

Weak Vowels in Two Atayal Dialects

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Consonant clusters (CC) are quite common in Atayal orthography as the result of conventionally omitting intervening weak vowels in pronunciation. These weak vowels or vowel-like articulations between consonants may be interpreted as either phonetic transitions or phonological targets by different scholars. In this talk I will discuss the phonological properties of the weak vowels in two dialects of Atayal, Squliq and Matu'uwal (Mayrinax). It will be shown that the analysis of the weak vowels bears on a number of theoretical issues in the synchronic phonology of Atayal.

In Squliq Atayal, pre-penultimate vowels before final stressed syllables undergo weakening, as has been described in previous studies (Egerod 1965; Li 1980, 1981). While it is uncontroversial that these reduced vowels come from an underlying full vowel, how to analyze other pretonic weak vowels has remained unclear in the literature. In the present study, it is argued that those weak vowels that do not have a corresponding peripheral vowel in the paradigm are epenthetic in the synchronic grammar despite that they have developed from a phonemic vowel diachronically. Some unexpectedly reduced penultimate vowels consistently correspond to the vowel *u* in non-suffixed forms. These weak vowels, which involve $\text{ə} \sim \text{u}$ alternations, are shown to neither derive from vowel reduction nor come from epenthesis; rather, they are better analyzed as empty vowels in the lexical representation. The adoption of empty vowels in Squliq can be extended to account for the apparently infixal behavior of the agent voice marker <m>, which has been employed as an example to support primitive infixes in the literature (Blevins 2004). The infix <m> can be straightforwardly analyzed as a VC prefix /Vm/ (or /əm/) in the proposed analysis, which is forced into the infix position in order to satisfy prosodic constraints.

In Matu'uwal Atayal, surface weak vowels (schwas) are restricted to word-initial positions, never appearing in medial positions between CC. It will be shown that such phonotactics results from the influence of metrical structures on segment realization and the tolerance of nonfinal codas in Matu'uwal. The generalizations are rendered possible based on the assumption that Matu'uwal contains empty vowels in the input, too, and footing plays a crucial role in how they realize. Comparative data suggest that while some of the proposed empty vowels in Squliq and Matu'uwal are reflexes of Proto-Atayalic schwas, others are not, which means that the empty vowels are not a direct translation of the historical schwa but are independently called for in the synchronic grammar of Atayal.