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# ONSETS

The concept of the 'onset', i.e. the consonant(s) before the vowel of a syllable, is critical within phonology. While phonologists have examined the segmental behaviour of onsets, their prosodic status has instead been largely overlooked. In fact, most previous accounts have stipulated that onsets are insignificant when it comes to the 'heaviness' of syllables. In this book Nina Topintzi presents a new theory of onsets, arguing for their fundamental role in the structure of language both in the underlying and surface representation, unlike previous assumptions. To capture the weight behaviour of onsets, a novel account is proposed that relates their interaction with voicing, tone and stress. Using numerous case-studies and data from a variety of languages and phenomena (including stress, compensatory lengthening, gemination and word minimality), the book introduces a model that reflects the true behaviour of onsets, demonstrating profound implications for syllable and weight theories.

NINA TOPINTZI is a Teaching Fellow in the School of English at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

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# ONSETS

## SUPRASEGMENTAL AND PROSODIC BEHAVIOUR

NINA TOPINTZI

*Aristotle University, Thessaloniki*

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# *Preface*

## Theme

As the title communicates, this book is about onsets. In particular, it focuses on their suprasegmental and prosodic behaviour. This on its own is quite interesting, given that most current phonological theory assigns no such role to onsets. The core of the discussion is devoted to proving this assertion wrong.

The pivotal proposal this book wishes to make is that onset weight exists. And like rimal weight, it participates in the same phenomena, that is, stress, compensatory lengthening, word minimality and gemination, among others. However, onset weight is not unrestricted. It may either be produced on the surface as a response to a weight-inducing requirement or it may be lexical, in which case its source is found in the underlying representation. The former type of onset weight is termed *coerced*, whereas the latter is dubbed *distinctive*, following Morén's (2001) similar distinction for coda weight. The first type of weight – but not the latter – is subject to certain limitations and thus can be assigned to a subset of segments only.

These restrictions represent a leading idea in the book. In particular, it is claimed that the optimal weightful onsets are those that lack the feature [+voice]. As a result, the prototypical moraic onsets are [−voice] ones, i.e. the voiceless obstruents. Justification for this account comes from the relationship between voicing, tone and stress. Examination of the tonogenesis facts reveals that the pitch perturbation due to (the lack of) voicing is commonly phonologized as tone. Extending this idea, I propose that in some languages such pitch perturbation is phonologized as stress, in terms of moras. The languages Karo, Pirahã and Arabela exhibit this pattern.

Of paramount importance is a related claim made with regard to sonorants. These are argued to be marked on a language-specific basis as [+voi] or lack any [voi] feature whatsoever. This statement is supported by the behaviour of sonorants in the examination of tone and stress. It is postulated that they may pattern with the voiced obstruents when they bear [+voi]; but they may also



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pattern alongside the voiceless obstruents, if they lack [voi] specification. As explained, the system built is such that it can treat [–voi] segments and those lacking [voi] uniformly to the exclusion of [+voi] ones.

Still, as far as onset-sensitive stress is concerned, a crucial distinction is made. Languages may be sensitive to the presence of an onset (PO effect) or to its quality (QO effect), but also to both (PO&QO effect). Importantly, PO effects are down to alignment considerations, whereas QO effects depend on weight considerations. For instance, in Aranda, an onsetful syllable attracts stress more than an onsetless one (PO); in Karo, syllables with onsets of a certain quality attract stress more than others (QO); and finally, in Pirahã, the two effects are combined (PO&QO).

The subsequent discussion centres on the interaction of onsets with other phenomena, namely compensatory lengthening, word minimality and gemination. The reasoning behind this is the following: onset-sensitive stress on its own is not sufficient to uphold the onset-weight hypothesis. This is because there are other ways to account for stress, e.g. the concept of prominence, which bypass reference to weight. Thus, providing evidence on the effects of onsets from uncontroversially weight-based phenomena surely offers solid grounding to the onset-weight theory.

