

Incipient initial dropping in Wubuy
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A number of Australian languages have undergone lenition of initial stops to continuants (liquids, glides), with the outcome that both *k and *p are lenited to /w/, with neutralisation thereby of both the initial stop contrast as well as the contrast between /w/ < *w and /w/ < *k, *p. Wubuy (Heath 1984) is such a language. Nevertheless, several phonological processes distinguish synchronic w < *k from w < *p, showing that there is a phonological contrast between them even though they are phonetically identical. We discuss the behaviour of one rule in particular, which deletes w₁ (w < *k) but not w₂ (w < *p) between low vowels across a morpheme boundary, as shown in (1) and (2), with long vowels as a result.

- (1) wara:pa:pa: [Heath 1980: 259, Text 50.5]
wara-w₁apa-w₁apaa
3pl/3pl-REDUP-wrap.PC
'they wrapped them'
- (2) ŋimawa|gawa|ga: ~ *ŋima:|ga:|ga: [Heath 1980:51, Text 7.4]
ŋi-ma-w₂a|ga=w₂a|ga:
3fem-VEG-REDUP-pound.PCONT
'She pounded and pounded/kept pounding (VEG class object)'

An examination of the Wubuy text corpus (Heath 1980) demonstrates that 96% of the time, in fact, w₁ deletes in this context, providing a further source of evidence for the contrast for learners. This behaviour however makes w₁-initial stems overlap in their behaviour with a-initial stems, which also feed the rule of vowel hiatus resolution in the same way, as shown in (3) and (4):

- (3) ŋa:ŋa|ara|lii ~ ŋawa:ŋa|ara|lii [17/1/2013]
ŋa-w₁aŋa-|ara|lii
1sg-arm-hold.up.PRES
'I'm holding my arms up'
- (4) ŋa:pɪŋ [Heath 1984: 95]
ŋa-a:pɪŋ
1sg-jump.PP
'I jumped'

We provide evidence that in fact the number of a-initial forms in the lexicon has been increasing, making Wubuy the only Australian language so far identified with synchronic initial consonant loss. This has come about through reanalysis of w₁-initial forms as a-initial forms, at least in the last 20 years. But there are also vowel-initial forms derived from historical *p, *j and other segments, sometimes just in particular cells of paradigms (e.g. some inflected forms of the 'hit' verb *pu- but not others). By merging w₁ with a-initial stems, Wubuy thereby ends up with a contrast between w₂ and a/w₁, which is a better-supported contrast than the current three-way near merger (Labov 1994) of w₁, w₂, and a-initial forms.

References

- Heath, J. 1980. *Nunggubuyu myths and ethnographic texts*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
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