Syllable Structure in Vietnamese
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Syllable structure in Vietnamese has usually been treated descriptively in previous studies, (i.e. (C) (w) V (V) (C)) (Nguyễn, 1987). It appears to be relatively simple, permitting only single consonants in onset and coda positions, and a single vowel or a diphthong in the nucleus. There is one apparent complication, however, the so-called “medial”, a [w] that may appear between an onset and a nucleus, as exemplified (1).

(1) Examples of “medial” (adopted from Thompson, 1965: 46)
   (i) tôa [twa] ‘bureau, office’
   (ii) xuân [swn] ‘taxes’
   (iii) ngoài [ŋwaj] ‘outside’
   (iv) chuyện [cwian] ‘conversation topic’

Since modern analyses of syllable structure do not allow a separate “medial” node in a syllable, the two obvious structural possibilities are those in (2a) and (2b):

(2) Syllable Structure with [w]
   (a) [w] in onset (Thompson, 1965)
      
      (C) (w) V (V) (C)

      onset rhyme
         nucleus coda

   (b) [w] in nucleus syllable
      
      (C) (w) V (V) (C)

      onset rhyme
         nucleus coda

Although both structures have certain complications, in the onset and nucleus respectively, we argue that (2b) is the preferable structure for Vietnamese syllable structure.

We provide an analysis on the basis of a moraic approach to Vietnamese syllables. We will show that our analysis is based on several widely observed and motivated phonological principles, and involves the following claims: i) the minimal (and maximal) foot in Vietnamese consists of two moras (μμ), ii) the “medial” is underlyingly a high vowel /u/, iii) a high vowel adjacent to another vowel is typically a glide, iv) the coda position of a syllable is moraic, and v) the preferred type of syllable structure is one in which all three syllabic components (onset, nucleus, coda) are filled. An illustration of our claim is given in (3).

(3) Moraic approach to Vietnamese syllables: hiệu [hioʊ] ‘understand’

      sylla  byle
      onset rhyme
         nucleus coda

      Building Nucleus

      h i o u
      μ μ

      Maximum Syllable

      onset rhyme
         nucleus coda

      h i o u
      μ μ
Our analysis also explains an otherwise unexpected coda restriction in the language. Specifically, in syllables that have the most complex vocalic sequence, namely uyê, the coda position only permits [n] and [t], as in (4).

(4) Examples of coda restriction
   (i)  chuyën [cuiæn] ‘conversation topic’
   (ii) tùyêt [tuiaæt] ‘snow’

Our proposal predicts that since the maximal foot requirement has been satisfied in the nucleus node, there leaves no mora for the coda position. As a result, the coda can only be phonetically realized with unmarked place of articulation, namely coronal [n] and [t].

In addition, we will briefly examine a type of word game, “nói lái”, which exchanges different parts of syllables in word sequences to form a sort of spoonerism. On the basis of possibilities manifested in this game, we provide support for our claim that the “medial” is actually part of the nucleus, and not part of the onset, as exemplified in (5).

(5) Support from Nói Lái: tuyën bó [twiæn bo] ‘to declare’
   (i) Switching onset node: [twiæn bo] → [bwiæn to]/*[bian two]
   (ii) Switching rhyme node: [twiæn bo] → [to bwiæn]/*[two bian]

In conclusion, we argue that while the onset and coda are simple in Vietnamese syllable structure, the complication is in the nucleus. The moraic analysis we propose treats all the syllables in Vietnamese equally. That is, we resolve the mystery of medial in the language. Furthermore, we are able to account for a coda restriction that is observed in syllables with the specific vocalic sequence: uyê.

References