

Japanese /r/ is not feature-less: A rejoinder to Labrune (2014)

Abstract

Labrune (2014) argues that Japanese /r/ is structurally empty. This reply points out that the phonological characteristics of /r/ which are discussed by Labrune (2014) come with many systematic exceptions, and hence they are better modeled by violable constraints. To illustrate how violable constraints accommodate such systematic exceptions, alternative analyses based on Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 2004) are presented. This reply also points out that the three constraints on /r/ that are discussed by Labrune (2014) are in fact not specific to /r/, and therefore, motivating structural emptiness based on these patterns would face a problem of not being able to distinguish /r/ from other segments. Based on these considerations, this reply concludes that /r/ (and other segments) in Japanese should have segmental contents.

1 Introduction

Labrune (2014) argues that Japanese /r/ is “phonologically empty” (p. 1). Building on previous studies making use of the Underspecification Theory (e.g. Mester & Ito 1989), Labrune (2014) says that /r/ is “totally featureless at the abstract level” (p.14). This reply article reexamines some of the evidence that is discussed in Labrune (2014), and shows that the behavior of /r/ actually shows that it has features.¹ In particular, this paper argues that the phonological characteristics of /r/ which are discussed by Labrune (2014) come with many systematic exceptions, and hence should instead be modelled by using violable constraints.

¹Although some pieces of evidence in Labrune (2014) come from patterns of Old Japanese and historical developments of /r/, Labrune (2014) makes it explicit that the same argument holds for Modern Japanese—that Japanese /r/ is synchronically structurally empty (p.2). The current reply is exclusively about the synchronic phonology of Modern Japanese, and has nothing to say about the diachronic nature of /r/. Pellard (2014) develops an extensive critique on the diachronic claims made by Labrune (2014); readers who are interested in diachronic claims of Labrune (2014) are referred to that work.

To provide explicit accounts of the behavior of /r/ using violable constraints, alternative analyses in terms of Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 2004) are presented.²

In addition, this reply also points out that the three constraints on /r/ that are discussed by Labrune (2014) are in fact not specific to /r/, and therefore, motivating structural emptiness based on these patterns would face a problem of not being able to distinguish /r/ from other segments. Based on these considerations, this reply concludes that /r/ (and other segments) in Japanese should have segmental contents, at least to the degree that these segments can be distinguished from each other.

While the specific aim of this reply is to reexamine the arguments presented in Labrune (2014), this reply can also be understood in the broader context of the debate about whether segmental behaviors should be understood in terms of underspecification or (violable) constraints. Labrune (2014) argues that /r/ is in a sense a special segment in Japanese, and attempts to explain its behavior in terms of the Underspecification Theory (e.g. Archangeli 1988 and Steriade 1995 for overviews of this theory). This reply instead uses violable constraints to explain the behaviors of /r/. (This reply remains neutral about the markedness of /r/, and focuses on the claim that it is structurally empty.) For other arguments against the Underspecification Theory of special segmental behaviors (such as those of coronals: Paradis & Prunet 1991), of which Labrune (2014) is an example, see Gafos & Lombardi (1999), Kurisu (2000), McCarthy & Taub (1992), McCarthy (1994, 2002), Prince & Smolensky (2004), Steriade (1995) among others.

2 Resistance to gemination

First, Labrune (2014) points out, citing Mester & Ito (1989), that Japanese does not allow geminates of /r/, and uses this observation to suggest that Japanese /r/ is structurally empty (pp. 8–9). However, it is not only /r/, but approximants in general, which cannot be geminated in the phonology of Japanese, as exemplified below in (1) (Kawagoe, 2015; Kawahara, 2012, 2015; Kawahara et al., 2011).

(1) Lexical geminates in Japanese

²Despite the fact that Labrune (2014) argues that /r/ is phonologically empty, the same paper develops an Optimality Theoretic analysis to derive /r/ to break up vowel sequences (pp. 16–21). This analysis assumes that /r/ is featurally-specified, because it uses feature-agreement constraints, which would not be computable if /r/ is featureless. This OT analysis may be intended to model the sound change from premodern time to Modern Japanese, but then the output of the analysis—/r/ with featural contents—should be what exists as /r/ in Modern Japanese. Therefore, what Labrune (2014) attempts to do with the OT analysis does not seem, at least to me, compatible with the rest of her claim that /r/ in Modern Japanese is featurally empty. Since I am not quite sure how to reconcile these two apparently contradictory claims, this reply sets this issue aside. I instead focus on the latter claim that /r/ is featureless.

