Vowel length, hiatus, and the representation of length

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Abstract

Languages differ in their treatment of adjacent identical vowels. It is more common for languages to realize such sequences as long vowels [Vː], but we also find those that realize adjacent identical vowels heterosyllabically [V_i.V_i]. Presumably there is a single underlying configuration that results in these two different surface patterns.

At least monomorphemically, there is an expectation for consistency in the treatment of adjacent identical vowels, as modern assumptions about the surface representation of adjacent identical vowels necessitates phonological features being shared over time, either tautosyllabically or heterosyllabically. That is, phonological theory does not allow for differing underlying forms that result in a monomorphemic distinction between long vowels and hiatus. A language can act like Quechua, which has contrastive vowel length and does not allow the configuration [V_i.V_i] (or indeed, hiatus more generally; Weber and Landerman 1985), or a language can act like Belep, which is argued not to have long vowels but permits the configuration [V_i.V_i] (and hiatus generally; McCracken 2012). Some underlying difference would be needed to have [Vː] contrast with [V_i.V_i], and since the OCP is enforced on underlying representations, we do not expect a contrast between a single long vowel and adjacent identical short vowels.

However, on the surface, Latin appears to make exactly this contrast. Latin has contrastive vowel length, and, additionally, permits hiatus not just between adjacent vowels of different qualities, but between adjacent identical vowels of the same quality. An example pair is given in (1).

(1) a. me.tuːs ‘fear (gen. sg.)’
   b. mu.tu.ʊs ‘mutual’

This paper proposes an account of this contrast in Latin, couched in two different theories of weight.

1The term “adjacent identical vowels” is purposely vague, and meant to encompass both literal cases of this (arising through morpheme contact, for example), as well as long vowels.