

## The inherent strength of initial positions: Perspectives from Southern Italian dialects

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### 1. Problem

In typology and diachrony the initial position is seen to be strong compared to the other positions:

- It hosts more contrasts and a wider array of consonants.
- It is asymmetrically resistant to weakening/change over time.

In phonological theory, the phonological models of positional strength have built the inherent strength of the initial position into the system. A widespread view is that the strength of initial positions is a design feature of (phonological) grammar. However, in Southern Italian dialects, such as Neapolitan, initial voiced stops: [b], [d], and [g] are weakened to fricatives, liquids or glides: [v], [r] and [j, w, ɥ].

We will show in this presentation that the initial weakening in Neapolitan is not a product of lenition, rather it is the case that the initial position is playing host to a wider set of contrasts which set up quasi-morphological paradigms. Roots come in strong and weak forms depending on their morphemic environment. This view preserves the hypothesis that initial positions are inherently strong because it is only in a strong position which can host such a quasi-morphological contrast.

### 2. The Pattern (as traditionally presented)

In Neapolitan, the weak variant of the stop is found both in absolute initial position and intervocalically, whereas, the strong variant is found in post-consonantal position and in positions created by *Raddoppiamento Sintattico* ‘syntactic doubling’ (RS).

(1) Old and Modern Neapolitan (labial voiced stop pattern)

(a) ##\_ absolute initial position

Neap.	Old Ita.	Gloss
vasta	<i>basta</i>	‘enough’
viato	<i>beato</i>	‘lucky’

(b) V\_V internal words or at words boundaries

sivo	<i>sebo</i>	‘sebum’
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(povera) vestia	<i>bestia</i>	‘beast’
li vagne	<i>i bagni</i>	‘the bathrooms’

(c) Raddoppiamento Sintattico (RS)

/v/ → [b:] / Ø<sub>C</sub> #\_

tre/Ø <sub>C</sub> / [b:]ote	<i>tre volte</i>	‘three times’
a/Ø <sub>C</sub> / [b:]iento	<i>al vento</i>	‘in the wind’

(d) More RS (traditionally referred to as post-consonantal RS)

no/Ø <sub>N</sub> / [b:]ego	<i>non vedo</i>	‘cannot see’
pe/Ø <sub>C</sub> / [b:]encere	<i>per vincere</i>	‘to win’

### 3. How the Pattern Clashes with Phonological Models

Typically, strength and weakness in words is distributed as shown in (2).

(2) Strong and weak positions

Strong positions (onsets)                      Weak positions (intervocalic onset, coda)

# [ <sub>σ</sub> C V      C [ <sub>σ</sub> C V                      V [ <sub>σ</sub> C V                      [ <sub>σ</sub> VC#

#### 3.1 The ‘Coda’ Mirror and CVCV

The Neapolitan initial weakening seems to run against the general CVCV formulation of the ‘Coda’ Mirror (Ségéral & Scheer 2001), revised by Scheer and Ziková ‘Coda’-mirror v2 (2010).

The strength of consonants depends on the licensing force they can obtain from a vowel position to its right. Strength and weakness derive from a position’s ability to receive the contradictory forces of strength (licensing) and weakness (government). Since Scheer and Ziková (2010), it is understood that a position which could in principle be both licensed and governed is only governed. Due to its conditions, the following constellation of strength and weakness ensue:

- C is weak when it is [-Lic, -Gov] ‘word-final coda’ or [+Gov] ‘intervocalic’
- C that is [-Gov, +Lic] is strong ‘initial’ or ‘post-consonantal’

(3) Weakness in the (unified) disjunctive context {C\_ , \_#}

(a) word-internal ‘coda’ [-Gov, -Lic]                      (b) word-final ‘coda’ [-Gov, -Lic]