- a. /katta/ ‘bought’ vs. /kata/ ‘frame’
- b. /isso/ ‘if so’ vs. /iso/ ‘beach’
- c. /konna/ ‘such’ vs. /kona/ ‘power’
- d. */korra/
- e. */kowwa/
- f. */kojja/

It is not exactly clear from Labrune (2014) how the prohibition against /rr/ can be derived from the alleged structural emptiness of /r/; i.e. why underlying emptiness should preempt gemination. However, let us assume for the sake of discussion that geminates cannot be built off of segments that are structurally empty. To explain the lack of /ww/ and /jj/, then, /w/ and /j/ would also have to be assumed to be structurally empty (unless other independent stipulations are made on [w] and [j], which is undesirable.)

Then, Labrune’s (2014) account of the resistance against gemination in terms of structural emptiness would not be able to distinguish between /r/, /w/ and /j/ in Japanese—one would have to assume that these segments are structurally empty, which is not desirable, because we would not be able to distinguish these segments. Instead, these segments need to have segmental specifications, at least enough so that all of these segments can be distinguished from each other. The prohibitions against these types of geminates are better accounted for in terms of constraints against /rr/ and glide geminates: */rr/, */ww/, and */jj/.³

Moreover, gemination of /r/ is possible in emphatic gemination patterns (Aizawa, 1985; Kawahara, 2002, 2013; Kurisu, 2014; Nasu, 1999), as in (2). Geminate /rr/ also appears in some loanwords, particularly in those loanwords from Arabic and Italian, which themselves have liquid geminates, as shown in (3).

³This reply assumes that there are distinct constraints against /r/-geminates and glide geminates for the reason that is stated below; however, nothing hinges on this assumption—it may as well be that a constraint that is active in Japanese phonology is a general constraint, *APPROXIMANTGEMINATE. One reason to assume distinct constraints for /rr/ and glide geminates is because they may have different phonetic groundings. Gemination and /r/ are inherently mutually incompatible in the sense that /r/ is a short segment in Japanese (Campbell, 1992; Sagisaka & Tohkura, 1984) and gemination requires that the consonant be long (Kawahara, 2015); making /r/ a trill may satisfy both of these conflicting requirements, but a trill comes with its own articulatory difficulty (Solé, 2002). When Japanese speakers pronounce geminate /rr/ as in (2) and (3), impressionistically speaking, they often make a sound that is similar to a lateral geminate [ll]. On the other hand, the prohibitions against glide geminates may be attributed to their confusability with corresponding singletons (Kawahara, 2012; Kawahara et al., 2011; Podesva, 2000, 2002).

This paper throughout touches on phonetic grounding of the constraints deployed in the analyses, but whether or not the constraints are phonetically motivated does not affect the argument of this paper. Explicit discussion of phonetic grounding of phonological constraints, I believe, makes the constraints more plausible (see e.g. Hayes & Steriade 2004; Ito & Mester 2003; Kager 1999; Myers 1997). However, I fully acknowledge that not everyone accepts this view (see e.g. Blaho 2008, Blevins 2004 and Hale & Reiss 2000). I reiterate that the arguments of this paper would hold even if none of the constraints are phonetically-motivated. What is crucial instead is the violability of constraints.

(2) /rr/ created by emphatic gemination

- a. /karrui/ ‘very light’
- b. /zurruui/ ‘very cunning’
- c. /hirroi/ ‘very spacious’

(3) /rr/ in loanwords

- a. /arraa/ ‘Allah’
- b. /diaberri/ ‘Diabelli’
- c. /morutaderra/ ‘mortadella’

One may consider these geminates of /rr/ to be “marginal” in the sense that they are found only in the emphatic conditions and some loanwords; however, the fact that they can appear at all shows that the resistance of /r/ against gemination is better handled by a violable constraint $*/rr/$. A constraint-based analysis of emphatic gemination is, indeed, developed by Kurisu (2014).

