

Consonant repetition within words

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A well-known phonological principle is the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP) which prohibits adjacent identical elements. Originally the OCP was applied at the prosodic level, that is the absence of adjacent identical tones, but thereafter it has been applied to other language features as well, including other domains of phonology, but also syntax and discourse. In phonology, one such feature is a dispreference in languages for repeated consonants within words. This is most clearly seen in Arabic verb roots. These roots typically consist of three consonants, but the first and the second are never the same. The extent to which such dispreference also exists in other languages has not been investigated systematically, but there are observations that suggest that the OCP applies to consonantal word structure in other languages as well. I will present the results of a corpus study, in which I examined whether the frequency with which consonants are being repeated within words deviates from what would be expected given the structure of the word and the frequency with which the consonants occur in different positions within the word (word onset, word final, syllable onset, syllable final). The corpus that was used for the study consisted of lists of monomorphemic words taken from the Celex lexical database in the languages English, German and Dutch. The results showed that nearly all consonants in these languages occurred two or more times in a word less often than expected. The tendency was strongest for alveolar consonants / l r n t d s /.

Taken together, the results suggest that an OCP principle against repeated consonants such as the one observed in Arabic roots is also productive in other languages, even though the pattern is not as clear-cut and does not apply to all consonants equally.