An analysis of high vocoid in Brazilian Portuguese: syllabification and stress assignment

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In this work, we aim to analyze the way high vocoids behave in relation to syllabification and stress assignment in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). In this language, the stress can be on the last three syllables in the word. The term “vocoid” is used here to express a subjacent segment that can surface as vowel or glide. Our objective is to verify in which contexts will surface one or the other.

Based on Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky (1993), McCarthy and Prince (1993b)), we take as starting point the hypothesis that the postvocalic glide is placed in the syllabic coda whereas the prevocalic glide forms a complex nucleus with the following vowel. In relation to the first hypothesis, the main argument refers to the fact that the glide does not co-occur with another coda segment. Concerning the second hypothesis, our argument refers to the fact that the prevocalic glide has to play a role in the stress assignment, since there are not words in BP in which the stress “jumps” a syllable constituted by rising diphthong in the penultimate position. In a word like idioma 'idiom', for example, the stress in first syllable woul be impossible. In a non-derivational analysis, it is not possible to interpret this absence as a consequence of an anterior stage of syllabification, where the high vocoid was placed in the nucleus position, and stress placement on a syllable on its left would mean a “three syllables window” violation. It is important to highlight the fact that there is no consensus in literature about the syllabic affiliation of prevocalic and postvocalic glides in BP.

We propose a ranking that deals with the different syllabic structures of vowel plus postvocalic glide and prevocalic glide plus vowel. In relation to stress assignment, in a general way, we observed that the high vocoid will be stressed only if it is stressed in the input. If the stress is not present in the input or if another segment is stressed in the input, there will be a preference for the realization of a high vocoid as glide, since this realization allows a simultaneous satisfaction of the constraints relating to syllabification and to stress assignment.