In order to illustrate how violable constraints can accommodate systematic exceptions, I present an illustrative analysis in Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 2004).⁴ Let $\text{MAX}(\mu)$ be a faithfulness constraint that prohibits mora-deletion or degemination (see McCarthy & Prince 1995 for the initial formulation of the MAX constraint). Let us posit a specific rendition of this faithfulness constraint for emphatic environments, $\text{MAX}(\mu)_{\text{emph}}$ (for morphologically-specific constraints, see, e.g., Benua 1997; Ito & Mester 1999, 2003, 2008; Kurisu 2001, 2005; Pater 2000, 2010; Wolf 2007). If the ranking $\text{MAX}(\mu)_{\text{emph}} \gg */rr/ \gg \text{MAX}(\mu)$ holds, then geminate /rr/ is allowed only in the emphatic forms, as illustrated in the tableaux in (4) and (5):

(4) $*/rr/ \gg \text{MAX}(\mu)$: no geminate /rr/ in general

/arraa/	$\text{MAX}(\mu)_{\text{emph}}$	$*/rr/$	$\text{MAX}(\mu)$
→ /araa/			*
/arraa/		*!	

(5) $\text{MAX}(\mu)_{\text{emph}} \gg */rr/$: geminate /rr/ allowed in emphatic forms

/karui+ μ_{emph} /	$\text{MAX}(\mu)_{\text{emph}}$	$*/rr/$	$\text{MAX}(\mu)$
/karui/	*!		*
→ /karrui/		*	

⁴It would be possible to model the Japanese patterns in other models of grammar which deploy violable constraints, such as Harmonic Grammar (Legendre et al., 1990; Pater, 2009, to appear) or MaxEnt Grammar (Goldwater & Johnson, 2003; Hayes & Wilson, 2008). This reply uses Optimality Theory because it is probably best-known—Labrune (2014) too presents an Optimality-Theoretic analysis to derive the quality of /r/ from its structural emptiness as well (pp. 16–21). My analysis would hold in any analysis in which constraints are violable.

The structure-based theory of the lack of /rr/ is not able to handle these exceptional appearances of /r/. Indeed, not being able to easily accommodate exceptions is a general problem for structural explanations of phonological patterns (McCarthy, 2002; Padgett, 1995, 2002; Pater, 2000; Prince & Smolensky, 2004).

As Labrune (2014) discusses (p.9) (see also Kuroda 1965, Mester & Ito 1989 and Kawahara 2006), glides and /r/ pattern differently in the context of /ri/-suffixation. The adverb-forming suffix /-ri/ causes gemination of the last consonant of the root (e.g. /patt**a**-ri/ ‘stopped’); when the root final consonants are glides, a coda nasal is inserted instead (e.g. /bon**y**a-ri/ ‘absent-mindedly’), whereas neither gemination nor nasal insertion occurs when the root-final consonant is /r/ (e.g. /koro-ri/ ‘rolling’). To account for this difference between /r/ and glides, in addition to */rr/, there needs to be some constraint that prohibits an /nr/ sequence; for example, it could be a constraint that is grounded on the phonetic difficulty of implementing a ballistic tongue gesture for /r/ after the oral closure of a nasal consonant. Whatever the nature of this constraint is, it is important to note that this constraint against an /nr/-sequence too is, like */rr/, violable, as Japanese has many lexical items with /nr/ sequences (e.g. /nan**n**ra/ ‘in any way’, /kon**n**ran/ ‘confusion’ and /kon**n**raddo/ ‘Conrad’). Attempting to derive the prohibition against /nr/ from the structural emptiness of /r/ (Labrune 2014, p.9) cannot explain these exceptions.

In relation to this argument based on lack of geminate /rr/, Labrune (2014) argues that /r/ fails to trigger assimilation, and this is because “there is simply nothing in its phonological structure to assimilate” (p. 9). However, since assimilating to /r/ would result in /rr/, which is independently prohibited, this lack of assimilation triggered by /r/ cannot be considered as an additional argument for the structural emptiness of /r/. Moreover, all the examples of assimilation provided on page 9 of Labrune (2014), which supposedly show the lack of assimilation to /r/, have /r/ as the first consonant and another consonant as the second consonant (e.g. /wakar**a**nai/ → /wakar**n**ai/ → /wakar**nn**ai/ ‘not know’). However, it is independently known that assimilation in VC₁C₂V clusters almost invariably results in VC₂C₂V, never in VC₁C₁V (see Jun 1995, 2003, 2004; Ohala 1990 and also McCarthy 2008; Wilson 2001 for a similar observation in consonant cluster simplification). In Japanese too in fact, we observe regressive place assimilation patterns in Sino-Japanese root fusion (e.g. /hat+**k**ai/ → [hak**k**kai] ‘eight times’; /hat+**p**ai/ → [hap**p**pai] ‘eight cups’) (see Ito & Mester 1996, 2015; Kurisu 2000 for details).⁵ Therefore, the argument based on the lack of assimilation to /r/ is doubly-confounded.

