Postlexical stress in Standard Russian: A case study

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The system of lexical stress in Standard Russian has been a subject of scientific study and debate for a substantial amount of time. Stress assignment has been accounted for from many perspectives—synchronic and diachronic, traditional and generative—among numerous works one can name, for example, Halle (1973), Halle and Kiparsky (1979), Zaliznjak (1985), Shapiro (1986), Melvold (1989), Nesset (1994), Brown et al. (1996) and Chew (1999) among many others. However, the focus has mainly been on word-internal algorithms of stress placement computation.

In this paper we analyse a previously undescribed phenomenon in the field of postlexical stress conditioning. We claim that stress placement in a set of lexical items with variable stress depends on the following word context and is determined postlexically depending on the phonological context.

There is a set of Standard Russian verbs like podat’, otdat’ and others with variable stress in past tense e.g. pódal or podál, ótdal or otdál (3SG.MASC). We suggest that stress placement in such forms is conditioned by the stress pattern of the following word. That is to say, the closer the stressed syllable of the following word is to the beginning of that word, the lower the probability of stressing the last syllable in the forms under discussion. This mechanism can be represented not as a phonological rule or a strictly ordered set of constraints, but rather as a probability inequality:

\[(1) \quad p (\ldots \sigma \# \sigma \ldots) < p (\ldots \sigma \sigma \# \ldots)\]

To test our hypothesis we conducted a series of experiments with speakers of Standard Russian in Moscow and its region. The task was to read out loud a set of sentences, which all contained a red herring assignment so that the attention of the participants would be drawn from the forms in question. The distinction of the contexts where the forms under discussion were placed was twofold. In one type of contexts such verbal forms clashed with direct objects expressed by nouns with initial stress, in the other type—with direct objects expressed by nouns with peninitial stress:

\[(2) \quad \text{podal sho}bú \quad \text{vs.} \quad \text{podal pa}l’tó \]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{handed} & \quad \text{fur coat} & \quad \text{handed} & \quad \text{overcoat} \\
\text{‘handed a fur coat’} & \quad \text{‘handed an overcoat’}
\end{align*}
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The obtained data showed statistically significant results which confirm our hypothesis, and the stress pattern of words with stress variability is indeed influenced by their phonological context. The results might be preliminary but we believe it to be an important step towards the understanding of postlexical phenomena in Russian phonology.

References


