Morpholexical rules and Optimality Theory: Grade Alternation in Inari Saami
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Recently several researchers have taken the existence of crazy rules in language as fatally undermining the Optimality Theory (OT) enterprise (Halle and Idsardi 1997; Dolbey and Hansson1999; Hale and Reiss 2000). I argue this diagnosis may be traced to a category error, whose basis lies in a failure to observe the appropriate division of labour between I-language (the grammar) and E-language (here, the lexicon) (Chomsky 1986). The idea at the centre of the fallacy is that all regularities are appropriately encoded in the grammar. However, I will argue that at least a subset of phonological regularities, including many of those billed as 'crazy rules', are best encoded in the lexicon as morpholexical rules in the sense of Lieber (1980,1982). I will connect this claim to the radical OT line emerging from the recent work of René Kager (2004), for whom the OT grammar serves to define the unique space, the I-language, in which the output forms of a given language are permitted to contrast and vary. Using this idea, Kager challenges the received wisdom concerning the treatment of lexical exceptions and minor rules as 'leaking' contextual neutralizations and proposes instead to deal with such cases in terms of the preservation of underlying ternary contrasts. This allows us to dispense with more elaborate models which employ cophonologies or constraints relativized to lexical strata, allowing a model that adheres far more closely to restrictive classical lines. In pursuing this streamlining approach, I argue that certain infelicities are the result of the violation of morpholexical rules rather than ungrammaticality per se. A simple example is the lexical blocking of the form *oxes by the irregular form oxen. Other affixes may include phonological information in their subcategorization frames, not just lexical. An example from English is the ungrounded and suffix-specific requirement that -ic attaches to a stressed syllable, which is an unpredictable property of one particular suffix and thus not appropriately encoded in the grammar. Extending this general line of reasoning, I will address more challenging cases in which a given morphosyntactic feature complex has more than one allomorph, A and B, where A and B each have distinct combinatorial requirements, that is, A arbitrarily subcategorizes for the phonological environment P1 and B arbitrarily subcategorizes for the phonological environment P2. If the distinction between the I-language grammar and the E-language lexicon is not properly observed, such cases present an apparent problem for OT both because of their functional arbitrariness and the Richness of the Base. Given that the input to the grammar is universal, we must allow for inputs in which A is in the environment P2 and B in the environment P1. In such cases, the grammar will faithfully return the wrong allomorph distributions in the output, inviting the imputation that the fault lies with the grammar itself. This conclusion does not follow, since allomorph distributions are ruled out by independently motivated morpholexical rules. My claims are illustrated with the help of an analysis of the grade alternation system of the Finno-Ugric language Inari Saami (Itkonen 1946, Sammallahti and Morottaja 1993), which has an unusual abundance of rules of this type. My analysis will show how morpholexical rules and constraint interaction jointly produce the complex pattern of surface alternations in the language. Given the right understanding of the division of labour between I- and E-language, then, unnatural alternations are fully compatible with OT's claims of constraint universality. If there is time, I will touch on some of the implications of this understanding for a couple of recent proposals in OT, including paradigm leveling (McCarthy 2001) and ineffability effects (Orgun and Sprouse 1999; Rice 2004).