

Tales of two Diphthongs of an Indigenous Minority Language

Abstract

This study investigated the phonological variation and sound change in the Yami diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ (e.g., *mangay* “go”, *araw* “day, sun”). Yami is a Philippine Batanic language, spoken by less than 3000 speakers on Orchid Island, 60 kilometers southeast of Taiwan. For background information about the cultural/historical/linguistic setting of this minority group, access the first author’s Digital Archiving Yami Language Documentation website <http://yamiproject.cs.pu.edu.tw/yami>).

The interpretation of the direction of change has been centralization and upward movement, thus [ay] and [aw] alternate with [əy] and [əw], respectively. In addition, [əy] moves forward to [iy], whereas [əw] moves backward to [uw]. Our qualitative analysis (Rau & Chang, in press) has revealed that the nucleus raising rule is an innovation in Yami and has progressed faster and longer in (ay) than in (aw). The same rule has also spread to environments such as a-i and a-o across morpheme boundaries. While (ay) is raised to the peripheral high front vowel /i/ in the raising areas, another change, in prefixes with the high front vowel (e.g., *mi-/pi-/ni-*), is reversing the direction and has begun to lower and diphthongize the nucleus [i] to [əy]. However, a detailed quantitative analysis is needed to confirm the findings from the previous study.

This study is a quantitative VARBRUL analysis to answer the following three questions: (1) To what extent is the variation of (ay) and (aw) influenced by a combination of internal factors and external factors? (2) Does the spread of raising to a-i and a-o follow an implicational scale with the following hierarchy: morpheme boundary > word boundary > morpheme internal? (3) What internal and external factors affect the reversing change from /i/ back to /əy/?

The data came from a Yami corpus built from 20 narratives in Rau & Dong (2006) and more narratives from Dong & Rau (1999, 2000) to ensure a balanced representation of age, sex, and location of the speakers.

Our results for Question 1 confirmed that Yayo, Iraralay, Iranomilek, and Ivalino villages on the northeast coast promote the raised production of (ay) and (aw), while Iratay and Imowrod inhibit it. The ordering of the effect of the preceding segments of (ay) and (aw) favoring raising is scaled as follows with the VARBRUL weights in parentheses:

(ay): Voiced obstruent (0.767) > Lateral, retroflex & trill (0.602) > Vowel & semi vowel (0.49) > Voiceless obstruent (0.43) > Nasal (0.40), while the ordering of the preceding segment

(aw): Lateral & trill (0.628) > Voiced obstruent (0.464) > Voiceless obstruent (0.399) > Vowel (0.344).

The results for questions 2 and 3 will be available by the end of September 2006.

References

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