

Word-level prosody in Nauruan

In this talk I propose a new analysis of the vowel system of Nauruan (Micronesian; Nauru), focusing on length, stress, and pitch, and situate it in the context of Micronesian prosody. The data comes from original fieldwork on Nauru in winter and spring of 2014.

Previous claims about Nauruan stress have been at best tentative (as in Nathan 1973; Hough 1974), but there is apparent unanimity in the literature that vowel length is contrastive, while central vowels [i, ʌ] are allophonic. In this paper I suggest an alternative view of the vowel system, where central quality is contrastive, while length is predictable.

The key to the vowel system is the previously unstudied system of stress. For evidence of the latter I turn to a recording of all the headwords in a draft of the Nauruan dictionary (Jacob 1996). The data contain the words pronounced with a listing intonation, which, as I show, interacts with stress in a predictable way. The stress rule gleaned from this data places stress within a final three-syllable stress window according to a set of weight-sensitive conditions; the listing intonation is aligned with the stressed syllable.

Once stress is taken into account, length in turn becomes predictable as well. Stressed non-central vowels preceding voiced consonants are long, modulo some cyclic effects.

The resulting system is not transparently derivable from Rehg's (1993) reconstruction of proto-Micronesian prosody.

References

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