An Optimality Theoretical (OT) analysis of syllabification in English and Classical Arabic (CA): a corpus-based analysis

The Optimality Theory (henceforth OT) is a recent theory which made its public debut in the 1990s. This theory proposes that Universal Grammar (UG) contains a set of violable constraints and that each language has its own ranking for these constraints, which gives rise to systematic variations among languages (McCarthy, 2002, p. 26). According to the OT, a language successfully violates a universal constraint in order to satisfy a higher ranked constraint (Archangeli, 1997; McCarthy, 2002). Thus, the objective of this paper is to provide a corpus-based analysis of English and Arabic data in order to probe the validity of the OT claim that “each language has its own ranking for universal constraints, which gives rise to systematic variations among languages” (Archangeli, 1997; McCarthy, 2002) by showing how the OT model accounts for the differences of syllabic structures in Classical Arabic (henceforth CA) and in English.

This paper is mainly descriptive and it is divided into two main sections. The first section provides an overview of the functioning of OT by defining its components. The second section discusses how OT accounts for English and Classical Arabic (CA) syllabic structures in order to probe the validity of the OT claim that universal constraints are ranked on language-specific basis and that these different rankings give rise to variations between these two languages. Our corpus-based analysis suggests that English and CA do not have the same rankings for universal constraint. For example, whereas English outranks *complex constraint as it allows complex onsets and codas, CA does not violate this UNIversal constraint. Likewise, while CA accepts the Onset constraints, English allows its syllables to begin with vowels. This analysis confirms the OT claim that language variations are due to differences in constraint-rankings.


