

Vowel Harmony in Borneo?

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This presentation will explore a vowel-changing phenomenon in Tindal Dusun, a language spoken in Sabah, Borneo (Malaysia). Although this phenomenon has been called vowel harmony by various authors working on Sabahan languages (Kroeger 1992, Hurlbut 1981, Harris and Chapple 1993, Boutin 1993), I conclude that the phenomenon is sufficiently different from what has been typically called vowel harmony in the literature to warrant another name. I will tentatively call it "vowel lowering", while recognizing that there may be another more appropriate term that captures the nature of the process without confusing it with prototypical vowel harmony, as exemplified by languages like Turkish.

First, this presentation will treat the vowel system of Tindal to provide a background in which to understand the context of the vowel changes. In particular, the circumstances of the neutralization of the diphthongs [oy] and [ay] as [e:] will be discussed, as this bears on the vowel-changing phenomena under discussion.

The phenomenon of vowel lowering in Tindal does not involve underspecified vowels or changing phonological features of vowels as the name vowel harmony implies, but rather entails a change of /o/ to /a/. In Tindal, the vowel /a/ spreads from right to left changing /o/ to /a/. The spreading of /a/ is blocked by the high vowels /i/ and /u/ (i.e., any vowel but /o/), but intervening consonants do not affect the rule. This can be formalized as a rule whereby /o/ changes to /a/ if the following syllable contains /a/.

(1) o → a/ __ (C) a

This rule must be allowed to apply iteratively.

Next, this presentation will examine how this vowel-lowering rule interacts with other aspects of the phonology. In order to do so, the stress system of Tindal will be briefly examined, and there will be a short discussion of why /o/ can be considered the most neutral vowel in Tindal. With this data in mind, the presentation will address the interaction between vowel lowering and prepenultimate neutralization, where an /a/ becomes /o/ (the opposite of the vowel lowering rule) in the prestressed syllable. In such cases where both vowel lowering and prepenultimate neutralization are applicable, the neutralization takes place first, and the vowel lowering, taking place second, reverses the effects of the neutralization.

Finally, the process will be compared and contrasted with similar but not identical processes in other Sabahan languages.

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