C	V	C	v	C	V	C	V	C	v
C	V	R		T	V	C		C	







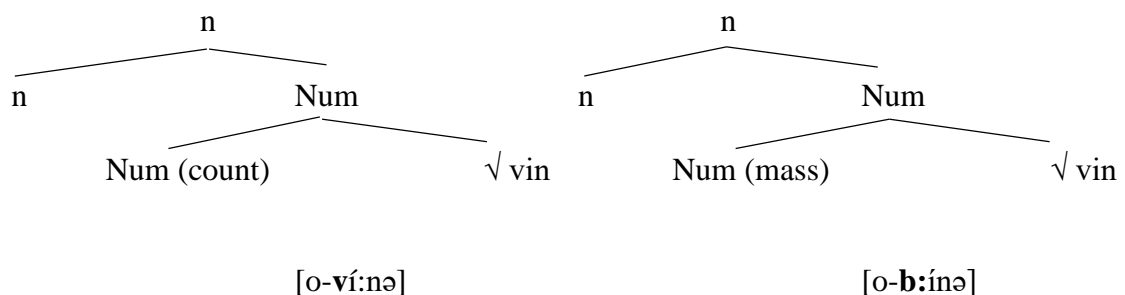
- The consequence of this initial weakening is to increase phonological contrasts as a reinforcing cue for morphological and quasi-morphological patterns.
- Roots will undergo weak-initial vs. strong-initial alternations depending on their morphemic context.
- Indeed, \*\*\*only a strong position that can hold such a contrast\*\*\*.
- This is the morpho-phonology recruiting a phonotactic and deploying it systematically in a position of phonological strength (to its own advantage).
- This type of (quasi-)morphological contrasts are almost always initial, they are usually called ‘consonant mutation’ and occur in very many languages.

(9) Quasi-morphological alternations

Type	Strong/weak	Form		Gloss
simple n	weak	[v́a:sə]	<i>bacio</i>	‘kiss.n’
indefinite Det	weak	[nu:v́a:sə]	<i>un bacio</i>	‘a kiss’
three Noun	strong	[treb:árkə]	<i>tre barche</i>	‘three boats’
Def article Sg	weak	[a-v́ók:ə]	<i>la bocca</i>	‘the mouth’
Def article Pl	strong	[e-b:ók:ə]	<i>le bocche</i>	‘the mouths’
Pret	weak	[adʒ:ə-v́íp:ətə]	<i>ha bevuto</i>	‘he/she drunk’
Neg	strong	[nu-b:érə]	<i>non bere</i>	‘do not drink’
S-	strong	[z-b́íj:ə]	<i>scappare</i>	‘escape’
N-	strong	[ <sup>m</sup> -bó:lə]	<i>in volo</i>	‘in flight’
N- (Loc)	strong	[m:ók:ə]	<i>in bocca</i>	‘in mouth’
Count n	weak	[o-v́í:nə]	<i>il vino</i>	‘wine (count)’
Mass n	strong	[o- <b>b</b> :ínə]	<i>il vino</i>	‘wine (mass)’

Here, we see a strong-weak alternation providing morphological information, reinforcing certain quasi-morphological patterns. In the case of the count and mass noun we have some of the strongest evidence for root initial consonants being alternated, strong and weak, to expone an aspect of the morpho-syntax:

(10) Morphosyntaxphonology of wine in Neapolitan, count and mass



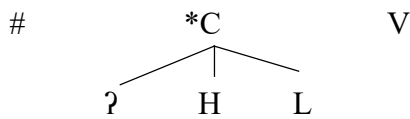
But we also see strong forms with the locative preposition, which underlyingly is probably only a floating nasal feature.

(11) Locative preposition + bok:a [bok:a] ‘in mouth’



Beneath in (14) we express the phonotactic using Element Theory (for a modern introduction see Backley 2011).

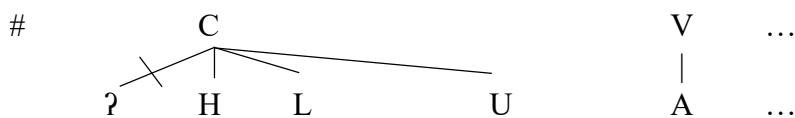
(14) Illicit onset according to *Phonotactic-14*



*Phonotactic-14*<sup>2</sup> acts as a ban on an onset, or a C position, hosting |?| (stopness) known as Edge, |H| (noise) known as Noise, and L (nasality and voicing) known as Murmur. This phonotactic targets voiced stops (and affricates) which have all three properties.

