Word initial rhotic avoidance: a typological survey

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In many languages of the world, rhotic consonants tend not to occur in the initial position of words. This talk will address this issue of word initial rhotic avoidance (henceforth WIRA) from a typological point of view. The first aim of this study is to document WIRA cross-linguistically, based on the examination of a sample of 200 languages designed by the WALS (Dryer and Haspelmath 2013). This set of 200 languages has been surveyed in order to reveal rhotic (and more generally liquid) phonotactic patterns in relation to word initial avoidance. On the basis of this survey, two types of WIRA have been identified: 1) phonological, or emic WIRA; and 2) phonetic, or etic WIRA.

The first and most notable result that will be discussed in the talk, with examples taken among different languages, is that nearly half of the languages of the sample can be labelled as exhibiting some degree of WIRA. More precisely, 49% of all languages containing at least one phonemic rhotic exhibit emic-WIRA, i.e., they possess no word which begins phonologically with at least one of their rhotics in their native lexicon.

We will also examine how word initial rhotics are adapted from a non-WIRA language into a WIRA language. The loanword adaptation data suggest that WIRA is a recessive feature, because no language of the sample which has developed a WIRA feature due to language contact has been found (although one exception has been identified outside of the 200 language sample). Finally, I will propose two universals in relation to WIRA: 1) if a language forbids /l/ word initially, it also forbids /r/; 2) a rhotic segment never occurs as the positional allophone of a non-liquid segment word initially.