⁵The sole systematic exception known to us is the case in which C₁ is a retroflex; in such cases, progressive assimilation is observed (Steriade, 2001). Neither [r] nor [n] in Japanese is retroflex, so that this systematic exception is not moot.

3 Resistance to palatalization

Another argument that is put forth for the emptiness of structural content for /r/ is the fact that /r/ does not undergo a palatalization process in mimetic forms. In Japanese mimetics, palatalization expresses “uncontrolledness”, and where this palatalization occurs is arguably determined by phonological considerations (Hamano, 1986; Kurisu, 2009; McCarthy, 2003; Mester & Ito, 1989; Zoll, 1997). Whether the loci of palatalization can really be determined phonologically is much debated (Alderete & Kochetov, 2009; Schourup & Tamori, 1992), yet one point that is clear is that /r/ does indeed resist palatalization (Alderete & Kochetov, 2009). Labrune’s (2014) theory would derive this property by postulating that since /r/ does not have a Place node (Clements, 1985; Clements & Hume, 1995), the secondary palatalization feature cannot be attached to /r/.

However, this avoidance of palatalization does not unambiguously support the structural emptiness of /r/. As Kurisu (2009) notes, a constraint against palatalized /r/ is cross-linguistically motivated (see Hall 2000, 2003; Hall & Hamann 2010; Rose 1997; Walsh Dickey 1997 and references cited therein), and has an articulatory basis as well—the tongue tip gesture required for /r/ may be articulatorily incompatible with the tongue dorsum raising required for palatalization (Hall & Hamann, 2010; Recasens, 1990; Recasens & Espinosa, 2006).

An argument for the account of the lack of palatalized /r/ in terms of violable constraints comes from the fact that palatalized /r/ does indeed appear in many lexical items, especially in Sino-Japanese items. Some minimal pairs from Sino-Japanese words/stems are shown in (6):

- (6) Minimal pairs in terms of palatalization on /r/
 - a. /**rj**aku/ ‘abbreviation’ vs. /raku/ ‘easy’
 - b. /**rj**oku/ ‘green’ vs. /roku/ ‘six’
 - c. /**rj**oo/ ‘amount’ vs. /roo/ ‘prison’
 - d. /**rj**o/ ‘travel’ vs. /ro/ ‘road’ (both bound morphemes)

Palatalized /r/ is most often found in Sino-Japanese words (Moreton et al., 1998; Moreton & Amano, 1999), but some non-Sino-Japanese words with palatalized /r/ are also found both in Yamato words and loanwords, as in (7) and (8):⁶

- (7) Yamato items containing /rj/
 - a. /**rj**aa/ ‘if (casual)’

⁶Yamato words containing [rj] are admittedly rare, however—they may be limited to the three examples listed in (7).

- b. /toor**j**anse/ ‘don’t pass (song lyric)’
 - c. /**rj**uu-to/ ‘conspicuously dressed’
- (8) Loanwords containing /rj/
- a. /**rj**uumati/ ‘Rheumatism’
 - b. /**rj**ukku/ ‘backpack’
 - c. /**rj**uuto/ ‘lute’

The existence of these exceptions yet again shows that the resistance to palatalization is better expressed in terms of a violable constraint, which is operative in the formation of palatalized forms in the mimetics phonology,⁷ but is violated elsewhere, at least in the Sino-Japanese phonology, but presumably also in other sectors of Japanese phonology.

Again, to illustrate this analysis, an Optimality Theoretic analysis follows (see Kurisu 2009 for a fuller analysis of Japanese mimetic palatalization within Optimality Theory). We posit */rj/, a constraint against palatalized /r/, which is cross-linguistically independently motivated (see above). This constraint is operative in determining the locus of palatalization in mimetic forms, as in (9).

