

Forest Nenets monosyllabic shortening as overwrite

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Background Stressed and initial syllables are among the positions that preserve more contrast than others (Beckman 1998). In Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky 1993/2004), prominent syllable privilege has been implemented via positional faithfulness constraints, which ensure the preservation of contrastive features in certain positions. Monosyllables, which are simultaneously stressed initial (i.e. prominent) and final (potentially less prominent), are a possible context for *overwrite* (Kaplan 2015) — a situation where an environment which is protected elsewhere, loses protection under positional restrictions (e.g. final neutralization). The case that I bring up to extend the typology of overwrite systems is monosyllabic shortening (MS) in Forest Nenets (FN; <Samoyedic<Uralic). I provide acoustic data and novel phonological observations which show, in accordance with previous descriptions (Salminen 2007), that the vowel length contrast in FN, which only exists in stressed vowels, is lost in monosyllables.

Acoustic data The data comes from the author’s fieldwork, building on Sammallahti (1974) and Salminen (2007). The vowel inventory of FN comprises 12 vowels, whereas in unstressed positions, only 4 contrastive vowels are found.¹ Stress falls on odd-numbered non-final syllables. Possible syllable structures are CV, CVC, CVV and CVVC (1).

Stressed syllables	Unstressed syllables	(1)	CV: <i>kă.ta</i>	‘fingernail’
ĩ i	ũ u		CVV: <i>wa.ta</i>	‘word’
ě e	õ o	o	CVC: <i>kăm.ta.ŋa</i>	‘spill.GFS’
ǣ æ	ǎ a	i u	CVVC: <i>kań.d’a.na</i>	‘hunter’
		æ a		

In monosyllabic words, all 4 types of syllables are found (2). The underlying length in monosyllables is observable in polysyllabic word forms with affixes.

	Syllable	Word	Translation	Polysyllabic form	Gloss
(2)	CV	<i>tũ</i>	fire	<i>tũta</i> [tũtta]	fire-POSS.3SG
	CVV	<i>d’a</i>	flour; land	<i>d’ata</i> [d’ata]	flour-POSS.3SG
	CVC	<i>tǎł</i>	fur	<i>tǎłkăt°</i> [tǎłkăt ~ tǎłkătĩ]	fur-ABL
	CVVC	<i>kem</i>	blood	<i>kemta</i> [kemta]	blood-POSS.3SG

Comparing monosyllables and internal stressed syllables while holding the presence of a coda constant reveals that length is partially neutralized in isolated monosyllables: the mean duration of long and short vowels are closer (see Figures 1–2).²

Morphophonological evidence While the neutralization is phonetically palpable in isolated forms, it is unclear, whether it is indeed shortening rather than mere loss of contrast: note how short vowels are longer in monosyllables than in stressed internal positions. There is, nevertheless, morphophonological evidence in favor of shortening in open monosyllables. Underlyingly long vowels in open sentence-internal monosyllables behave like short vowels in word-internal stressed CV syllables.

In FN, compensatory gemination lengthens the consonant after stressed CVs. The

¹Schwa (/°/) is often expressed suprasegmentally rather than as an overt vowel and will not be discussed here.

²High vowels: /i, ĩ/; low vowels: /a, ǎ/. The missing bar plot is due to no CV monosyllables with /ǎ/ having been found so far.

same gemination occurs after open monosyllables regardless of underlying length of their vowels (3). This effect is analogous to Raddoppiamento Sintattico (Larsen 1998), where gemination happens after final stressed vowels, which are not subject to tonic lengthening. Since long vowels in FN undergo tonic lengthening under stress, the lack of lengthening and the occurrence of compensatory gemination confirms the application of MS.

- (3) CV: *tī mind'a* [tī́mínd'a] 'a reindeer is going'
 CVV: *d'a kǎmtuma* [d'ǎkkǎmtuma] 'flour was spilled'

Analysis and implications Despite being initial and stressed, monosyllables are vulnerable to final syllable neutralization: long vowels are always banned from final syllables. MS is thus an example of *overwrite* in terms of Kaplan (2015): stressed syllables, which are faithful word-internally, lose their privileged status word-finally due to positional markedness.

