Structural Variability of Mandarin Prenuclear Glides as Constraint Ranking

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This paper re-examines data from speech errors in previous studies, and shows that some data previously taken to support the onset or rime status of Mandarin prenuclear glides are in fact ambiguous. The paper attempts to clarify the theoretical implications that can be drawn from various substitution errors reported in the literature. It is concluded that based on speech error evidence, the structural status of prenuclear glides is indeterminate. The paper then argues that structural indeterminacy is better captured as the result of constraint ranking in a constraint-based grammar such as Optimality Theory. Specifically, interactions among a set of *COMPLEX constraints, which place restrictions on how complex a constituent can be, determine whether the medial glide forms a single constituent with the initial consonant or with the following Rime. Syllable-initial prevocalic glides are in the onset, as the result of ranking the onset requirement above the *COMPLEX constraints.

Key words: prenuclear glide, Optimality Theory, syllable structure, speech error