Headedness in Element Theory: facts, myths, use, and abuse

Grzegorz Michalski

Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

grzegorz@wa.amu.edu.pl

This paper provides a critical review of headedness in Element Theory, hereafter ET. Starting with KLV (1985) and moving to the more recent proposals and analyses by Backley (2011, 2012), it will demonstrate how headedness has evolved from a conceptual necessity into a powerful theoretical device. This will be shown to be in a relationship with the trend to reduce the number and change the nature of elements without properly formalising the nature of headedness.

For |I|, |A|, and |U| KLV (1985) only proposed headedness be necessary in a fusion of elements into a compound segment, and fusion *had* to be asymmetrical because elements had conflicting *binary* features in the matrices they were shorthand for, a fact now commonly forgotten. Ever since elements ceased to be defined through such features and started moving towards acoustically oriented cognitive objects (no later than Harris 1994), headedness has been conceptually dubious in systems of the /i a u/ type, i.e. with no direct contradiction between any two elements, but has not been abandoned, as it is still required in bigger inventories.

However, as shown in Backley (2011, 2012), headedness is also a function of a given element even when it does *not* conflict with other elements, e.g. the unheaded |H| for fricatives vs. the headed |H̲| for (fortis-type) voicelessness. The latter does *not* imply a fricative *unless* it is the sole non-resonance element in an expression. In this way ET has moved away from giving each element one relevant property; now the contribution of an element may depend on 1) whether it is headed (rather than being *the* head) and 2) what other elements of a particular *group* of elements co-occur in the segment. Here the discussion will focus on the discrepancy between linguistic information in general and purely contrastive information, and that in ET some linguistic information is made explicit (vowel reduction in weak positions, headed single-element expressions, aspiration of plosives), while other linguistic information is made implicit (spontaneous voicing of sonorants, release of plosives, unstressed KIT vowel emanating from an empty segment).

For comparative purposes the paper will review selected aspects of the analysis of Polish phonology by Gussmann (2007) and recast some of it in the version of ET advocated by Backley (2011). For instance, it will be shown that the only good reason for granting one of the elements |I|, |A|, or |U| the status of head in consonantal expressions as if by default must have been the fact that the set of elements used has no member for velarity, and headedness is employed as a *pseudo*-element in that consonants not headed by any element are taken to be velars (or the other way round).

The paper will also address the issue of elements not found to be active in a given language, such as |H̲| in the case of Polish, and argue that the proposal put forward by Scheer (1999) to split |U| into |U| (backness and velarity) and |B| (labiality and roundedness) may have been discarded prematurely.

Word count: 500

References:

Backley, Phillip. 2011. *An Introduction to Element Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Backley, Phillip. 2012. Variation in Element Theory. *Linguistic Variation* 12.1, 57–102.

Gussmann, Edmund. 2007. *The Phonology of Polish*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harris, John. 1994. *English Sound Structure*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Kaye, Jonathan — Jean Lowenstamm — Jean-Roger Vergnaud. 1985. The Internal Structure of Phonological Elements: a Theory of Charm and Government. *Phonology Yearbook* 2, 305–328. (=KLV 1985)

Scheer, Tobias. 1999. A Theory of Consonantal Interaction. *Folia Linguistica* 32, 201-237.