

Rise of a prosodic raram: tone, stress and length interaction in Serbo-Croatian

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This paper analyses, from an historical and typological perspective, a set of hitherto unobserved or underdescribed prosodic phenomena in Serbo-Croatian (SCr), which are considered typologically rare or synchronically unnatural (in the sense of Hyman 2017, also cf. Hyman & Leben 2020), but are in fact shown to follow from a series of diachronically natural steps, driven by the economy principles.

SCr has inherited and innovated in various ways a relatively complex pitch accent system from Proto-Slavic, based on the interaction of tone, length and stress (i.e. ictus). Words may have an underlying H tone on any syllable or morpheme, or be underlyingly toneless, in which case they are assigned a default H tone on the initial syllable. Stress is assigned to the syllable bearing the H tone if it is word-initial (either underlyingly or by default), or to the syllable immediately preceding the one bearing the H tone, if it is not word-initial, due to an innovative Stress Retraction rule (SRR) that has operated in SCr. All other syllables are then assigned a L tone, which produces two contour tones, falling (H*L) and rising (L*H). As a consequence of these stress-assignment rules, final syllables in polysyllabic words are never stressed, falling pitch is allowed on initial syllables only, and monosyllabic words may only have falling pitch. Rising pitch, on the other hand, may occur on any syllable in polysyllabic words other than the last. Standard SCr is based on this prosodic system (cf. Lehiste & Ivić 1986, Inkelas & Zec 1988).

Its most innovative group of spoken dialects, however, tends to differ prosodically from standard SCr in a number of ways. First of all, they are characterized by a length-based qualitative vowel reduction, affecting all tonic and posttonic syllables. When disyllabic words with a rising pitch on the initial syllable are affected by the reduction, they will surface as monosyllables with a rising pitch (e.g. /kǒjni/ ‘horses’ > /kǒjn/, /dǒ:dzi/ ‘come-IMP’ > /dǒ:dz/), a situation dispreferred in standard SCr. In addition, in a number of polysyllabic words, an innovative rising pitch appears on the initial syllable instead of the etymological falling one (e.g. /mǎ:jka/ ‘mother’, /kǎ:rta/ ‘card’ for the etymological /mâ:jka/, /kâ:rta/, etc.), thereby effectively manifesting tone reversal. Ultimately, with L tone attracting stress due to SRR, SCr doesn’t fit easily into general typology of tone and stress interactions (de Lacy 2002), either.

Although typologically awkward or synchronically unnatural, in the sense of Hyman (2007, 2017), these phenomena are shown in this paper to systematically follow, in a series of diachronically natural steps, from the single SRR, which triggered them, and the dynamics of tone, stress and length interaction in SCr. The dialectal diversity of contemporary spoken SCr, thus, may shed light on the emergence of crosslinguistic raras, the motivation behind synchronic prosodic rules, as well as the nature of tone-bearing units.

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