Nara

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Nara is a Nilo-Saharan language spoken by some 41,000 people to the north-west of Barentu in northern Eritrea. It is now regarded as constituting a one-language branch of the East Sudanic family (Bender 1989: 20; though see Ehret 1989: 49) but formerly it had been treated as an isolate within the phylum. The fullest description of the language in existence is that of Reinisch (1874) though in that work, the language name is given as 'Barea', which is an unfortunate choice since it is the word for 'slave' in a number of Ethiopian Semitic languages; Nara is the term used by the speech community for referring to their language as well as to themselves. Four distinct dialects need to be recognized within Nara, namely: Higir, Mogorayeb, Koyta and Saantoorta.

A short sketch of Nara (Thompson 1976) established that the language had phonemic length both for consonants and vowels and that it was a tone language, though very little was said on the latter subject. Hayward (2000) analyses pitch in Nara in terms of two tones, though he draws attention to the complex tone sequences that may occur on contiguous moras within syllables as well as to some quite drastic patterns of tonal perturbation that occur within phrases.

Until 1993 Nara remained unwritten but since that time, language development has been taking place under the impetus of the language policy of the government of Eritrea. It seems that the now-emerging standard language is based mainly on the Higir dialect. Abushush Dawd, who is the principal person concerned with the development of Nara, is a 31-year-old male speaker of the Higir dialect, and his speech is the variety recorded and described here.

Tone

Nara is a tone language. The tone-bearing unit is the mora and, in addition to vowels, post-vocalic glides and sonorant consonants also carry tone. Tones are associated independently with each mora of a long vowel. Monomoraic (short open) syllables carry either higher or lower relatively level pitch, and these are interpreted as high (H) and low (L) tones, respectively; e.g. /nì.hì/ 'tusk', /tà.wó/ 'form', /tú.sá/ 'ears', /kú.tì/ 'bark (of a tree)'. Bimoraic (CVV and CVC) syllables have an additional two pitch patterns, viz. falling and rising contours, while trimoraic (CVVC) syllables may have any of the preceding together with one further pattern, namely, a rising-falling contour, e.g. BIMORAIC SYLLABLES: /wáá.rì 'egg', /tár.bí/ 'roots', /gòò/ 'frog', /ɕàn.ɕà.láà/ 'bamboo', /sùḿ/ 'grass', /tèé/ 'that', /súm̀/ 'poison', /è.dóò/ 'prayer-mat made

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from hide'; TRIMORAIC SYLLABLES: /hóól̀.kí/ 'soldier ant', /kààŋ̀.ŋ̀ì/ 'termite', /kéèr̀/ 'thorn', /hàámˊ/ 'kudu', /fàárˊ.dáà/ 'branch', /jàánˋ/ 'Shout!', /c̀òónˋ/ 'four'. These contours are straightforwardly interpretable as sequences of the H and L tones. A further possible pattern that might be expected, viz. falling-rising, is ruled out by a constraint to be described shortly, which prohibits any occurrence of high tones on non-contiguous tone-bearing units within a phonological phrase (cf. Hayward 2000). Logically possible contrasts in trimoraic syllables between HHL and HLL, and between LLH and LHH sequences do not occur, but since the sharpest change in the direction of the pitch seems to occur always on the second vowel mora, such falling and rising contours are regarded as HLL and LHH tone : mora associations.

In CVC syllables where the closing consonant is an obstruent, falling or rising contours may be heard on the preceding short vowel. This phenomenon is analysed as the way in which tones assigned to the second (obstruent) mora of the syllable receive their phonetic realisation. Such an interpretation makes it unnecessary to recognise distinct falling and rising tones in the phonology of Nara; e.g. /bûk/ 'dove', /lât/ 'See!', /kăt.ì/ 'circumcision', /àdăb/ 'discipline'.

Nara frequently – though not exclusively – shows head-final syntax, and when this order occurs, the overall tone pattern of a phonological phrase is sometimes different from what would be expected in terms of combining the tone patterns of the component words of that phrase. In all such cases, what we observe is that the right-hand constituent (i.e. the syntactic head word) appears without an expected H. For example, NPs in which an expected H tone is not realised on the head always consist of words having lexical tone patterns that, if combined within a (phonological) phrase, would create a contour containing two non-contiguous H tones, e.g.:

a.	H + LH	gíŕbá hùbùr̀
		colour of a mongoose (cf. /gíŕbá/ 'mongoose', /hùbúŕ/ 'colour')
b.	H + LHL	kúú bàttèèg
		the man's melon (cf. /kúú/ 'man', /bàttéèg/ 'melon')
c.	LH + LH	àbbàá tòòkkù
		father's wife (cf. /àbbàá/ 'father', /tòòkkú/ 'wife')
d.	HL + LHL	náàmbà àsàr̀
		footprint of a calf (cf. /náàmbà/ 'calf', /àsáŕ/ 'footprint')

