Phonology: Analysis and theory

By Edmund Gussmann


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Phonology is an introductory-level text that presupposes no previous knowledge of the subject, but does assume some background in phonetics and general linguistics. Certain features make this a good introductory text. First, it is reasonably concise, making it manageable for a one semester course, and not overwhelming for the beginning student. Secondly, the author's writing is clear and easy to follow. Thirdly, all data examples, regardless of the language or original source, are transcribed consistently according to IPA conventions. This is a welcome improvement over those texts which mix various, and sometimes conflicting, conventions much to the confusion of the reader. Finally, the author explicitly avoids model-specific formalisms and theory-internal issues, focusing instead on more general analytic problems that must be addressed by any theory.

It is worth noting, however, that throughout the book Gussmann assumes a nonderivational approach to phonology. As a result, there is no discussion of more traditional concepts such as the phoneme, underlying representations, feeding, bleeding, rule ordering, and so on. Instead, the author speaks of phonological regularities as general constraints on well-formed structures. For example, he prefers to speak of “nasal assimilation” as “place of articulation sharing” (or simply, POA Sharing) since assimilation implies that one nasal becomes another through a process of derivation. By contrast, the term “POA Sharing” implies no such process, but reflects a static constraint in which two consonants in a given configuration must share the same place of articulation.

Gussmann devotes a significant portion of his book to the topic of syllable structure. He rejects the traditional assumption that identifies all word-initial and word-final consonants (or consonant clusters) with syllable onsets and codas respectively. In place of this he presents a more abstract approach to syllable structure in which an onset must be licensed by a following nucleus, and a coda by a following onset. An important implication of this is that all word-final consonants (in all languages) are interpreted as syllable onsets followed by empty (i.e., unpronounced) nuclei, and not as codas. Although counter-intuitive, this approach has interesting consequences for issues such as stress placement and vowel length. However, someone looking for a more conventional, and less abstract, introduction to syllable structure will be disappointed here.
The emphasis on analysis represented in the title should not be taken to suggest that this book is appropriate for the field linguist preparing to analyze undescribed and/or unwritten languages for purposes of language development. Gussmann draws his data from a relatively small set of languages, most of them literary languages such as English, Icelandic, Polish, German, and others. Perhaps the best way to characterize the overall emphasis of the book is to say that it seeks to demonstrate the ways in which data analysis and theory inform each other. In each chapter, Gussmann begins with a simple description and analysis of data from which he draws theoretical implications regarding phonological structure. He then applies these theoretical conclusions to additional data to demonstrate how the theory, in turn, has implications for the analysis of other more complex or ambiguous data. In the end, the book is perhaps most appropriate for the student of phonology who intends to go on to more advanced studies in theoretical linguistics, especially in a nonderivational framework such as Optimality Theory.