/a/ introduction in the Southern Dialects of Italy: phonology, morphology, syntax or the lexicon?

1. Introduction

This study presents new, freshly collected data and advances a new proposal concerning a sandhi phenomenon characterizing the Upper Southern Dialects of Italy, known as /a/ introduction, described in detail below and previously analysed in the Prosodic Phonology (Nespor and Vogel 1986) framework. The proposal advanced here suggests to separate /a/ introduction in two different phenomena according to whether inserted /a/ is etymological or non-etymological. The former case is analysed as a case in which a vowel, whose content is lexically defined, resists reduction when it finds itself in a metrically strong position. The latter case, on the other hand, is analysed as a case of true insertion of an epenthetic vowel, which phonologically interprets a morphosyntactic boundary. Setting apart the surfacing of etymological /a/ from that of non etymological /a/ as two different phenomena allows to make sense of what looks as inconsistencies in the empirical data and to attain a better definition of the morphosyntactic contexts where both phenomena take place.

2. Description of the phenomenon and previous accounts

The Upper Southern dialects of Italy are characterized, among other things, by a generalised reduction of word-final vowels to schwa, or in some cases a complete deletion. Nevertheless, word-final /a/ resists deletion in such dialects in what has been pretheoretically defined as the “first member of a syntactic cluster” (Rohlfs 1966:177), as shown in (1) with data from Abruzzese (Rohlfs 1966:177), on which this study focuses:

(1) a. na femmēna bɛllɔ “a beautiful woman”  b. na femmēnɔ “a woman” < FEMINA(M)

As can be observed in (1), /a/ only surfaces when phrase-internal in the first member of the phrase (1a), whereas the same vowel is inaudible in phrase-final position (1b). Interestingly enough, in the same dialects the surfacing of /a/ is also documented counteretymologically, as shown in (2):

(2) a. li kina mi “my dogs”  b. li kinɔ “the dogs” < CANE(S)

Among the descriptive literature on Abruzzese, De Lollis (1901) provides a detailed study. As for the theoretical literature, Maiden (1995) and Vogel (1997), basing their claim on a restricted and non uniform amount of data, have described the phenomenon in Prosodic Phonology. More specifically Vogel defines /a/ introduction as a rule introducing /a/ at the end of a non-final Clitic Group in a Phonological Phrase (Vogel 1997:63). The collection and analysis of a larger amount of data carried out for this study, among which compounds, nominal reduplicative constructions and loanwords, allows to question Vogel’s account for several reasons, among which are the following:

- /a/ surfaces inconsistently instead of schwa in the same syntactic configuration, which should arguably lead to the same phonological phrasing. This is shown in (3):

(3) a. lu kanɔ nɛrɛ “the black dog”
   DEF ART.M.SG dog.M.SG black.M.SG
   b. la fattà nɛrɛ “the black cat”
   DEF ART.F.SG cat.F.SG black.F.SG

- /a/ surfaces inconsistently between members of compounds which fall under the same group under Scalise and Bisetto (2009) classification, and should therefore get the same prosodic phrasing. This is exemplified in (4):

(4) **Attributive endocentric compounds**

a. ākwarɔ manganese “copper bisulfite” vs. fɛnɔ_rekɔ “Greek hay”

Indeed Ledgeway (2009) commenting on final vowels resisting deletion in Neapolitan, a similar but slightly different phenomenon, argues that syntactic constituency is not a sufficient condition on the
surfacing of final vowels in adjacent words, suggesting that the alternance of reduced/unreduced vowels may be determined by a lexical specification of a restricted bunch of items.

3. Splitting /a/ insertion

Notwithstanding the possibility of lexical specification of some items, here a proposal is advanced for Abruzzese, which crucially sets apart the surfacing of etymological /a/ from that of non etymological /a/. It is argued that the surfacing of etymological /a/ is an effect of the position of the vocalic nucleus in a metrically strong position, since it precedes the head of a licensing domain. Indeed, /a/, differently from all other vowels, also resists deletion in prothetic position word-internally in the same language. This proposal reformulates in a different theoretical vocabulary Maiden’s and Vogel’s account, and matches Bafile’s (1997) proposal concerning a similar phenomenon of Neapolitan. Crucially, however, it restricts it to the surfacing of “etymological /a/” (with this label, I refer to the thematic vowel of -Domains- Vacing o Bafile, a similar C, in J. Durand-’s: I, Fonetica, Torino: Einaudi tere a Internal Structure of Prosodic vs Empty Category Principle 1997 Bisetto Perugia 27 (1990) Disentangling the two phenomena provides greater insight into this invitation in Morphosyntactic Principles, which can optionally be phonetically realised as schwa. In addition we assume Direct Interface (Scheer 2010) as the phonology/syntax interface theory and Strict CV (Lowenstamm 1996, Scheer 2004) as a phonological theory. Accordingly a morphosyntactic boundary impacting the phonological computation, as in our case, is one that has been translated as an empty CV unit. In the case at hand the CV triggers insertion of a word-final epenthetic vowel in sandhi where an empty nucleus is not governed, in compliance to the Empty Category Principle (Scheer 2004:67). This is exemplified in (6) where the boundary CV and the epenthetic vowel are in bold (epenthetic /a/ is attested elsewhere in the language-other reasons for the surfacing of a vs. θ are also explored):

(6) mari mari [maramari] C V C V C V C V C V

summary

The analyses of /a/ insertion in the Upper Southern dialects of Italy have so far conflated the surfacing of etymological and non etymological /a/, leading to some limits in the analysis proposed. Disentangling the two phenomena provides greater insight into this sandhi phenomenon and a better definition of the morphosyntactic contexts where both phenomena take place (i.e. non etymological /a/ seems to be inserted only in exocentric compounds, only in NP involving postposed possessive but not other postposed adjectives and so on).

References