If, however, the combination of tone patterns on the constituent words involved does not create such a contour, H tone is not dropped on the head, nor does any other tonal change take place, e.g.:

a.	HL + L	wíínì nòò
		eye of fly (cf. /wíínì/ 'fly', /nòò/ 'eye')
b.	L + LH	ngòò wól
		our house (cf. /ngòò/ 'our', /wòĺ/ 'house')
c.	LH + H	kàmbèré káló
		camel's food (cf. /kàmbèré/ 'camel', /káló/ 'food')

The examples happen to be possessive phrases, but the phenomenon under discussion is certainly not confined to this type of construction. (This topic is pursued more fully in Hayward 2000.) It is not reasonable to analyse the variation shown here as 'grammatical' as, for example, the morphosyntactic expression of the genitive relationship. Rather, we suggest, this tonal perturbation is motivated by a phonological constraint that disallows two non-contiguous High tones within a phonological phrase.

Thompson (1976: 484) makes certain tentative comments about stress in Nara, but we find no convincing evidence for this additional prosodic feature, and the examples adduced by Thompson seem to lend themselves to a simpler analysis in terms of length (gemination) of the following consonant.

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Consonants

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labialised Velar	Glottal
Plosive & Affricate	b		t d		t͡ɕ d͡ʑ		k g	kʷ gʷ	
Prenasalised Plosive	m͡b		n͡d				ŋ͡g	ŋ͡gʷ	
Nasal	m		n			ɲ	ŋ		
Fricative		f		s (z)	ɕ				h
Tap/Trill				r					
Approximant	w					j			
Lateral Approximant				l					

Most of the above consonants are contrastive in onset position, as in the following words:

búr̀	'Pick up!'	m͡búŕ	'noise of car' (onamatopeia)
tàl̀	'Give birth!'	dàǹ	'Hit!'
n͡dáá	'What?'		
t͡ɕèèlág	'mud'	d͡ʑéèl̀	'ostrich'
ɕééŕkù	'rough'		
káà	'Will you go?'	gàà	'Are they?'
kʷàà	'men'	gʷààd́i	'loose folds of skin on neck'
ŋ͡gáá	'yours'	ŋ͡gʷàà	'ours'
máámí	'type of flower'	náá	'Who?'
ɲá	'I disagree' (interjection)		
fèè	'mouse'	sèè	'I will kill'
hèè	'I will give'		
lààmá	'razor'	wáárá	'eggs'
jàáǹ	'Shout!'		

Distributional restrictions and frequency considerations

1. /ŋ/does not occur in onset position except in geminates; however, it commonly contrasts with other nasals in coda position, e.g. /bùŋ̀tò/ 'he swam', /nàm̀tò/ 'he caught', /fíń̀tò/ 'he stopped doing something'.
2. /r/ does not occur word-initially in native Nara words, though it is extremely common both in onset and in coda position word-internally, e.g. /àárà/ 'cows', /kàŕbà/ 'birds', /ɕ̀iddíŕ/ 'thatching grass'.
3. The four prenasalised plosives are fairly uncommon and are restricted to onset position.

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4. The labialised velar plosives are extremely rare; /gʷ/ is confined to the one word cited in the above list.
5. /ɲ/ is very rare and, in word-initial position, confined to the item cited above and /ɲɛ̀ŋ̀ɲéɛ̀/ 'type of cat-like animal' and certain onomatopeias, e.g. /ɲááẃ/ 'mewing noise of cat', /ɲàm̀/ 'sound of eating'. Word-internally, where it is always geminate, /ɲ/ occurs in some anthroponyms, e.g. /gòɲ̀ɲè/.
6. /z/ is confined to loanwords from Arabic and Tigre, e.g. /láázùm̀ ~ láádùm̀/ 'must'; see, however, the later comment concerning intervocalic /s/.

Conventions

1. As indicated by the notation employed, the post-alveolar affricates and the post-alveolar fricative are judged to be alveolo-palatal in articulation. Preceding close vowels /d͡ʒ/ is generally pronounced as a voiced palatal stop, e.g. [ɟ]ùbbàt 'cloak', [ɟ]íib 'pocket'.
2. Voiceless plosives are entirely without aspiration.
3. Except when geminated, voiced stops are devoiced in coda position, though elsewhere they are fully voiced. When word-initial in syllables having low tone, the voiced plosives – especially /b/ – have a quite extended pronunciation, viz. [b̥]àà 'farm'; cf. [b]ál 'Descend!'. Intervocalic /g/ is very lenis and may spirantize to [ɣ].
4. Intervocalic single (non-geminate) /s/ is pronounced with a good deal of voicing.
5. /r/ is generally pronounced as a tap, viz. [ɾ].
6. Intervocalic /h/ has breathy phonation, e.g. kà[ɦ]àà[ɦ]ádnàkkìnnòŋ̀ 'when discussing', lè[ɦ]ét 'sleeping-mat'.