I follow Kaplan (2015) in treating overwrite as an interaction between (a) a positional faithfulness constraint, which forces length to be maintained under stress — LICENSE(VV, STRESSED) — and (b) a positional markedness constraint, which bans length from final syllables — *VV-σ_{FINAL}. IDENT-IO(LENGTH)/STRESSED, ranked the lowest, assigns a violation mark in case of an input-output discrepancy in length under stress, i.e. shortening or lengthening of stressed vowels (4).

- (4) Ranking of positional constraints of length in FN
 *VV-FINAL ≫ LICENSE(VV, STRESSED) ≫ IDENT-IO(LENGTH)/STRESSED

Length is only contrastive in stressed non-final syllables, elsewhere we observe shortening. The only context where finality and stress co-occur is the monosyllable; since *VV-FINAL ranks over LICENSE(VV, STRESSED), monosyllables undergo shortening. Since the known examples of overwrite targeting stressed initial syllables overwhelmingly feature assimilation (Kaplan 2015, Zhang 2020), FN makes an addition to the typology with a different kind of process, namely, vowel length neutralization.

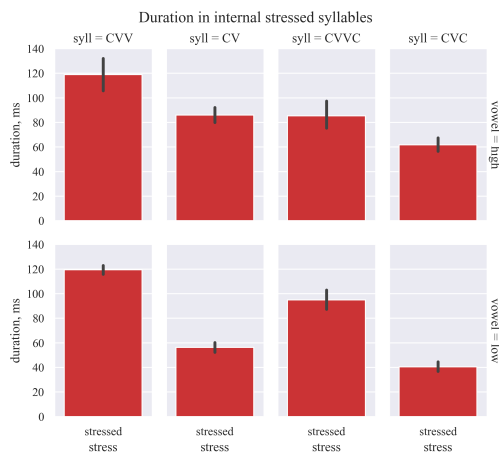


Figure 1

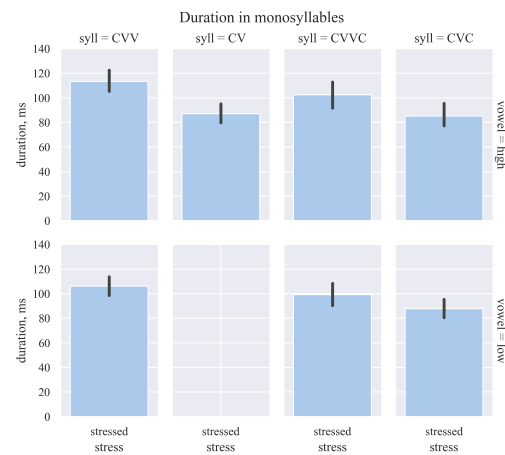


Figure 2

Selected references ❖ Beckman, Jill. 1998. *Positional faithfulness*. University of Massachusetts Amherst dissertation. ❖ Kaplan, Aaron. 2015. Maximal prominence and a theory of possible licensors. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 33(4). 1235–1270. ❖ Larsen, Bergeton Uffe. 1998. Vowel length, Raddoppiamento Sintattico and the selection of the definite article in Italian. *Langues et grammaire II-III, phonologie*. 87–102. ❖ Salminen, Tapani. 2007. Notes on Forest Nenets phonology. In Jussi Ylikoski & Ante Aikio (eds.), *Sámit, sánit, sánehámit. Riepmočála Pekka Sammallahtii miessemánu 21. beaivve 2007*, vol. 253, 349–372. Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura. ❖ Sammallahti, Pekka. 1974. *Material from Forest Nenets*.

Helsinki: Castrenianum. ❖ Zhang, Tuo. 2020. *Positional markedness and positional faithfulness: Their overlap and non-overlap*. **Glossing abbreviations** 3 = third person, ABL = ablative, GFS = general finite stem, POSS = possessive, SG = singular.