- (9) */rj/ determines the location of /j/ in mimetic forms

/noronoro+j/ ‘slow’	*/rj/
→ /njoro-njoro/	
/norjo-norjo/	*!*

This markedness constraint, however, is dominated by a faithfulness constraint, MAX(pal) (McCarthy & Prince, 1995), which protects underlying palatalization. As a result, forms like /rjoku/ ‘green’ surface faithfully. This constraint ranking is illustrated in (10).⁸

- (10) MAX(pal) ≫ */rj/ protects underlying palatalization on /r/

/rjoku/	MAX(pal)	*/rj/
→ /rjoku/		*
/roku/	*!	

⁷This constraint is operative in the mimetic phonology to the extent that the palatalized word formation is phonological (see Schourup & Tamori 1992 for arguments that this palatalization is not really phonological, as it comes with many lexical irregularities, both semantic and phonological). It is at least true, however, that /rj/ is underrepresented in the mimetics phonology (Alderete & Kochetov, 2009).

⁸Assuming the Richness of the Base Hypothesis (Kurisu, 2000; McCarthy, 2002; Prince & Smolensky, 2004; Smolensky, 1996), mimetic input forms that contain /rj/ may need to be depalatalized, which means that */rj/ must be ranked above MAX(pal)_{mimetics}. For stratum-specific faithfulness constraints, see the next section.

If /r/ were phonologically completely empty on the other hand, and if phonologically empty segments could not be palatalized, then it would not be able to support the palatalization feature in the Sino-Japanese phonology at all.

Another important point to be noted about Japanese phonology is that /r/ is not the only segment that resists palatalization. Indeed, nowhere in the Japanese phonology do we find palatalized labial glide, /wj/. If the lack of palatalization is to be attributed to structural emptiness, /w/ would also have to be empty structurally. However, this postulation would lead to an unfortunate consequence of not being able to distinguish /r/ and /w/.

4 Prohibition in word-initial position

As Labrune (2014) points out (pp. 3–4), Japanese /r/ cannot appear word-initially, at least in native words (also known as “Yamato” words) (Tateishi, 1990). However, this prohibition against /r/ in word-initial positions does not constitute evidence for its structural emptiness in and of itself, because there is no *a priori* reason that underlyingly empty segments cannot appear in word-initial positions. Rather, in order to state the constraint, it is more natural to assume that /r/ has phonological contents, and a constraint prohibits those phonological contents word-initially. Based on an extensive cross-linguistic survey, Flack (2007, 2009) finds an array of phonological elements that can be prohibited in word/phrase-initial positions in natural languages (e.g. [h], [ʔ], [ŋ], rhotics, and glides—see also Smith 2002). Given this observation, it would be unrealistic to assume that these kinds of elements all lack phonological structures: at least, I do not know of any proposal to treat [ŋ] as structurally empty.

Moreover, yet again, prohibition against word-initial /r/ comes with systematic exceptions; this constraint is violated in Sino-Japanese words and loanwords. See (6) above for Sino-Japanese examples; some examples from loanwords are given in (11):

- (11) Loanwords beginning with /r/
- a. /**r**uuto/ ‘root’
 - b. /**r**emon/ ‘lemon’
 - c. /**r**aamen/ ‘ramen’
 - d. /**r**entaru/ ‘rental’

A violable constraint offers a way to express the restricted prohibition against word-initial /r/ in Yamato-words.⁹ Following, Ito & Mester (1999, 2003, 2008), we can posit

⁹A constraint against word-initial /r/ can be grounded on the possible articulatory difficulty of initiating a ballistic gesture for /r/ word-initially. See also Flack (2005) for various restrictions on word-initial liquids

stratum-specific faithfulness constraints; for the sake of illustration, let them be $\text{MAX}_{\text{Foreign}}$ and $\text{MAX}_{\text{Yamato}}$. The ranking $\text{MAX}_{\text{Foreign}} \gg * \text{INITIAL}/r/ \gg \text{MAX}_{\text{Yamato}}$ would get us the right outcome, as shown in the tableaux in (12) and (13):¹⁰

(12) $\text{MAX}_{\text{Foreign}} \gg * \text{INITIAL}/r/$: Initial $/r/$ is allowed for foreign items

$/raamen/_{\text{Foreign}}$	$\text{MAX}_{\text{Foreign}}$	$* \text{INITIAL}/r/$	$\text{MAX}_{\text{Yamato}}$
$\rightarrow /raamen/$		*	
$/aamen/$	*!		

