

ROTUMAN VOWELS AND THEIR HISTORY

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Non-phonemic statements, of which there are several, fail to agree on the number of vowels in Rotuman. Five, seven, ten, twelve, and fourteen have all been suggested. Recent work with an informant in Auckland attested ten contrasting vowel phonemes arranged as follows:

Front		central unrounded	Back
Unrounded	rounded		rounded
i	ɨ		u
e	ɛ		o
æ	ɶ	a	ɔ

/æ/ does not occur finally; /ɨ, ɛ, ɔ/ occur only medially; /a, i, e, u, o, ɔ/, occur in all positions.

Morphology:

Each base (major word) in Rotuman has two forms, called 'long' and 'short'. The short form is predictable from the long form, but the reverse is not the case. Long forms are always stressed on the penultimate syllable, short forms on the last syllable. Since forms differing only in the position of stress occur it is considered to be phonemic. e.g. /fáfa/ await /fafá/ challenge.

A long form is always at least two syllables long. The short form is always one syllable shorter than the corresponding long form.

Vowel pairs occur in long forms only, the first vowel of the pair, if stressed, being phonetically long. Each vowel is best considered as being in a different syllable. e.g. /vóí/ [vó:i].

In the corresponding short forms the less sonorous of the two vowels becomes phonetically (and phonemically) a semi-vowel in the same syllable as the other vowel. e.g. /vóí/ (two syllables) /vóy/ (one syllable).

Both /e/ and /i/ become /y/. Both /u/ and /o/ become /w/.

The history of the vowels:

Rotuman is closely related to Fijian and to Polynesian. The long forms of Rotuman bases are very similar in shape to their cognates in Polynesian, and to the reconstructed Fiji-Polynesian proto-forms. The sound correspondences are regular and fairly simple. Since Rotuman short forms do not have counterparts in any of the closely related languages they can be regarded as unique and fairly recent innovations.

Similarly the vowel system of Rotuman is unique among these languages, and it too, may be regarded as an innovation. At an earlier stage Rotuman had the usual Polynesian five vowel system, consisting of a front-back opposition at high and mid tongue positions, plus a low unopposed vowel.

This low unopposed vowel in Rotuman had positional variants ranging from low front [æ] to low back [ɑ] or [o].

The development of short forms from the long forms of bases seems to have taken place in two stages. The first step (which can only be inferred) involved metathesis of the last syllable. e.g. móse > *moes; ?úli > *?uil; [kómi] > *[koim]; ?éfe > *?eef; píko > *piok; [múí] remained the same, etc.

The second step involved the loss of one syllable. This is achieved in one of three ways:

1. The less sonorous of two vowels becomes a semi-vowel. e.g. *piok > pyók; [múí] > /móy].
2. A vowel is lost from an identical vowel pair. e.g. *?eef > ?éf.

3. A back rounded vowel and a front unrounded vowel coalesce to form a front rounded vowel.
e.g. *moes > m^ʷs; *k^ʷim > k^ʷm; *ʔuil > ʔ^ʷl.

3. results in the addition of a new series of three front rounded vowels being added to the phonemic inventory. The short forms in general result in the front and back allophones of the hitherto unopposed /a/ phoneme being raised to phonemic status, because of such minimal pairs as [ʔ^ʷf] thousand, [ʃf] line; [rʃ^ʷ] carry, [rʃ] wound.

The adoption of short versus long forms of bases is thus seen as the dynamic which gave Rotuman ten vowel phonemes in place of five. What triggered the morphological change is unknown.

Note: In the discussion that followed this paper Dr. K.J. Hollyman pointed out that secret languages involving metathesis of normal word forms are known from Melanesia, and suggested that some such phenomenon might have provided the initial stimulus towards the Rotuman short forms.