

# ON THE VOWEL SYSTEM IN PRESENT-DAY STANDARD SLOVENE

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## POVZETEK

Današnji slovenski samoglasniški sestav sestoji iz osmih fonemov /i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, u, ə/, ki so vsi lahko naglašeni, medtem ko jih je v nenaglašenem položaju lahko le šest, ker sta /ɛ/ in /o/ lahko samo naglašena. V nenaglašenem položaju je razlika med sprednjima srednjima samoglasnikoma /ɛ/-/ε/ in zadnjima srednjima /o/-/ɔ/ odpravljena ter izgovarjamo v tem položaju nevtralni /E/ in /O/. Ni več minimalnih parov, kjer bi bila dolžina besedno razlikovalna. Tako imamo v današnji standardni slovenščini samo dve skupini samoglasnikov, naglašene in nenaglašene, ker dolžina ni več fonološko relevantna.

## ABSTRACT

The present-day vowel system in Slovene consists of eight vowel phonemes /i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, u, ə/, that can all be stressed, while only six of them can appear in unstressed position as well because /ɛ/ and /o/ can be only stressed. In unstressed position the difference between the close and open middle vowels /ɛ/-/ε/ and /o/-/ɔ/ is abolished with the result that a neutral /E/ and /O/ is used. There are no minimal pairs with distinctive length. We have thus in Standard Slovene only two groups of vowels, stressed and unstressed, while length is not distinctive any longer.

Standard Slovene has 8 vowel phonemes /i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, u, ə/.

According to traditional grammar they fall prosodically into three groups [1], as it can be seen from Figure 1.

Unstressed vowels are thus always short and in quality equivalent to short stressed vowels. The latter are of longer duration than the unstressed short group although both are considered short. Stressed vowels in non-final syllables are always long, in final syllables and in monosyllabic words they can be either short or long, depending on the meaning of the word.

An acoustic investigation into vowel duration in Standard Slovene [2] as spoken by educated people in Ljubljana has shown that these tenets do not hold. There are no minimal pairs where length is distinctive. Length has ceased to be an independent feature and has become a supportive feature of stress. It is a consequence of stress

and not vice versa, i.e. its cause. Vowels in Standard Slovene thus fall into two groups: stressed and unstressed. All other conditions being equal, a stressed vowel is longer than an unstressed vowel. The longer a stressed vowel is, the bigger the duration difference is between it and its unstressed counterpart. What makes stressed vowels differ in length is their intrinsic (or inherent) duration. Thus a second factor comes into play: inherent duration. Inherent duration is quality dependent. All other conditions being equal, /a/ for example lasts longer than /i/ or /ə/. Examples: *pas, piš, pæ*. This vowel property is automatic, is predictable and thus belongs to phonetics and not to phonology. A third relatively important predictable influence on vowel duration is syllable structure: in Slovene open syllables tend to be longer than closed, e.g. *žep - žepa, miš - miši, sok - soka, grd - grda*. There are other foreseeable properties that influence vowel duration but they carry less weight and will therefore not be mentioned here.

As already mentioned, a phonological distinction between long and short vowels in traditional grammar is limited to final syllables or monosyllabic words. According to this theory, length can play a word distinctive role in such words and we have minimal pairs with length as the only distinction. Such minimal pairs are supposed to exist with the vowels /i/, /u/ and /a/. There are none with /ε/-/ε/ and /ɔ/-/ɔ/. e. g. *sít* (sem te)-(pet) *sít*; *kùp* (gnoja) - (na) *kúp* (v trgovini); (moj) *bràt* - (grem jagode) *brát*. The dialect forms *sæt, kæp, bræt* are proof that these words once contained a short vowel. To prove the distinctive function of length in these words in present-day Slovene, present users of Standard Slovene have to make this length difference in vowels of the same quality. Thus (moj) *bràt* with a distinctly short a and (jagode) *brát* with a distinctly long one, etc. Measurements of vowel length in these words showed that no systematic length difference existed in the speakers. In Standard Slovene as spoken in Ljubljana, no difference is made between short and long vowels. The result of my investigation is: close /ɛ/ and /o/ can be found only in stressed syllables and they are thus always »long« (= in the phonetic sense). All the other vowels can appear in stressed as well as in unstressed position and can be »long« or »short« depending on whether they are stressed or not.

Stressed				Unstressed	
long		short		short	
í		ì		i	u
é		ə		ə	
ε	ɔ	ε	ɔ	ε	ɔ
á		à		a	

Figure 1: The vowel system in Slovene according to traditional grammar.

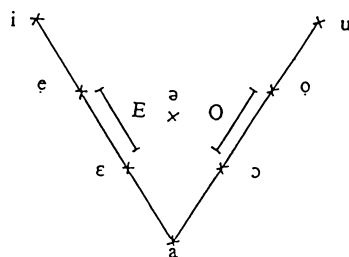


Figure 2: Pronunciation range of the archiphonemes /E/ and /O/.

