VOWEL LENGTH IN MALECITE

Karl V. Teeter and Philip LeSourd
Harvard University and M.I.T.

Malecite and Passamaquoddy are the same language, and we believe the rules discussed here apply to both of them. However, the research and data on which they are based have so far only been fully confirmed for Malecite.

In Teeter (1971:194) the statement was made that “vowels are lengthened under accent” but no details were provided. It appeared at the time that both accent and vowel length would in fact prove to be predictable from a correct segmental transcription. It soon became evident, however, that there are minimal pairs distinguished by accent, especially in connection with the absentative paradigm:

(1) ntol ‘my canoe’
   ehpit ‘woman’
   tōkē ‘now’
   ntol ‘my canoe’ (Abs.)
   ehpit ‘woman’ (Abs.)
   tōkē ‘he hits’

As given here, these forms are written in the system first worked out by Ives Goddard (1970). He suggests that the words of the language have alternating high and low pitched syllables, but only one main stress a word, which may fall on either a high or a low pitch. If the former, we mark the prominent syllable with an acute accent mark (‘), and if the main stress is on a syllable bearing low pitch we mark it with a grave (‘). This system of writing distinguishes minimal pairs and thus represents a distinct advance over Teeter’s notation, which did not write accent.

Teeter’s assumption had been, however, that accent would prove to be predictable, and vowel length in turn was determined by accent placement. That accent is predictable, at least in a great variety of cases, is now demonstrated in LeSourd’s unpublished work. His dissertation on Passamaquoddy phonology presents rules for the placement of accent based on metrical stress theory with an alternation of weak and strong syllables. This interacts with a system of schwa-dropping in alternate syllables, a system adumbrated but not analyzed by Teeter (1971:195). Finally, LeSourd shows that vowel length, taken to be phonemic in Szabó (1972), is in fact predictable by rule. How this works is the subject of the present paper.
The discovery that makes the prediction of vowel length work is that lengthening is not correlated only with accent. In fact, vowels are lengthened also whenever they are followed by /h/ plus a consonant:

(2) e-hpit 'woman' nte-hpi'tem 'my wife'

A second situation in which length is not correlated with accent involves the vowel schwa, which is never lengthened:

(3) messowellóso 'he shows himself'

The rule for lengthening under accent provides that in penultimate open syllables vowels are lengthened when accented, and for a final grave accent the vowel preceding the accent is lengthened:

(4) ski-táp 'man'

There are exceptions for monosyllables, where an acute accented vowel is lengthened if no more than one consonant follows, but a grave accented vowel is short (as in the first example of (1) above). And when the accent falls on /i/ before /y/, /o/ before /w/, or a vowel before /h/ followed by the same vowel, the preceding syllable has its vowel lengthened:

(5) nátsa-kíyal 'he goes to see him'
    mícáhan 'he goes away' (Rel.)

The derivation of accent itself is much more complicated and is not treated here. The point of the present paper is that vowel length goes according to rule, is therefore predictable, and does not have to be marked in a rational Malecite orthography (we have written length on the forms given as examples except those in (1) only to illustrate the rule).

Szabó's (1972) paper on stress and vowel length has already been mentioned. This paper has the virtue of including a large number of examples, so it is a useful exercise to look at them in terms of the system we have sketched. His examples and others were checked by LeSourd and Teeter this past summer of 1982 with words spoken by Dr. Peter Lewis Paul, Malecite Elder of Woodstock, New Brunswick, who has over the years patiently helped generations of would-be describers to obtain true and accurate data.

The most notable conclusion to be drawn from this work is that the overwhelming majority of Szabó's transcriptions agree in marking of vowel length with just what would be expected by our rules, a tribute
to the excellence of his hearing. A few examples may thus serve well
to show how vowel length is predicted by accent:

(6) pilskʷe·hši·sak 'little girls'
elíwi·htá·sik 'what it is called'
ákʷá·mok 'more'
elipawá·tak 'what he wants'
nmilhamá·pan 'we’re doing a lot of different things'
ski·cín 'Indian'
pé·ciye 'he arrives'

There is one important type where Szabó’s transcriptions do not
agree with ours, and this is based on a difference in writing system.
Both Teeter (1971) and Szabó (1972) fail to note the difference be­
tween clusters of /h/ plus consonant and geminate clusters. In fact,
all of the consonants but /h/ do geminate in Malecite (/h/ does too
in Passamaquoddy), and since lengthening takes place before /h/ plus
consonant, it is important to distinguish the two cases:

(7) sakamákk 'chiefs' (Abs.)
sakamá·hk 'where the chief is'

Since Szabó writes only the /h/ plus consonant for both cases, we
should expect to find him hearing and marking both short and long in
this situation. This is just what happens, so that apparent contrasts
in length in his data are resolved when it is seen that the contrast is
based on what follows the vowel. The following are examples where
Szabó (1971) writes /hs/ for /ss/ and /ht/ for /tt/:

(8) ksakássowá 'he crossed over'
nitte 'right here'

The great bulk of Szabó’s forms, then, show agreement in vowel
length with ours as spoken by Paul, and thus provide further evidence
for our rule. A few of the exceptions may be the result of dialect
variation, but we may tentatively conclude at this point that where the
Paul forms, all of which appear to conform to our rule, and the Szabó
forms disagree, the Paul forms are to be preferred as the more correct.

As we have indicated, the details of the accent system of Malecite
are minute, usually difficult, and often beyond our present understand­
ing. There is much work yet to be done on Malecite-Passamaquoddy
phonology, and this will remain true even after LeSourd’s dissertation
in progress is done. But there are no minimal pairs for vowel length
in Malecite. And in terms of vowel length and its relation to accent,
it does seem fair to conclude that future work will need to incorporate
the systematic relationships we have presented.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The original stimulus for this study comes from work of László Szabó, to whom we are grateful.

REFERENCES

Goddard, Ives

Szabó, László

Teeter, Karl V.