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Phonological evidence for the syntax of preverbal and postverbal subjects in Huave

According to Stairs & Stairs (1981), the basic word order of Huave (an isolate of Southern Oaxaca) is SVO, but VS and VOS are also widely attested. Furthermore, in the San Mateo variety of Huave, preverbal subjects are distinguished from postverbal subjects by at least two *phonological* criteria:

(i)   An H-tone can spread rightward from a verb to a postverbal subject, but can never spread rightward from a preverbal subject to a verb.

(ii)   An epenthetic /a/ vowel can be inserted between a verb and a postverbal subject, but not between a preverbal subject and a verb.

1) a.   SV: H tone on subject does not spread rightward; no epenthetic /a/
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(xíke) (taxejpíɨs)
 1SG    1SG.PST.bathe
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'I bathed.'

   b.   VS: H tone on verb spreads rightward; epenthetic /a/ inserted
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(taxejpíɨs    á xíke)
 1SG.PST.bathe    1SG
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'I bathed.'

It has been independently suggested (Aissen 1992; Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 2001, etc.) that in other languages that allow both SV and VS orders, preverbal subjects occupy a higher position in the syntax than postverbal subjects. Pak (2008) adopts this basic proposal for Huave, arguing that the domain for H-spread is a spelled-out complement of C (i.e. a TP) and that preverbal subjects in Huave are in Spec,CP while postverbal subjects are in Spec,TP. (VOS order is then derived by fronting and adjunction of the predicate to TP.) As predicted by Pak's analysis, H can spread rightward across multiple words in the same TP (see also Noyer 1991, Pike & Warkentin 1961):

2) (taxomás   nóts kóchíl sálín)
    1SG.PST.find one knife Salina.Cruz
   'I found a knife in Salina Cruz.'

In this paper I focus on the second phonological phenomenon noted above – /a/ epenthesis – and argue that despite initial appearances, <u>epenthetic /a/ can be analyzed as the product of a phonological rule that applies within the same domain as H-spread: a spelled-out TP</u>.

According to Stairs & Stairs (1981: 3,310), *a* is the apocopated form of the definite article *aaga* ('the'), and in many contexts this analysis seems to be correct; both instances of *a* in (3) could be replaced by *aaga* with no apparent change in meaning or grammaticality.

3) sapiɨng   xowɨy lajneaj <u>a</u> cielo, aw   <u>a</u> poj
   1SG.think very beautiful sky   say   turtle
   ' "I think the sky is very beautiful," says the turtle.'

However, I report several findings from a corpus study of Huave narratives showing that not all instances of *a* are apocopated *aaga*. First, *a,* unlike *aaga*, can precede a pronoun (1b). Second, when vowel-harmony causes /a/ to be raised, it is perceivable co-occurring with *aaga* (4). Third, unlike *aaga*, *a* shows a striking tendency to precede postverbal subjects (Table 1).

4) taxééb   <u>é</u> áágá náxey
   PST.bathe DEF man
   'The man bathed.'

Table 1. Distribution of *a* and *aaga* in the *Cuentos huaves II-III*

	Distribution of *a*		Distribution of *aaga*	
Postverbal subject	159	**52%**	27	**25%**
Preverbal subject	16	**5%**	37	**34%**
Postverbal object	72	24%	24	22%
Other contexts	58	19%	20	19%
	306	100%	108	100%

To explain these results, I propose in that in addition to the apocopated form of *aaga*, Huave has a homophonous version of *a* that is the result of a syntax-sensitive phonological rule of epenthesis. This epenthesis rule applies within the same domain as H-spread, thus accounting for the fact that both rules are blocked between preverbal subjects and verbs (1).

Unlike H-spread, however, /a/ epenthesis does not apply *throughout* a TP; i.e., it is not freely inserted between every pair of words in a sentence like (2). In fact, unambiguous /a/ epenthesis is never observed between a verb and a direct object, but only between the final word of a VP and a following word *outside* the VP, as in (1b), (3)-(4) and (5).

5) ngo naráng nájíɨ́t á xíke
   NEG sub.do work   1SG
   'I don't do work.'

Apparently, /a/ epenthesis has *two* structural constraints: in addition to being bounded by the same TP domain as H-spread, epenthesis only applies between two words Y and Z if Y belongs to a phrasal constituent that does not include Z (i.e., Y $]_{XP}$ Z). This kind of 'juncture rule,' while cross-linguistically somewhat uncommon (Scalise et al. 2009:77), is not unprecedented: Tallerman (2006) advances a very similar proposal for Welsh consonant mutation, which applies between but not within XPs:

6) prynodd $_{DP}$[y ddynes] **feic** (< beic)
   bought   the woman bicycle
   'The woman bought a bicycle.'

This analysis of Huave *a* allows us to maintain the idea that preverbal subjects are in a structurally higher position than postverbal subjects, as has been argued for other languages with similar word-order variations. The two phonological rules presented here, which appear very different at first sight, are argued to be ultimately delimited by the same structural domain – a convergence with interesting implications for theories of the syntax-phonology interface.

Corpus texts:

Cuentos huaves II. 2006. 2a edición. Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, A.C. Electronic version.
Cuentos huaves III. 2006. 2a edición. Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, A.C. Electronic version.
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    en el huave de San Mateo del Mar). 2009. La Liga Bíblica. Electronic version.

Selected references: **Aissen**, J. L. 1992. Topic and focus in Mayan. *Language 68*, 43-80.
Alexiadou, A. & Anagnostopoulou, E. 1998. Parametrizing Agr: word order, verb-movement and EPP-checking. *NLLT 16*:491-539. **Noyer**, R. 1991. Tone and stress in the San Mateo dialect of Huave. *Proceedings of ESCOL '91*, 277-288. **Pak**, M. 2008. The post-syntactic derivation and its phonological reflexes. Ph.D. dissertation, UPenn. **Stairs**, E.F. and Elena E. de Hollenbach. 1981. *Gramática huave*. In Stairs and Stairs 1981. **Tallerman**, M. 2006. The syntax of Welsh 'direct object mutation' revisited. *Lingua 116*, 1750-1776.