

Camuno vowel harmony: Understanding a unique pattern of height agreement

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This work documents and analyzes harmonic patterns in Camuno, an understudied, endangered Romance language spoken in Valcamonica, northern Italy, within the general framework of Evolutionary Phonology (Blevins 2004, 2006, to appear). Camuno exhibits a unique system of stress-dependent height harmony within a 10 vowel system /i u y e ε ø o ɔ a ɐ/. In all words, a stressed high vowel /i/ triggers raising of preceding mid vowels, while stressed /u/ only raises preceding mid round vowels. The low vowel /a/ blocks harmony and is opaque. Although stressed /y/ as a trigger is not found in the native vocabulary, nonce-word elicitations suggest that it is an even weaker trigger than /u/, potentially raising only preceding unstressed /ø/.

In addition to describing productive alternations and static height agreement patterns, this study attempts to illuminate the special status of the front rounded vowel /ø/ in harmony contexts. Due, primarily, to its historical origins from stressed Latin short /o/ in open-syllables (cf. Loporcaro 2011) this Camuno vowel is contrastive only in stressed syllables in the native lexicon. While one might expect raising of /ø/ to [y] under harmony, in both real words and nonce-word experiments, a range of factors appears to determine [u] in some cases and [y] in others. These factors include (i) whether or not ø is part of the suffix /-ø/ 'nominalizer/diminutive'; (ii) whether or not ø is followed by //, and hence phonologically similar to this suffix; (iii) whether or not /ø/ is in a stem-initial syllable; and (iv) whether or not /ø/ can bear secondary stress.

In sum, while height harmony in Camuno appears to be a phonetically natural process with origins in common co-articulatory patterns, the details of this sound pattern reflect accidents of history, and aspects of the Camuno lexicon which give rise to complex patterns when speakers are asked to provide nonce forms giving rise to lexically unattested harmony patterns.

References

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