



How many peripheral low vowels can you have?

Low vowel contrasts in Vouvantais

John Hajek

School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 May 2009

Received in revised form 4 June 2010

Accepted 7 June 2010

Available online 2 August 2010

Keywords:

Vowel systems

Low vowels

Distinctive features

Transcription

ABSTRACT

Relatively little attention has been paid to possible low vowel systems in the world's languages. While most languages appear to have only one low vowel, some have two, and in rare cases, three contrastive low vowels. Here we make the case for the largest low vowel system yet reported: five low vowels are shown to be contrastive in Vouvantais, a moribund language variety related to French. After outlining the system and its unusual characteristics, including contrasts not previously reported, we consider how the system developed, as well as its implications for distinctive feature representation and for current transcriptional practices. We see that while the facts of Vouvantais can be dealt with, if not predicted, by means of available binary features, they remain much more problematic for transcription and observation by linguists, leading to an under-reporting of some vowels across languages.

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1. Introduction

Vouvantais, a moribund *langue d'oïl* variety spoken in western France, and closely related to Standard French, is typologically unusual in having a large contrastive system of peripheral low vowels. In the first phonemic analysis of Vouvantais vowels we argue that it has at least five such vowels /æ ą ɒ ɓ/—the highest number of peripheral low vowels so far reported in the world's languages. It also appears to have an unusual low back vowel /ɓ/ (slightly raised and rounded), rarely reported, and not previously known to be contrastive with either /a/ or /ɔ/. We provide first an overview of low vowels in the world's languages before detailing the nature and distribution of low vowels in Vouvantais. We also test the ability of distinctive feature representation to capture the Vouvantais low vowel system, and show that the latter is consistent with the former. Finally, we consider the implications of the same vowel set for phonetic transcription.

2. Peripheral low vowels across the world's languages

Most languages of the world have at least one peripheral low vowel. According to Maddieson's (1984) UPSID (UCLA Phonological Segment Inventory Database) sample of 317 languages, central /a/ is by far the most frequently occurring low vowel, as seen in the following results¹:

(1)	raised low front unrounded	/æ/	38 languages	(12%)
	low front unrounded	/a/	14 languages	(4.4%)

E-mail address: j.hajek@unimelb.edu.au.

¹ We ignore here non-peripheral low vowels, e.g. ɐ, and low vowels with additional features such as length or nasalization. We will use the symbol a, as is common practice, to represent the fully low central vowel, but will return to transcription issues in section 5.

low central unrounded	/a/	274 languages	(86.4%)
low back unrounded	/ɑ/	22 languages	(6.9%)
low back rounded	/ɒ/	5 languages	(1.6%)

The five peripheral low vowel qualities identified in the UPSID sample, and shown in (1), include slightly raised front /æ/ which occurs more frequently than fully low front /a/. No language in the sample is known to contrast front /æ/ and /a/. We note too the lower frequency of back low vowels, whether unrounded /ɑ/ or rounded /ɒ/. Moreover, while back vowels are usually rounded across languages, as lip rounding is known to enhance the perceptual backness of back vowels (Stevens et al., 1986), labialization is not so typical of low back vowels, suggesting a more limited enhancing effect at that specific degree of vowel opening. Nowhere in the sample, do we find as contrastive a slightly raised low back vowel (rounded or unrounded), that would match raised front /æ/, but which occurs contrastively in Vouvantais, and also, as we shall see (albeit in more limited nature), in a small number of other languages.

Few of the world's languages have more than one central vowel. In (2) we see that a binary contrast between raised low front /æ/ and low central /a/ is by far the most common expanded low vowel system in the UPSID sample. All other two vowel combinations are highly marginal in number.

- (2)
- | | |
|--------|--|
| /æ a/ | 19 languages (e.g. Bengali, Finnish, Hakka, Thai) (6%) |
| /a̠ a/ | 3 languages (Azerbaijani, Farsi, Sinhalese) (0.9%) |
| /a̠ ɑ/ | 2 languages (Bengali, Khmer) (0.6%) |
| /a ɑ/ | 2 languages (Khalaj, Temne) (0.6%) |
| /æ ɒ/ | 2 languages (Norwegian, Hungarian) (0.6%) |
| /æ ɑ/ | 1 language (Bashkir) (0.3%) |
| /a ɒ/ | 1 language (Amo) (0.3%) |
| /a ɒ/ | 1 language (French) (0.3%) ² |

Three-way low vowel systems, as in (3), are highly exceptional, and no four-way systems are found in UPSID nor elsewhere, as far as we are aware:

- (3)
- | | |
|----------|-----------------------------------|
| /a̠ a ɒ/ | 2 languages (Dan, Punjabi) (0.6%) |
| /æ a ɑ/ | 1 language (Nambakaengo) (0.3%) |
| /æ a ɒ/ | 1 language (Luo) (0.3%) |

3. Vouvantais

The low vowel system of Vouvantais indicates that some rethinking is needed about what is possible in languages with regard to low vowels as contrastive elements in a single language. The data for this study are taken from Rézeau's (1976) detailed description of Vouvantais, the traditional *langue d'oïl* dialect of Vouvant, located in the French *département* of la Vendée. Although today in the Pays de la Loire region, it is in the historical Poitou region. Poitevin, like all other *langues d'oïl* varieties, is closely related to Standard French (henceforth French), itself based on the traditional *langue d'oïl* spoken in the Île de France region surrounding Paris.

Vouvantais, like rural dialects and regional languages spoken throughout France, is highly threatened. Rézeau (1976) noted that only older generations were actively fluent in Vouvantais, as the population increasingly shifted to French.

Our primary data source is the lengthy lexicon that is included by Rézeau (1976) in his description of Vouvantais. Rézeau (1976) does not provide a phonemic analysis of the Vouvantais vowel system (although he does provide such information for the consonant system). Instead, following a more traditional French dialectological approach, he outlines all vowel variants, first in a vowel quadrilateral, and then by vowel symbol, with some descriptive information as well as lexical examples provided in French-oriented phonetic transcription. This transcription system combines normal Roman letters, a small number of special vowel characters, e.g. æ, œ, and the use of diacritic marks and accents, e.g. à, á, to account for vowel quality differences. For ease of reading, we will generally maintain the use of Rézeau's transcription of low front /a̠/ and slightly raised back /ɒ/ as à and â respectively for much of this article and will return to transcription issues relevant to the Vouvantais low vowel system in section 5. We also note that our attention in this study is focused primarily on oral vowels below the open-mid vowel quality range. We do, however, also include some information on low-mid vowels /ɛ ɔ/ in order to demonstrate that these also contrast with raised low vowels in Vouvantais. With one brief exception, no reference is made to other, higher, oral vowels nor to any nasal vowels.

² UPSID draws on Sten's (1963) account of French. Most sources, e.g. Tranel (1987), suggest French has, or at least had until recently, a two low vowel system involving unrounded vowels, either /a ɑ/ or /a̠ ɑ/, although most speakers have now shifted to a single low central vowel /a/, cf. Fougeron and Smith (1993).

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