It seems that the morphological paradigm operates by arbitrarily banning this combination of elements word-initially, as shown in (14). This creates the weak form of the root:

(16) Initial phonotactic \*[b] > [v] ([varka] *barca* ‘boat)



The weak form of the root, seen in its phonological features in (16), must lose its Edge. However, in other morphological paradigms the otherwise illicit combination of elements is reinforced by the following relaxation of the phonotactic:

(17) ONE SAVES ALL condition (to be used in association with *Phonotactic-14*)

If any of the elements named by *Phonotactic-14* (|?|, |H|, |L|) can branch, the structure is licensed.

This creates the structures shown beneath (18), all of which are licensed by the ONE SAVES ALL condition on phonotactic-14.

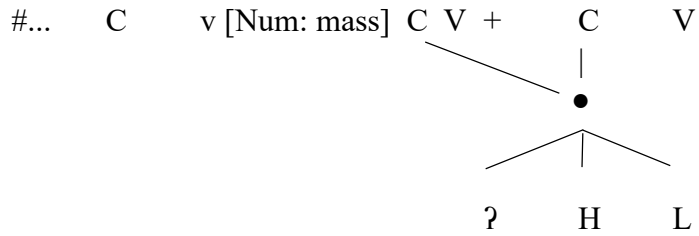
(18) Morphemes interacting with the ONE SAVES ALL condition

(a) Gemination allowing structure to branch (and therefore maintained)

<sup>2</sup> If the name sounds arbitrary it should do, there is no inherent phonological motivation for phonotactic-14, it is merely a condition which has developed so that the phonology may expone the morphology.

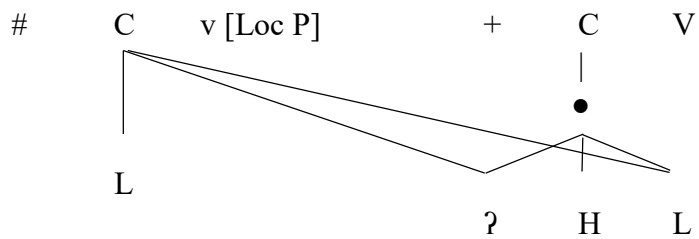


v ~ b:          o + vine          [ob:inə]          ‘the wine.mass’



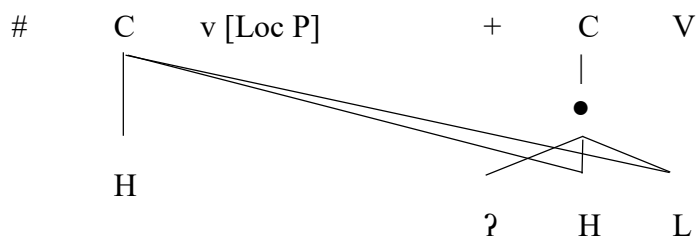
(b) Nasalisation allowing Edge and Murmur to branch

v ~ mb          IN + barka          [mbarkə]          ‘in the boat’



(c) Fricative allowing Noise and Murmur to branch (v ~ zb)

v ~ b          Z + bigna          [zbɪn:a]          ‘escape’



## 5. Conclusion

- Initial weakening in Neapolitan is not lenition, rather it is more similar to what is widely thought of as consonant mutation.
- In Neapolitan any consonant, voiceless or voiced, can occupy the root-initial position depending on the quasi-paradigm.
- The strength and weakness is derived by factors that enable the quality of the initial consonant of the root to support or expone a particular syntactic head, or (quasi-) morpheme: [o-vi:nə] ‘the wine (count noun)’ [o-b:inə] ‘the wine (mass noun)’, or reinforce the signaling of the association of a root with a certain morpheme, or the formation of (quasi-)paradigms.
- Initial weakening in Neapolitan bears a role in reinforcing quasi-morphological, left-edge, strong/weak alternations, so...
- **...this quasi-morphological load is borne by a strong position, one which can host a strong ~ weak contrast.**
- Crucially, the inherent strength of the initial position can still be taken to be a design property of human language design, that is, it falls inside phonological universal grammar.

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