Polish Clitics: Consequences for the Analysis of Optionality in OT

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Optionality (or variation) arises when the grammar maps one input onto more than one output. In Optimality Theory, it is often assumed that two (or more) candidates surface as optimal when the constraints that distinguish between them are 'tied' (i.e., crucially unranked with respect to each other). This approach, however, seems inadequate for the analysis of some cases of optionality. Accordingly, more complex models, such as Partially Ordered Grammars (Anttila 1997, 2002), Stochastic OT (Boersma 1998, Boersma & Hayes 2001), and the Rank-Ordering Model of EVAL (Coetzee 2006) have been proposed to account for variation. I show the result of applying these models to handle certain optional processes in Polish.

The Polish clitic /z/ undergoes obligatory voicing assimilation, but optionally also undergoes coronal assimilation in one set of contexts (A), while in another set of contexts (B) it optionally surfaces with an epenthetic vowel instead of undergoing either assimilation. Consequently, /z/ displays the following context-dependent variation: (A) 'coronal-and-voice-assimilated' ~ 'only-voice-assimilated,' and (B) 'epenthesized' ~ 'only-voice-assimilated.' I show that tied constraints are unable to describe this pattern. Furthermore, the Rank-Ordering Model of EVAL cannot account for the data, because it incorrectly predicts an epenthetic form in the set of contexts (A). Conversely, Stochastic OT and Partially Ordered Grammars can both capture the variation pattern, but fail to predict adequate probabilities of occurrence of the varying forms. I conclude that while these models can account for optionality, they should not be claimed to possess any predictive power regarding frequencies of occurrence.