Consonant length

Intervocalically, the majority of consonants present contrasts based on duration. In the case of the affricates /t͡ɕ/ and /d͡ʒ/, only the stop phase seems to be lengthened, viz. [tː͡ɕ], [dː͡ʒ]. Geminate /r/ is always a trill.

àbìǹ	'father'	àbbáà	'my father'
kátí	'bone'	kătti	'circumcision'
àdăb	'discipline'	àddùhúɾ	'afternoon'
kàt͡ɕáà	'gravel'	mìt͡ɕt͡ɕáàɾ	'hairline at sides of forehead'
bàd͡ʒál	'venereal disease'	fìd͡ʒd͡ʒáàǹ	'coffee cup'
bákál	'mule'	dókkù	'one'
sáágà	'Kill (pl.)!'	hàggìíkkà	'beautiful'
íɕò	'Come!'	káɕɕè	'I don't know'
dùmáǹ	'ex-residence'	dàm̀mò	'nose'
ánìǹ	'woman'	àníǹná	'women'
kàfáɾ	'milking vessel'	kóffɛ̀ègù	'deaf'
kàsà	'fat'	kèssèél	'leopard'
àrá	'Let's go!'	kòɾ̀rá	'stupid'
kɛ̀ɛ̀là	'head'	kɛ̀ɛ̀llá	'heads'
sàwà	'sieve'	dàẁwíɕí	'heat'
ájè	'I will do'	àllìjjàḿ	'Let's go'

Not all consonants show length contrasts. The following two observations attempt to account for this in a systematic way.

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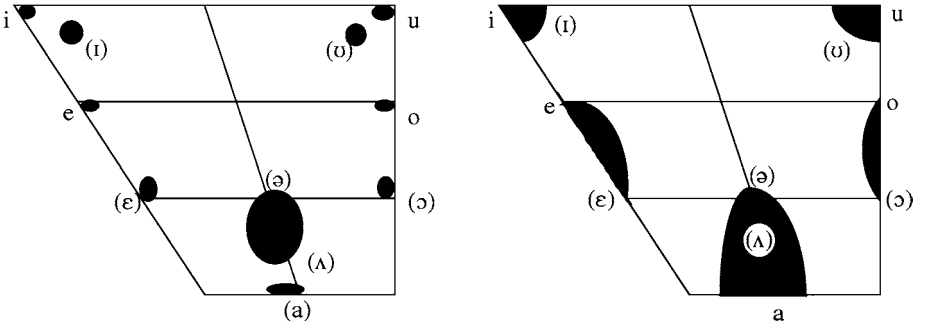
1. The prenasalised and labialised plosives lack geminate congeners. This could be said to follow from the fact that consonants that have been found to occur only in onset position could not be expected to exhibit length, as an intervocalic geminate occurrence would simultaneously place them in coda position too.
2. As noted earlier, intervocalic /ɲ/ and /ŋ/ always have extended phonetic duration and are preceded by closed syllable allophones (see below), so that even though there is an absence of contrast with short/single /ŋ/ or /ɲ/, it is proper to treat these segments as geminate.

Vowels



Conventions

The vowels written in parentheses in the chart, viz. (ɪ), (ɛ), (ʌ) ~ (ə), (ɔ), (ʊ), are closed syllable realizations of /i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /e/, /u/, respectively, e.g.

Closed syllable		*Open syllable*	
fɪ̀ŋ̀.ŋì	'again'	tì.bá	'they'
kɛ̀s.sɛ̀ɪ́	'leopard'	á.jè	'I will do'
ŋ͡gʌ̀f.nì.tò	'he blew'	kèè.là	'head'
ɔ̀f.kò	'hot'	tèès.kò	'they decided'
gʊ̀b.lə̀t	'north'	dɔ̀k.kù	'one'

One further observation is that words analysed as being vowel-initial (and written as such in this description) actually begin with glottal stops; this is especially clear in utterance-initial position or when the preceding word ends in a vowel.

Vowel length

All vowels have phonologically long congeners. The long vowels do not show the open/closed syllable variation in their realization, observed for the short vowels.

i : ii	c̀ítì	'louse'	c̀ìittá	'finger-nails'
e : ee	tèɾ̀	'Hit!'	téèɾ̀	'Dismiss him!'
a : aa	sàj́	'spring'(season)	sááj́	'Shall I kill?'
o : oo	kólè	'weaver (bird)'	kóólè	'I will ascend'
u : uu	kùǹ	'Weave!'	kúùǹ	'Call!'