(13) $* \text{INITIAL}/r/ \gg \text{MAX}_{\text{Yamato}}$: Initial $/r/$ is not allowed for Yamato items

$/riki/_{\text{Yamato}}$	$\text{MAX}_{\text{Foreign}}$	$* \text{INITIAL}/r/$	$\text{MAX}_{\text{Yamato}}$
$/riki/$		*!	
$\rightarrow /iki/$			*

Furthermore, like the restrictions on gemination and palatalization, $/r/$ is not the only segment that is prohibited in the Yamato phonology of Japanese; voiced obstruents are also prohibited word-initially in the Yamato phonology of Japanese (Kuroda, 2002; Martin, 1987; Tanaka & Yashima, 2013). To the extent that we need to distinguish voiced obstruents and $/r/$ —which we indeed do—the prohibition against $/r/$ in word-initial position cannot be used for an argument for its structural emptiness—that would entail that both $/r/$ and voiced obstruents are structurally empty, which is not desirable.¹¹

5 Some remarks on other arguments

Before closing this reply, some remarks on other arguments presented in Labrune (2014) are in order. First, Labrune (2014) points out that phonetic realizations of $/r/$ in Japanese vary substantially across phonetic contexts, dialects, and speech styles (see Arai 2013 and Magnuson 2011 for phonetic studies on the variable realizations of $/r/$ in Japanese). I do

in other languages, and discussion of possible phonetic grounding (or lack thereof) (see also Steriade 2001 and Smith 2002 for related discussion).

¹⁰For constraints that specifically operate on initial syllables, like $* \text{INITIAL}/r/$, see Smith (2002). This analysis assumes that deletion is the repair strategy to avoid word-initial $/r/$ in the Yamato phonology, but other repair strategies are of course possible. The Richness of the Base hypothesis (Kurusu, 2000; McCarthy, 2002; Prince & Smolensky, 2004; Smolensky, 1996) requires that we allow an underlying form with an initial $/r/$ even for Yamato words, and ensure that such words do not surface faithfully by deleting—or changing—the word-initial $/r/$.

¹¹There are exceptions to word-initial prohibitions against voiced obstruents (e.g. $/damas-u/$ ‘to deceive’), but there are exceptions to word-initial prohibition against $/r/$ as well ($/risu/$ ‘squirrel’; see also footnote 3 of Labrune 2014). See Tanaka & Yashima (2013) for experimental evidence for the psychological reality of word-initial prohibitions against voiced obstruents in Yamato Japanese. As far as I know, there are no psycholinguistic studies on the psychological reality of the prohibition against word-initial $/r/$.

not disagree with this observation. Phonetic variability of segments, however, in and of itself does not mean that that structure is phonologically empty. For example, as shown in Table 1 (adapted from Kingston & Diehl 1994), [+voice] in English is realized phonetically differently across phonetic contexts—for instance, there is considerable voicing during closure intervocalically, but not word-initially or word-finally (Kingston & Diehl, 1994; Lisker, 1986). However, this phonetic variability is not usually taken to be evidence that English [+voice] is phonologically empty. Note that this logic holds even if the English “voicing” contrast is to be represented as an aspiration contrast based on the feature [spread glottis] (see e.g. Beckman et al. 2009; Iverson & Salmons 1995, 2003). No matter what the real phonological representation, the fact is that this contrast is realized in different ways across different contexts, but nobody as far as I know takes this to be the evidence for underspecification.

Table 1: Variable phonetic realizations of English [+voice] obstruents. Adapted from Kingston and Diehl (1994: 427)

	[+voice]
utterance-initial or pre tonic	shorter lag VOT F ₁ lower F ₀ lower weaker burst
intervocalic or posttonic	closure voicing shorter closure longer preceding vowel F ₁ lower F ₀ lower
utterance-final or postvocalic	longer preceding vowel closure voicing possible shorter closure F ₁ lower

In general, it is not unusual for one phonological segment to receive different phonetic realizations across different phonetic contexts. Another famous example is English [l], which is realized with a coronal gesture in onset positions, but is realized also with a dorsal gesture in coda positions (Lee-Kim et al., 2013; Sproat & Fujimura, 1993); no work to the best of my knowledge argues that English [l] is structurally empty, despite its surface phonetic variability. In short, /r/ in Japanese is not special in receiving various phonetic realizations (see Kingston et al. 2012 for a more recent discussion on this issue).

