
Voice-induced vowel lengthening

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Vowels are longer before sonorants and voiced obstruents than before voiceless obstruents. This pattern is found in many languages and by some is argued to be universal. In some languages it is phonologized and gives rise to alternations. Three cases are examined: Western Slavic, English and German. The Western Slavic pattern is peculiar in that vowels are lengthened only if the following sonorant or voiced obstruent is word-final.

In all cases, it is argued that the mechanism which modifies vowel duration in a voiced context is phonetic in kind (not phonological). Phonetic length is then phonologized by its inscription in the lexical recording of morphemes. Phonological processes such as (Canadian) raising in English or oo > uu raising in Western Slavic may then take this lexical length as an input.

This analysis allows us to keep spontaneous and non-spontaneous voicing truly waterproof: sonorant and vowel voicing is never phonologically active, its spreading can only occur in the phonetics (passive voicing in Laryngeal Realism). A strong argument in favour of this view is the fact that cross-linguistically sonorants appear to always be among the triggers of voice-induced vowel lengthening: there are no cases on record where vowels lengthen before voiced obstruents, but not before sonorants. This is predicted if lengthening is phonetic (phonetics cannot distinguish between sonorant and obstruent voicing), but unexpected if it were phonological: the phonologically active voicing of obstruents should at least sometimes be the only trigger.

Finally, it is argued that the pattern at hand is voice-induced lengthening, rather than shortening before voiceless obstruents (called pre-fortis clipping in the literature on the English pattern).