Syllables: Argumentation

1. Syllable structure is a *phonological* phenomenon

It appears to be a universal characteristic of all languages to have syllables. (This has been proposed even for signed languages, incidentally.) However, it is very difficult to give a precise *phonetic* definition of a syllable, and it is not possible to look at a spectrogram of an unknown language and "see" syllable boundaries in some physically measurable way.

This is because syllable structure is a *phonological* **phenomenon** — it is part of how the mental grammar organizes speech sounds.

2. Argumentation for syllable structure

So, if syllable structure can't be directly investigated through phonetics, **how do we study it**?

Native speaker judgments can help, especially since native speakers often have (relatively) clear and stable intuitions about *how many syllables* are in a given word. However, native speaker judgments about *where syllables begin and end* are not very reliable — partly because pronouncing one syllable at a time puts each syllable in a different phonological environment than it would be inside its word, so additional (word-level) factors interfere with the judgments.

Instead, what we need to do is use **evidence** about which segments or features can occur where in a language, or evidence about where certain phonological processes apply in a language, to **make a proposal** for how that language divides segments into syllables. As always, this kind of proposal must be backed up with argumentation based on the available evidence. (Note that the conclusions we reach about syllable structure in one language based on multiple sources of evidence from that language need to be *consistent* — if not, something else is going on that we haven't captured yet.)

For example, a starting-point hypothesis would be that the left edge of a word is also the left edge of a syllable, and the same for the right edge. Thus, patterns of consonants (or the lack thereof) at the left or right edges of the word may give us some initial clues about possible left or right edges of syllables. We have to be a little careful with this technique, however, because sometimes there are special rules that apply at word edges and disrupt this word-edge/syllable-edge correlation. So this is a good way to get started, but be willing to revise your initial word-edge-based hypotheses if further investigation shows that this is necessary.

3. Some aspects of syllabification are language-specific

A final word of caution: It is important to remember that, while some aspects of syllable structure seem to be universal, there are a number of aspects — especially related to assigning **consonants** to syllables — that are language-specific. So, it is *not safe* to apply your own intuitions about syllable structure in your native language to the question of syllable structure in other languages. **Every language must be examined based on the evidence it provides.**