

English Theme Vowels are Syntactic Heads

Heather Newell

Université du Québec à Montréal

This talk argues that irregular verbal ablaut in English is due to the presence of theme vowels in the syntax (*break-broke-broken*). This proposal is supported by both the syntax and the phonology of English. First, the theme vowels are argued to undergo syntactic movement, and can therefore be considered akin to auxiliaries in English. Second, this movement derives a hierarchical structure whereby the order of Vocabulary Insertion in verbal derivations leads to the theme vowels being linearly blocked from attaching in the phonology in the participial derivations. This is evidenced by a reversion to the root vowel in participles in a subset of irregular verbs (*take-took-taken*). Third, minimal pairs of verbs in English (*dive-dove* vs. *dive-dived*) weakly support recent work arguing that theme vowels impact argument structure (e.g., Fábregas 2018, Kovačević et al 2023).