To this end, a large number of case-studies is examined and formalized using the framework of Optimality Theory (OT) (Prince and Smolensky 1993/2004; McCarthy and Prince 1995). Many of the analyses are very detailed, thus also supplying the technical implementation of the theoretical ideas proposed here.

Finally, the theoretical proposals that are presented often extend beyond onsets. For instance, the chapters on compensatory lengthening and geminates provide full-fledged analyses (in terms of theoretical and empirical scope, as well as technical detail) that promise to account for a wide range of facts and cases.

## Audience and use

This book revolves around the topic of onsets, but in doing so, it addresses several core phenomena in suprasegmental and prosodic phonology. It is thus of interest to anyone who works on syllables, geminates, weight theory, compensatory lengthening, word minimality, tone and reduplication. It will also prove useful to segmental phonologists, especially those interested in [voice] and its interaction with the prosodic phenomena of tone and stress.

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Typologists interested in phonology can certainly use this book as a resource on some typologically rare languages and find information on languages hardly discussed elsewhere.

This study should be accessible to anyone with some background in phonology. While it is true that its technical aspects will be fully appreciated by OT-theorists (or anyone with some good knowledge of OT), the core insights, such as the weightfulness of onsets and the relationship between stress and voicing, are theory neutral. The book can be used in various ways: by the phonologist in general, as a new model of syllable and weight to apply in her/his work; by the OT-theorist who wishes to espouse (some of) the ideas proposed here for their technical merits; by the typologist, as a resource for typological studies; and by the student, as a useful review of past and recent theories on syllable weight, compensatory lengthening and gemination.

**A final word**

This book is an updated and revised version of my 2006 thesis titled 'Moraic Onsets', at University College London. Much of the material in here is significantly altered, although the core idea remains the same: 'onsets can be moraic'! Most analyses have been changed (e.g. Arabela, Bella Coola, Samothraki Greek, etc.), while the discussion on [voice] as well as sonorants has been updated to reflect findings of more recent work, such as Tang (2008). Some material has been discarded in the interest of clarity, while certain other sections have been added (see the discussion on medial-onset geminates). The interested reader can consult Topintzi (2006b) for comparison. Finally, earlier versions of some of the material presented here have appeared in previously published work of mine. This includes: Topintzi (2006a) and Topintzi (2008a, b).

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In December 2001, as an MA student at UCL, I listened to a colloquium talk by Dan Everett on the phonology of Pirahã. I thought Dan was an engaging speaker and the data he reported on fascinating. A year later, as a first-year PhD student, I thought about this talk again; Pirahã has been notorious for its onset-sensitive stress. But, was it the only such language? Could there be more cases like it, and in fact, could it be that the role of onsets in prosody had so far been underestimated? These questions persist within this book – and previously in my thesis – in the hope that by the end of it a satisfactory answer will have been given.

During the years that I've been looking into this topic (2002–9), a number of people generously contributed to it with their suggestions, comments and help in gaining access to relevant material. First and foremost, my thanks go to Moira Yip, my thesis supervisor and academic role model, for teaching me good phonology (any 'bad' phonology here is purely my fault), helping me shape my own ideas, sharing her expertise and vast knowledge and for the most exquisite 'Tosca' I have and will possibly ever enjoy. Dan Everett has been a constant resource regarding Pirahã and provided a lot of encouragement when I first took up this project. Since 2005, Marc van Oostendorp has been my 'life-vest' whenever I seemed to get stuck on a piece of data, always offering insightful ways to tackle the problem in question. I thank both a lot! Many thanks also go to Matt Gordon, Iggy Roca and a third anonymous reviewer for this book. I thank them for their careful reading and their invaluable comments. I am especially grateful to Matt, who offered the most helpful feedback possible, disregarding his own views on the issue – expressed in Gordon (2005) – and generously offering remarks to make my own work genuinely better.

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