Final devoicing and vowel lengthening in the north of Italy: a representational approach

In this paper I present a novel approach to the phenomenon of length-related “final devoicing” in the Romance varieties of northern Italy. I propose a representational account of the facts, deriving vowel lengthening from the interplay of constraints regulating word-final delaryngealization and weight-by-position constraints targeting only laryngeally specified obstruents.

As Repetti (1992) shows, the facts are broadly similar for a range of Romance varieties in the north of Italy. I concentrate on (Central) Friulian here, since it seems to be the best described variety (Francescato 1966; Vanelli 1979; Hualde 1990; Baroni & Vanelli 2000; Finco 2009).

In Friulian, stressed vowels are lengthened in final syllables before underlyingly voiced consonants (2), despite the general absence of stress-to-weight effects. Importantly, Friulian has an independent quantity contrast (as in [mɪl] ‘thousand’ ~ [mɪ:l] ‘honey’), so this is clearly a phonological phenomenon rather than the much-discussed phonetic recoverability effect (cf. van Oostendorp 2008 for an overview).

At first blush, this seems to be a classic instance of counterbleeding opacity leading to over-application of vowel lengthening, and thus should present problems for a (parallel) Optimality Theory account. Within a derivational theory, on the other hand, a relatively straightforward account is possible: coda voiced obstruents become moraic at an intermediate level of representation; the mora is delinked following final devoicing, but then reassociated to the preceding vowel, giving rise to lengthening (Hualde 1990; for a different approach see Repetti 1992).

However, Baroni & Vanelli (2000) show that “final devoicing” does not lead to complete neutralization, at least on the phonetic level: among many other things, devoiced obstruents are shorter than true voiceless obstruents. Devoiced obstruents also differ from voiced obstruents in terms of both their own duration and of the degree of lengthening they impose on preceding vowels. I conclude, therefore, that rather than being a textbook [+voice] [−voice] change, Friulian final devoicing involves a phonological ternary contrast, similarly to at least one other language where final devoicing interacts with vowel length, namely (Trégorrois) Breton (Jackson 1960).

I propose a representational account of these facts. Specifically, I argue that final devoicing in Friulian is a case of delaryngealization, i.e. deletion of the Lar node (Mascaró 1987; Steriade 1997). I adopt the following (broadly familiar) specifications:

(3)  ×    ×    ×    |  
     |     |  
     Lar  Lar

[stiff]/[voiceless]

Devoiced  Voiced  Voiceless

I follow Prieto i Vives (2000) and interpret vowel lengthening as a means to satisfy the bimoraic norm for the main-stress foot (Repetti 1989) rather than as a compensatory phenomenon (Hualde 1990; Baroni & Vanelli 2000). Lengthening can happen before devoiced obstruents because they are delaryngealized and thus cannot project a mora, vacuously satisfying the constraint WEIGHTBYPOSITION(Lar); therefore, a second vocalic mora has to be inserted. Voiceless obstruents, on the other hand, resist delaryngealization via an effect similar to de Lacy’s (2006) Preservation of the Marked. They project the second mora of the main-stress foot thanks to WEIGHTBYPOSITION(Lar), which renders lengthening unnecessary.
The proposed account has a number of advantages:

- It captures naturally the connection between vocalic quantity and the moraicity of following consonants (not just single obstruents but also clusters, affricates and sonorants, thanks to the various modifications of WEIGHTYPOSITION), and is consistent with the observations of Vanelli (1979); Baroni & Vanelli (2000) on the relationship between source-language moraicity and recipient-language voicing in Italian loanwords;
- It explains naturally why lengthening only happens in oxytones (analogously to Prieto i Vives 2000);
- Unlike Prieto i Vives (2000), the proposed account also explains the “variability” of final devoicing in dialects such as Milanese: delaryngealization means that there is no target glottis state in the phonetics, leading to variable passive voicing (Keating 1988).

Moreover, the present account exemplifies how feature geometry may be used to reproduce the stringent violation effects of de Lacy (2006), thus capturing his insights on markedness preservation and reduction, but also allowing for language-specific markedness effects.

The paper presents a comprehensive synchronic account of at least one type of oxytone lengthening in the Romance varieties of northern Italy. It demonstrates that, far from being an opacity phenomenon problematic for OT, this type of lengthening is amenable a very straightforward parallel account thanks to closer attention to empirical data and a more nuanced theory of phonological representation.

References