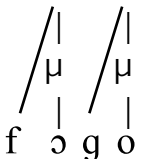
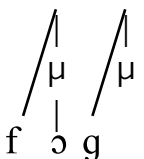
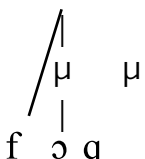
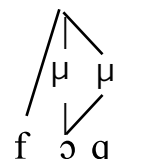


(Too much) synchrony within diachrony? Vowel length in Milanese.

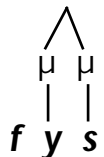
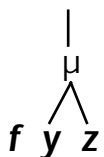
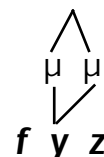
Many Northern Italian dialects display, unlike Standard Italian, contrastive vowel quantity (e.g. Milanese ['ka:l] 'loss' vs. ['kal] 'corn'). This contrast was not directly inherited from Classical Latin but arose as the product of phonological change. To explain this change, several proposals were put forward in research in theoretical phonology over the past decade.

Repetti's (1992:175) Moraic Phonology account proposes that Milanese contrastive length arose as a compensatory lengthening for the loss of final vowels, as shown in (1):

- (1) Example: FOCU > *['fɔgo] > ['fɔ:g]/['fɔ:k] 'fire'
- | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| a. input form | b. apocope | c. parasitic delinking | d. compensatory lengthening |
|  |  |  |  |

According to this view, Milanese had no distinctive vowel length before the change: it only possessed monomoraic vowels, and acquired long vowels, both underlyingly and at the surface, through compensatory lengthening. This explains why length does not occur in proparoxytones (e.g. ['nɔva] 'new.FSG': here, no final vowel was lost).

Montreuil (1991:43ff) develops an alternative mora-based account of Milanese vowel length. He assumes for minimal pairs like the one mentioned above the structural representations in (2a-c) (his (10), (11) and (14) respectively):

- (2) a. input (and output)form b. input form c. output (SRC)
 ['fys] 'ditch' ['fyz] ['fyz] 'spindle'
- | | | |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
|---|---|---|

Under this view, stressed short vowels are assumed to be followed by moraic consonants underlyingly, whereas long vowels are followed by non-moraic codas. Given the standard moraic representations, this boils down to positing underlying consonant gemination. Vowel length, on the other hand, is derived, as shown in (2c), through the enforcement of a Strong Rhyme Constraint (SRC) imposing that all stressed syllables be bimoraic.

Still another account of Milanese vowel length, based on foot structure, was proposed by Prieto (2000) (cf. already Prieto 1993:101). Within the framework of Optimality Theory, Prieto regards length in e.g. ['ka:l] 'loss' as forced by a prosodic FOOT-BINARITY constraint, imposing that «Feet should be analyzable as binary» (Prieto 1993:91). Prieto's treatment, while developed to account for the synchronic distribution of long and short vowels, directly carries over to diachrony. This is declared in Prieto's (1993) title ('Historical vowel lengthening in Romance'), and results clearly from Prieto's (2000:270) conclusion, in which the author compares her account of Milanese's length in terms of foot optimization with «the evolution of French syllable structure», that «represents an instance of syllable structure becoming more complex due to the pressure to optimize different foot types».

All these proposals are, in themselves, plausible, both as synchronic statements on the distribution of vowel length and as diachronic hypotheses about its rise. However, from the point of view of the method of historical linguistics, they share a common flaw: they reduce diachronic phonology to internal reconstruction alone (cf. King 1969). This is not in keeping with the well-established paradigm of historical linguistics. As Ferdinand de Saussure puts it:

«tandis que la linguistique synchronique n'admet qu'une seule perspective, celle des sujets parlants, et par conséquent une seule méthode, la linguistique diachronique suppose à la fois une perspective prospective, qui suit le cours du temps, et une perspective rétrospective, qui le remonte» (Saussure 1922²[1979]:291).

A diachronic account must reconcile the evidence coming from reconstruction (*perspective rétrospective*) – which in turn consists of two operations, internal and comparative reconstruction – with that coming from philological inspection of extant relevant records (*perspective prospective*). In our specific case, application of this more complex method reveals – as I argue in this paper – that Milanese vowel length is not the product of any of the changes formalised in the proposals above. In fact, no separate change has to be postulated in order to account for its rise, since Milanese vowel length goes back in a straight line to Proto-Romance open syllable lengthening, a change that is independently documented. Philological evidence shows that a rule of open syllable lengthening spread to all the Latin-speaking world in the late Empire (cf. Herman 1982). This rule was active in Proto-Romance and was lost, in Western Romance, with degemination, which gave rise to distinctive vowel length.

Finally, as for comparative reconstruction, this account also permits a unified treatment of vowel length in Milanese and in other related varieties of Northern Italo-Romance (e.g. Emilian), in which the contrast also occurs in paroxytonic words (and hence cannot be explained via (1), (2) or similar accounts). Restriction of length to oxytones in Milanese is demonstrably a later development, and is best explained as an effect of rhythmical compensation (e.g. Marotta 1985 for experimental evidence on Standard Italian).

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