Default segmentism between markedness and underspecification

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The existence of default segments in processes such as epenthesis and reduplication has generated considerable interest in phonological theory. The main questions are: What properties make a segment available for default status? Why is the set of crosslinguistically attested default segments limited to a small number of phonemes (such as the glottal stop as a consonantal default and schwa or /i/ as common vocalic defaults)?

In Optimality Theory (OT; Prince & Smolensky 1993), this question is generally answered with reference to markedness: It is the universally least marked segments that are used as defaults, as their insertion involves minimal violation of segmental markedness constraints (e.g. Alderete et al. 1999, de Lacy 2006). This talk will address some problems with this approach, while acknowledging the empirical reality that the set of possible default segments is heavily constrained. First of all, it is not clear if attested default segments are indeed the least marked ones; secondly, there is some variation especially in the vocalic domain that is problematic for the markedness-only approach, such as default /e/ in Spanish or /u/ in Japanese.

In previous work, default segmentism was linked to underspecification: ideal default segments are maximally underspecified, possibly featureless. Insertion of an empty segment will then trigger default fill-in rules (e.g. Archangeli 1988). While this feature-filling approach to underspecification has largely fallen out of use, this talk will argue that underspecification does have an important role to play in determining default segmentism. In OT terms, this means that default segmentism is not an effect of markedness alone but involves the interaction of markedness and faithfulness constraints, the insertion of an underspecified segment involving fewer feature faithfulness violations. Evidence for this approach comes from interactions between default segmentism and spreading in epenthesis, the latter also minimising feature faithfulness violations. This, however, implies a theory of underspecification compatible with this approach, which will also be outlined in this talk.