Transparency and opacity in vowel harmony

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The most frequently discussed topic in the analysis of vowel harmony is no doubt the matter of transparency and opacity. There have been many accounts of why it is, and under which circumstances, that certain vowels 'do not play ball'. My talk will first review some of these proposals to set the stage for my own approach which I have presented in great detail in my book 'Asymmetries in vowel harmony' A representational account' (OUP, 2018). From the viewpoint of locality consideration, assuming that locality is a desirable property of linguistic operations, transparency presents a bigger challenge than opacity. The optimal situation would be that we can predict the behavior of reluctant vowels from the inherent properties that these vowels have. An attempt to do just that was made by Norval Smith and myself many years ago. The basic idea was that only vowels that are inherently specified with the harmonic element *can* be transparent (they do not have to be), whereas vowels that are inherently incompatible with the harmonic element *must* be opaque. In my book I take this idea to be essentially correct ('still being [not so] crazy after all these years'). However, there are problematic cases and for these I had to develop an auxiliary hypothesis which recognizes the notion of *parasitic harmony* that had already been around since a proposal by Donca Steriade. Meanwhile, Nancy Ritter and I edited a big volume on vowel harmony for Oxford University Press (published May 2024) and as might be expected this brought to light additional problematic cases, perhaps more damaging to the original proposal than the cases that I was familiar with earlier. In this talk I will take an honest look at the idea that transparency (and to some extent opacity) can be predicted based on independent phonological properties, rather than be stipulated, given, and this is crucial, an element-based (i.e. unary) view of phonological primitives, as developed in van der Hulst (2020). At the moment of writing this abstract, I am optimistic that that the 2018 theory can be maintained. After all, it is better to have a theory that faces problems than having no theory at all.

Hulst, Harry van der (2018). *Asymmetries in vowel harmony. A representational account.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hulst, Harry van der (2020). *Principles of Radical CV Phonology. A theory of segmental and syllabic structure*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ritter, Nancy and Harry van der Hulst (eds.) (2024). *The Oxford handbook of vowel harmony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.