Exceptions to cyclicity in Maltese: Deferral vs. detouring
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Stress in Maltese verbs provides a classic argument for the phonological cycle (Brame 1974). Short vowels in non-final, unstressed open syllables are syncopated, but syncope underapplies in verbs with object markers: witness non-homophony of ['hton-na] ‘we snatched’, vs. [ha.'taf-.na] ‘he snatched us’ (cf. citation form ['ha.taf] ‘he snatched’). A cyclic analysis accounts for this by assuming that stress is assigned to the stem (plus any subject suffixes) prior to object suffixes being added; in [ha.'taf-.na] the earlier-cycle main stress on the first syllable would persist as a secondary stress, protecting the first vowel from syncope.

There is however an interesting exception to this pattern (Odden 1993): vowel-final stems (which at least historically had a glide as the third radical) do not show cyclic stress; witness syncope in ['tua:.na] ‘he read us’ (cf. ['tua:ra] ‘he read’). Why not? This talk presents and explores two general modes of analysis for dealing with the exceptional status of vowel-final stems. The first (Wolf to appear) is cast in Optimal Interleaving (Wolf 2008), an extension of McCarthy’s (2007) OT with Candidate Chains. In this theory, the ‘cyclic’ order of stress and object suffixation is not fixed for the language as a whole; instead the candidate set includes different candidate derivations with different orders. I suggest that non-cyclic order is chosen for vowel-final stems because the preference for cyclic order is overridden by a preference to defer stress until after pre-suffixal lengthening, which can only affect vowel-final stems.

The other analysis (Kiparsky 2011) is cast in Stratal OT, where we do have to assume that all stems, whether consonant- or vowel-final, pass through an inner cycle. Ensuring the absence of inner-cycle stress on the first syllable is achieved by taking V-final stems to end in an underlying diphthong, attracting stress to the final syllable in the stem-level phonology; this is then retracted to the first syllable at the word level if no object suffixes are added. (Informally, there is no evidence for stem-level stress on the first syllable because stress takes a detour to the final syllable at the stem level.) While innocuous for real Maltese, I argue that this mode of analysis (which relies on Stratal OT’s power to assign completely new foot-parsees at successive levels) is typologically dangerous, predicting unattested dissociations of stress-conditioned segmental processes from their ‘natural’ locations, which moreover can be conditioned non-locally by factors like a word’s ending in a vowel vs. a consonant, which affect the stressability of marginal syllables. For instance, we can adapt the basic Stratal OT approach to Maltese to model a hypothetical language where C-final words aspirate voiceless stops in the onsets of stressed syllables (like English) but where V-final words have aspiration in the onsets of surface unstressed syllables. I conclude that such effects recommend against Stratal OT and for a theory like OT-CC, where the existence of a single constraint ranking tightly limits the grammar’s ability to assign different distributions of stress at successive stages of a derivation.