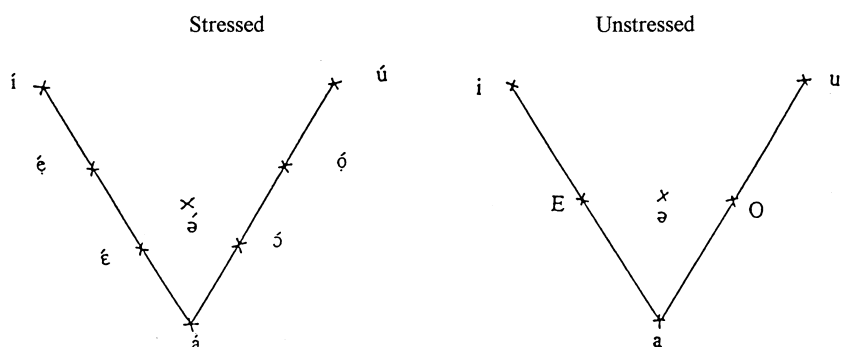


Figure 3: The vowel system in present-day Slovene.

Based on these findings, there are only two groups of vowel sounds in Standard Slovene: stressed and unstressed. All eight vowels can be stressed, while only six can be unstressed as well since /e/ and /o/ can be only in stressed position. In unstressed position we have phonologically only one *e* and *o*, that is to say, the difference between a close and an open *e* (and *o*) is abolished because they have no word distinctive function any longer. Their phonetic realization is not so clearcut for two reasons:

- 1) because unstressed vowels, because unstressed, are not so clearly pronounced; and
- 2) because we no longer have two phonemes in the anterior and posterior middle area of the vowel diagram.

Unstressed *e* and *o* have a tongue position between open and close without ever reaching the closeness of /e/ and /o/, or the openness of /ε/ and /ɔ/ of stressed syllables. Contrary to traditional grammar, which considers unstressed *e* and *o* definitely open vowels [3], we agree with Šolar [4] that in quality they are identical neither with close nor with open *e* and *o* respectively. They share,

however, with them the properties of: middleness and anteriority with *e*, and middleness and posteriority with *o*, properties that only these two sounds share, and no other. Since the openness or closeness of pronunciation is not distinctive and since the unstressed sound never attains the clearness of the stressed, it does not matter how they are pronounced and less attention is paid to their quality because it bears no influence on meaning (Figure 2). We have to do here with an intermediate sound containing the properties of both, an archiphoneme, to use Trubetzkoy's term [5]. Such minimal pairs as the unrelated words *peta* - *pĕta* are a sign that this is a wider phenomenon than covered by morphophonemics.

Compare stressed close and open *e* and *o* with the unstressed in the following examples. Only definitely close vowels are marked as to their pronunciation [e, o]: *pĕt* - *pe'tero*, *'žena* - *'žĕnski* - *žĕ'nica*, *'mora* - *'mĕra* - *mo'rala*, *po'govor* - *go'vornik*. In prestressed position, their realizations tend to be nearer to close /e/ and /o/, and

in poststressed to open /ɛ/ and /ɔ/, as already found by Šolar.

A realistic notation in agreement with the present Slovene vowel system would therefore be as it can be seen from Figure 3.

This presentation is still stylized, just as the vowel diagrams of my predecessors are. A more realistic one would contain /ɔ/ nearer to /a/ than to /o/ [6].

If we survey the situation in a wider context across Slovenia, the various dialectal vowel systems show that in the central Slovene dialects the quantitative opposition (i.e. stressed long vowels: stressed short vowels) often changes to a qualitative one, the short vowel being reduced to /ə/. Thus there is no longer a quantitative opposition, but a qualitative, although the reduced vowel is definitely short. It is so, however, as a consequence of its new quality, and is not an independent variable any longer. On the other hand, in many Styrian dialects vowel quality is retained while the quantitative opposition is abolished [7]. This also applies to the pronunciation of the majority of the population in the second biggest city in Slovenia, to Maribor [8].

This means that the pronunciation difficulties of keeping long and short vowels apart in qualitatively equivalent vowels do not apply only to speakers of Standard Slovene in Ljubljana, but also to the majority of Slovenes. The more deeply rooted in the subconscious the characteristics of a language are, the more difficult it is to influence them *ex cathedra*. Since quantity is a part of the prosody of a language and is therefore especially ingrained in the mind of a speaker, it is practically impossible to shed or change old habits at will. Thus it is only logical we ask ourselves what sense it makes to prescribe a distinction that the majority of Slovene speakers are incapable of making?

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