

Phonological evidence to treat the /ɨ/ and /u/ vowels as a natural class in Yamalero

The issue of whether the third high vowel (besides /i/ and /u/) in Guahiban languages should be described as /i/ or /ɨ/, that is, central or back, has been a topic for discussion in the literature. The preferred characterization is probably /ɨ/, found in Sikuni (Queixalós [1985], [forthcoming]), Wamone Cuiba (Kerr [1995]) and Hitnü (Lobo-Guerrero & Herrera [2000]), but, for Cuiba Maibén (Merchán [2000]), Capanaparo Cuiba (Machal [2000]) and Guayabero it has been described as /i/. In publications of wider scope, it is most often described as /i/ (Aikhenvald & Dixon [1999: 371], Storto and Demolin [2012: 335]).

In this presentation, I will address this issue with first-hand data from Yamalero, and I will provide phonological arguments in favor of considering the /ɨ/ vowel a high back vowel, together with /u/. Yamalero is a Guahiban language spoken in the Colombian Eastern Plains by some 300 people, with high rates of intergenerational transmission. The data that I will present has been collected between 2022 and 2024, after seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in one of the three Yamalero-speaking communities.

I will begin by showing a chart from an acoustic analysis that plots Yamalero's vowels according to their F1 and F2 (/i, e, a, o, u, ɨ/). In this chart we will see that /ɨ/ can also be phonetically realized as [i], depending on the speaker and the vowel context. Spectrograms and audio files will also be used to show some illustrative cases.

I will continue by showing two phonological processes that treat the /ɨ/ and /u/ vowels as a natural class. The first one is a velar secondary articulation that takes place after the /au/ and /au/ diphthongs, but not after /ai/. When these diphthongs are followed by an (aspirated) voiceless alveolar plosive (/t/ or /tʰ/), they are realized as /auʷ/ and /auʷ/ (1-2). In contrast, in the same context, /ai/ shows no velarization (3).

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| (1) /dau ^h tu/ | [ˈdɨuʷ.tʰu] | ‘sweet potato’ |
| (2) /nautapuna/ | [ˈnouʷ.ta.pu.na] | ‘stand up’ |
| (3) /haita/ | [ˈhei.ta] | ‘hunt’ |

The second one is a process of height assimilation triggered by high vowels that can already be observed in the previous examples. This process shows how the low vowel /a/ becomes a mid-closed vowel ([e], [o] or [ɤ]) when it precedes a high vowel (4-6). The fact that, before /ɨ/, /a/ becomes [ɤ], and not [ə], indicates that this assimilation must be triggered by a back vowel.

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| (4) /dainata/ | [ˈdei.na.ta] | ‘fly’ |
| (5) /kaukude/ | [kou.ˈku.re] | ‘pour!’ |
| (6) /tsonaw/ | [ˈtso.ˈnɨu] | ‘anteater’ |

Finally, from an areal perspective, I will show that, although the /i/ vowel is very common in Greater Amazonia (Aikhenvald 2012), there are at least 13 language families that have a /u/ vowel. Moreover, in a number of these languages the /i/ vowel has been reinterpreted as /u/ in recent analysis, while in others it is described as /u/, but still represented like /i/. Therefore, it is possible that the /u/ vowel described for Yamalero is found in more and more languages.

References

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