

## Pretonic mid vowel raising in Old Tuscan

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Keywords: irregular sound change, vowel harmony, misperception

The nature of ‘irregular’, ‘sporadic’ sound changes is one of the key issues in historical phonology since at least the Neogrammarians. They are often ascribed to non-phonological reasons, as analogy or borrowing, or to the non-(purely)-phonological mechanism of lexical diffusion. The goal of this paper is to show that a ‘sporadic’ sound change in the historical phonology of Tuscan – namely the non-systematic raising of pretonic mid vowels – was due to an allophonic raising rule whose output was acoustically not identical to a high vowel but similar enough to cause perceptual ambiguity, and hence non-systematic recategorization.

Old Tuscan presented five vowels in pretonic syllables, i.e. [a e i o u]. By and large, the two high vowels are the outcomes of Latin long high vowels [i: u:], while Latin pretonic [e e: i] yielded [e], and Latin pretonic [o o: u] yielded [o] (e.g. *felice* ‘happy’ < FELĪCE(M), *nemico* ‘enemy’ < INIMĪCU(M), *coróna* ‘crown’ < CORŌNA(M)). However, in a fair number of Old Tuscan words Latin pretonic [e e: i o o: u] yielded [i] or [u] in a seemingly random fashion (e.g. *ginocchio* ‘knee’ < GENUCULU(M), *mulino* ‘mill’ < MOLĪNU(M); see Rohlfs 1966: 162-166, Maiden 1995: 43-44 for additional examples and discussion). Some of the words displaying a pretonic mid vowel (e.g. *commento* ‘comment’) are learned words, in all likeness influenced by Latin spelling, but most of them seem genuine exceptions to a generalized raising of pretonic vowels. As Rohlfs (1966: 162) points out, a force plausibly obscuring the regularity of pretonic raising is analogical levelling: pretonic mid vowels are very rarely raised if they alternate with a stressed mid vowel in morphologically related words (e.g. *fedele* ‘faithful’ morphologically derived from *fede* ‘faith’). However, this cannot explain why many pretonic mid vowels which never alternate with stressed vowels did not raise.

At least since Meyer-Lübke (1890: 282) it has also been observed that raised pretonic vowels are often followed by a stressed high vowel (e.g. *pulire* ‘to clean’ < POLIRE, *ubbidire* ‘to obey’ < OBOEDIRE, *fulcile* ‘flint stone’ < \*FOCILE(M)). This suggests that pretonic raising may have had an assimilatory motivation, especially considering that pretonic mid vowel raising processes triggered by a stressed high vowel are attested in a few central Italian vernaculars. However, already Meyer-Lübke (*ibid.*) himself was quick to add that “es ist schwer, in das Toskanische eine Ratio zu bringen”, since words with raised pretonic vowels followed by a non-high stressed vowel abound. In sum, pretonic mid vowel raising is clearly non-systematic, yet analogy is not sufficient to account for all forms showing a pretonic mid vowel instead of a high one, and phonological conditioning appears to be present.

We tried to quantify the correlation between pretonic raising and the presence of a following stressed high vowel. Additionally, we also investigated the correlation between raising and the presence of (alveo)palatal consonants [ʃ dʒ ʃ j] next to a pretonic vowel, since their place of articulation might have affected adjacent vowels. To test these hypotheses, a list of Tuscan words, containing at least one pretonic vowel in their Latin etymon, was obtained from the *OVI* online corpus of medieval Italian texts; learned words and borrowings from other Romance languages were excluded. It was found that Latin pretonic mid or short high vowels were more likely (at a statistically significant level) to become high in Old Tuscan if the stressed vowel was high (67.7 vs. 45.8 per cent of raised outcomes) or next to palatal consonants (72.3 vs. 46.7 per cent of raised outcomes).

We consider these results consistent with a pattern of vowel reduction and coarticulation in unstressed syllables which did not reach phonological neutralization of height contrasts, but was intense enough to cause misperception. The compressed vowel space of unstressed syllables caused mid vowels and high vowels to be acoustically close; when this was compounded with co-articulation with a stressed high vowel and/or a palatal consonant, the unstressed mid vowel was often acoustically similar enough to a high vowel to be perceptually ambiguous, thus favouring a misperception (Ohala 1981, Blevins 2007) of speakers’ intended pronunciations.

## References

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