

What is kiw-ling (killing) about OT ah? --- LL from English in Singapore and Hong Kong

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Is Language a mental entity or a social entity? Depending on one's answer, linguistic research would take very different paths, all equally valuable. In this presentation, I lay out why it is important to undertake a research program that studies language patterns from the perspective of how the mind generates linguistic forms and how that has in turn led to the current framework of Optimality Theory (OT). Drawing upon phonological data in the Englishes spoken in Singapore and Hong Kong, I will briefly explain the logic underlying OT and how that would lead to one of the most serious objections raised against OT: the problem of derivational opacity. Though the problem has been independently raised by many opponents of OT and has brought about many improvements to the theory, it has never been fully solved. Ironically, it also calls to question if pre-OT generative phonologies had any deeper insight to opacity than just being able to generate the patterns. For an example of opacity, consider the vocalization of /l/ into [w] in words like "kill" and its interaction with heterosyllabic gemination in Singapore English, given below.

‘kill’ /kɪl/ → [kiw]	‘skip’ /skɪp/ → [skip]
‘killing’ [kiwliŋ]	‘skipping’ [skɪpiŋ]

Though there is only one [p] in ‘skip’, we know that there are two in ‘skipping’ not because of spelling, but because you can distinctly hear two of them when pauses are inserted and when the duration is between [i...i] is measured. By analogy, the [-wl-] in ‘killing’ must be the result of two processes, firstly the gemination of /l/ to [-ll-] and then the vocalization of the coda [l] to [-wl-]. The order is important, which is why it is a case of opacity, otherwise [-wl-] will not be derivable. It is hard for OT to deal with such situations because of its architecture. However, even with pre-OT theories, one might query why languages should have such orders in the first place. That query has typically been left unanswered, and stipulated as part of the language specific properties. These challenges underlie the title of this talk.

I will proceed to show that a solution can be found if one assumes that outputs of phonological systems are structural configurations that allow for information to be fully or partially shared across nodes. Not only would this move generate opaque patterns (only) where attested, it would explain that opacity is a side-effect of independently motivated structural configurations and would not need to be stipulated.