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Two tauto-syllabic vocoid sequences occur; these show a fall in prominence and are interpreted as /aj/ and /aw/, respectively, e.g. /sàj̀/ ‘spring (season)’, /sáẁ/.

Transcription of ‘The North Wind and the Sun’

The transcription is basically a broad phonemic one although certain phonetic features are also included in a systematic way, as described in the sections above on consonant and vowel pronunciation. The brief pause and readjustment to a higher pitch level (consequent on the effect of downdrift) which occur at the beginning of a new sentence is indicated with a hyphen. Certain high pitches that follow the final tone of a phrase-final word are interpreted as high boundary tones functioning to indicate that the utterance is not yet complete. These are indicated by an acute accent located above the space at the end of the word (there are two such cases).

kòòs dàà gʊ̀blɜ̀t ɕì̀máàl̀

kòòs dɔ́kkʊ́ kòòs dàá gʊ̀blɜ̀t ɕì̀máàl̀ dàà téé bóóɾ́ɕí kàɦààɦʌ́dnàkkì̀nnù wàáĺnààkkò - tì̀bá kàɦààɦʌ́dnʌ̀kkì̀nnɔ̀ŋ̀ kúú dɔ́kkù ɟʊ̀bbʌ̀t ì̀nnéèǹ wòòtò - tì̀bá kúú jìí gí náá ń téé ɟʊ̀bbʌ́t jìí kì̀lì̀gì̀nɔ̀ŋ̀ŋáà mʌ́ssì̀n tèèskò - kúú tèè gó téé ɟʊ̀bbʌ̀t kì̀lì̀gíŋkù tì̀béè bóóɾ́kù ǹ - kèɾàgɔ́t gʊ̀blɜ̀t ɕì̀màáĺ téé dìíŋ̀ hì̀lɜ̀t gì̀ ŋ͡gʌ̀fnì̀tò - lààkííń téé ɕì̀máàl̀ bóóɾ́kù kúú kí́tà kèèǹkù tèé gó fì̀ŋŋ̀ì̀ téé ɟʊ̀bbʌ̀t dʌ́ńńí́ nʌ̀m̀mí́gì̀ssò - dàwàtí́ gʊ̀blɜ̀t ɕì̀màáĺtéé d͡ʒàrùùbèè fíńtò - téé fòòkèɛ̀ kòòs ǹ nʌ́ssì̀n téé dəẁwì̀ɕí ì̀bì̀lĺáàdò tòótò - téé tógááɕí túkáàj̀ gí́ kúú kí́tà kèèǹkù dògò bʌ̀ll̀ì̀nnì̀ŋ̀ ɔ̀fkò ʔájɛ́j̀ nì̀ì̀tò - kí́tà kèèǹkù ʔɔ̀fkò jìí lʌ́ttì̀ŋ̀ tì̀ téé ɟʊ̀bbʌ̀t kì̀ll̀ò - mʌ̀ńńí́ gí́ gʊ̀blɜ̀t ɕì̀máàl̀ téé gí́ kòòs nú bóóɾ́nì̀ŋ̀ ísəj̀tò

In a very careful pronunciation, /ń/, the verb ‘to be’ in the second line in the text, is heard as a monosyllable/nú/, but in normal speech this seems to be reduced to a moraic nasal. It should be noted, however, that its tonal properties are preserved. (See also the present tense form in the predicate phrase /bóóɾ́kù ǹ/ and elsewhere later in the text.)

Orthographic version

(It should be noted that the recently-devised Nara orthography employs the letter ⟨v⟩ to represent /ŋ/, and the digraph ⟨sh⟩ to represent /ɕ/.)

Koos daa Gublat Shimaal

Koos dokku Koos daa Gublat Shimaal daa te boorshi gi kahaahatnakkinnu waalnaakko. Tiba kahaahatnakkinnov kuu dokku jubbat inneen wooto. Tiba kuu yii gi naa nu te jubbat yii kiliginovvaa massin teesko. Kuu tee go te jubbat kiliginku tibee boorku nu. Keragot Gublat Shimaal te diiv hilat gi ngafnito. Laakiin te shimaal boorku kuu kita keenku tee go fivvi te jubbat danni nammigisso. Dawati, Gublat Shimaal te jarruubee finto. Te fookee Koos nu nassin te dawwishi ibillaado tootto. Te togaashi tukaay gi kuu kita keenku dogo ballinniv ofko ayay niito. Kita keenku ofko yii lattiv ti, te jubbat killo. Manni gi Gublat Shimaal tee gi Koos nu boorniv issayto.

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