, the cognitive processing of proper names is significantly different from that of common nouns. This means that they are treated somehow as distinct linguistic categories, which might explain their asymmetrical status and behavior in phonology in terms of neutralization, (see Section 3).

Proper names behave distinctively differently from common nouns in lexical retrieval. There is almost a consensus among neuropsychologists that proper names are harder to retrieve from memory than their common noun complements (Semenza and Sgaramella, 1993; Pendlebury, 1990; and Young et al., 1986; to name but three studies). Semenza and Sgaramella (1993) argue that this retrieval rigidity of proper names comes from their denotation in the actual world which carries reference only; this means that they denote the individuals called by the names, but they have no sense. Common nouns, however, have sense. They are descriptions that give qualities or attributes of individuals or entities. A proper name which holds almost a meaning-free reference characteristic, as opposed to other categories which carry a meaning-full sense characteristic, has less mental correlations in terms of attributes and qualities than other word categories. This observation has been emphasized by Young et al. (1986), where the “Baker/baker Paradox” is introduced. The core claim of this paradox is that remembering the occupation of a certain person is easier than remembering his or her name though the person's name could be the same word used for his or her occupation. So, a word like ‘Baker’ utilized as a proper name is harder to retrieve than its occupation counterpart ‘baker’.

Thus, the differences in cognitive processing and lexical access of proper names and common nouns suggest a subcategory of nouns that behaves distinctively from the common noun category. This indicates a special status enjoyed by proper names that qualifies them to be rigid and resisting, an asymmetrical constellation that common nouns lack.

¹ Jordanian Arabic is a variety of Arabic spoken in Jordan. As other Arabic dialects, Jordanian Arabic is a descendent of Classical Arabic. The authors are native speakers of the dialect, so all examples come from the authors' repertoire.

² An ERP component is one of the component waves of the more complex ERP waveform. ERP components are defined by their polarity (positive, P, or negative, N going voltage), timing, scalp distribution, and sensitivity to task processing.

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