RESOLVING THE 'HEAVY' VS. 'LONG' DEBATE OF GEMINATES*

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After decades of research, the correct representation of geminates remains debatable. The two main proposals view geminates as either segmentally long (Ringen & Vago 2011) or as syllabically heavy (Davis 2011). Despite partial success in tackling some of the data, none of the approaches manages to account for all the attested facts. In fact, a shared drawback is the inability to predict a pattern that has been reported in Ngalakgan – and other Australian languages – in which geminate consonants appear weightless, although other singleton coda consonants emerge as moraic.

In this presentation, we resolve this empirical problem and offer a general unifying account by entertaining a model that rests on the assumption that all underlying geminates are moraic consonants, but they might not emerge as such on the surface. We argue that this intuition – due to Davis (2011) – can be formalized in a theoretical model where (1) different degrees of prosodic non-integration are possible and (2) phonetic interpretation can refer to the difference between epenthetic and underlying elements. To this end, we employ a version of Containment Theory (Prince and Smolensky, 1993/2004; Trommer and Zimmermann, 2014; Zimmermann, 2017), whose workings allow us to dissociate the mora effects on weight from those on length. Increased length is thus not treated as an isolated, independently arising property of geminates, but rather as the concomitant of underlying weight.

We further demonstrate that the proposed representations correctly predict the typology of attested combinations of geminates and singleton coda consonants in the languages of the world. Unique in our approach is the ability to represent and maintain the contrast between singletons and geminates emerging and co-occurring in various positions within the word, and not just word-medially. We exemplify with case studies from Trukese and Thurgovian Swiss.

*based on joint work with Eva Zimmermann (University of Leipzig)