Second, Labrune (2014) argues that /r/ can be an epenthetic consonant in Japanese ¹².

¹²Whether /r/ can be epenthetic in Japanese or in any other language in general is debatable (see de

To the extent that /r/ is phonologically contentless and there is an independent mechanism to fill its content, this observation makes sense, because epenthesis can insert an empty phonological slot, and the rest can be taken care of by taking a “free-ride” (McCarthy, 2005) of default feature insertion mechanisms. This view of epenthetic segments was in fact not uncommon (Archangeli, 1984; Abaglo & Archangeli, 1989; Ito, 1986), when the Underspecification Theory was widely accepted, but has been much argued against, based on the fact that epenthetic segments in some languages are not completely phonologically inert (Davis, 1995; Steriade, 1995).

Third, Labrune (2014) states that /r/ is unstable, citing some sporadic examples in which /r/ is deleted or inserted (synchronically or diachronically) (p. 7). However, this argument is based on sporadic examples, and /r/ is not the only segment that is deleted or inserted sporadically (e.g. /kawai/ → /kaai/ ‘cute’, /daia/ → /daija/ ‘diamond’, and /ideru/ → /deru/ ‘to get out’). It is not only /r/ that can be deleted sporadically, and if it is to be argued that /r/ is more frequently deleted than others, the claim has to be statistically supported.

Finally, Labrune (2014) uses vowel coalescence across /r/ in the Ryukyuan languages in an attempt to support the phonological emptiness of /r/ in (Standard) Japanese. However, it is dangerous to use data from one dialect to argue for the phonological nature of a structure in another dialect, let alone from a different language—Ryukyuan and Japanese became separated during the first few centuries AD (Pellard, 2015), and it would be a stretch, to say the least, to assume that they still retain the same phonological system.

Lacy 2006; Hall 2013; Lombardi 2002; McCarthy 1993; Staroverov 2014; Uffmann 2007), although I do not have strong arguments against this view from Japanese (though see Kawahara 2003 for an argument that Japanese resolves hiatus by glide insertion of /j/ and /w/, depending on the quality of the first vowel). One point to note, however, is that evidence from verbal inflection patterns, used by Labrune (2014) (pp. 10–12), probably should not be used for phonological argumentation, because “phonological” changes in verbal inflection patterns in Japanese are often not replicated with nonce words (Batchelder, 1999; Griner, 2005; Vance, 1987, 1991), and it is likely that Japanese speakers store all the inflected verbal forms in their memories (see also Kobayashi et al. 2012 on neurolinguistic insights on this issue).

Also even if verbal inflection patterns are governed by phonology, a deletion analysis is possible and perhaps necessary (Smith, 2006); that is, rather than subscribing to the view that /r/ is inserted at a stem-suffix boundary for vowel-final stems (e.g. /mi-u/ → /mi-ru/ ‘to look’), as Labrune (2014) does, we should consider the suffix-initial consonants (here /r/) are underlyingly present and get deleted after a stem-final consonant (e.g. /nak-ru/ → /naku/ ‘to cry’). This deletion analysis is necessary because various types of consonants are possible suffix-initially (e.g. /mi-saseru/ ‘to have look’ and /mi-joo/ ‘let’s look’), which get deleted after stem-final consonants (/e.g. /nak-aseru/ ‘to have cry’ and /nak-oo/ ‘let’s cry’). The view that /r/ is epenthetic cannot explain why various types of consonants can be inserted suffix-initially. It is better to say that suffix-initial consonants are present underlyingly and get deleted after stem-final consonants.

6 Conclusion

Three restrictions on /r/ discussed by Labrune (2014) all come with systematic exceptions, suggesting that these restrictions are better expressed in terms of violable constraints. The three restrictions are also not exclusively about /r/, and the structural account fails to account for these observations. The structural account needs to postulate that all the relevant segments must be structurally empty, but that theory faces the problem of not being able to distinguish these segments from each other. The alternative analyses developed in this paper, which make use of violable constraints, are better suited to model the phonological characteristics of /r/ in Japanese.

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