

/s/-deletion in Old French and the aftermath of compensatory lengthening

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ABSTRACT

It has recently been argued by Gess (2001) that the long vowels resulting from the compensatory lengthening that emerged in the wake of preconsonantal /s/-deletion in Old French had all been shortened by the sixteenth century. Given that many of these long vowels are still present in Canadian French, this conclusion cannot possibly be correct. What will be shown here is precisely how Gess' methodology led him to obtain such counterfactual results.

I INTRODUCTION

In a recent study of the effects of preconsonantal /s/-deletion in Old French (OF),¹ as in *feste* > *fête*, *isle* > *île*, *paste* > *pâte*, Gess (2001) comes to the conclusion that although compensatory lengthening (CL) undoubtedly took place, as evidenced by the many long and short vowel rhyming pairs he was able to find in his inspection of 116 755 lines of poetry from between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, 'the distinctive length that did result from the loss of syllable-final /s/ was lost in the 16th century' (151–2). This surmise is based on his finding that although 'poets consciously segregated rhymes with orthographic *s*, a marker of length, from those without it' (151), they 'ceased . . . dramatically, in the 16th century, to segregate the rhyme types in question' (152).

This is quite a surprising conclusion, to say the least, since contrastive vowel length emanating from /s/-deletion has existed in Standard French (SF) almost to this day, e.g., /be:l/bêle vs. /be:l/belle.² As noted by Morin, for example, '[i]l suffit d'examiner les données modernes pour voir que *pâte* et *château* se prononçaient il n'y a pas encore longtemps à Paris . . . avec une voyelle *a* longue (et postérieure) s'opposant à la voyelle *a* brève (en antérieure (*sic*) de *patte* et *bateau*, comme nous le disaient déjà les grammairiens du XVI^e siècle' (Morin, 2000: 23), adding that,

¹ The term /s/-deletion is shorthand for the sequences of context-sensitive changes VsC > VhC > VVC (= V:C) and VsC > VzC > VðC > VVC (= V:C) (cf. Brunot, 1933: 168–9; Pope, 1934: 151–2; Fouché, 1961: 861–2; Bourciez and Bourciez, 1967: 162–3).

² Other vowels from this source have shifted so that the opposition to their short counterpart is no longer minimally contrastive, e.g., *tâche* /ta:ʃ(ə)/ (< /ta:ʃ(ə)/) vs. *tache* /taʃ(ə)/, *hôte* /ot(ə)/ (< /ot(ə)/) vs. /ɔt(ə)/*hotte* (cf. Pope, 1934: 210, 212).

quite obviously, '[i] n'y a pas eu création *ex nihilo* de durée (phonétique) dans *pâte* et *château*' (24). In sum, '[h]istorically and dialectally, long vowels have played and continue to play a significant role in French' (Walker, 2001: 42) though it must be acknowledged that '[i]n SF . . . their role is significantly reduced' (42).³

The question that inevitably arises, then, is how Gess could have conducted such an exhaustive survey of the effects of CL and come up with something so counterfactual. In this paper, I will adduce evidence from the phonological system of Canadian French (CF), where the vowel quantity distinctions of Middle French (MF) have been preserved to a remarkable degree, in order to point up the fatal flaw in Gess' methodology that has led him to end up with 'an answer in the negative [to] the controversial question of whether there was contrastive vowel length in the 16th and 17th centuries' (2001: 152).

2 GESS' METHODOLOGY

In looking for the effects of CL following the deletion of preconsonantal /s/, Gess examines two types of rhyming pairs, namely those with orthographic rhyme matches that could provide evidence *for* CL (where /:/ signifies 'rhymes with'):

$V_1C_1 : V_1C_1$

$V_1sC_1 : V_1sC_1$ (where *s* is orthographic only)

$V_1C_1e : V_1C_1e$ (where orthographic *e* is /ə/)

$V_1sC_1e : V_1sC_1e$ (where *s* is orthographic only and orthographic *e* is /ə/)

and those with orthographic rhyme mismatches that could provide evidence *against* CL:

$V_1C_1 : V_1sC_1$ (where *s* is orthographic only)

$V_1C_1e : V_1sC_1e$ (where *s* is orthographic only and orthographic *e* is /ə/)

The rationale, of course, is that a preponderance of one of the two types of rhyming patterns (matches vs. mismatches) should be indicative of the actualization and evolution of CL across the chosen time period.

It turns out, however, that there is an important limitation in Gess' *modus operandi*. Given the fact that 'most vowels underwent an important change in quality (/a/ → [ɑ]; /e/ → [ɛ]; /ɔ/ → [o])' (2001: 148), he is forced to rule out the following orthographic rhyme types 'because a preference for them may indicate not a grouping based on common length, but on quality alone' (148):

a $aC_1(e) : aC_1(e)$ (may rhyme because both are short, or because both are [ɑ])

$asC_1(e) : asC_1(e)$ (may rhyme because both are long, or because both are [ɑ])

³ One indication of just how recent this situation obtains, however, is the fact that Fouché still provides rather elaborate vowel-length rules in the context of his contention that '[d]ans les mots français, les voyelles n'ont pas toutes la même durée: certaines sont plus longues que les autres' (1959: xxxvii).

- e* $eC_1(e)$: $eC_1(e)$ (may rhyme because both are short, or because both are [e])
 $esC_1(e)$: $esC_1(e)$ (may rhyme because both are long, or because both are [ɛ])
o $oC_1(e)$: $oC_1(e)$ (may rhyme because both are short, or because both are [ɔ])
 $osC_1(e)$: $osC_1(e)$ (may rhyme because both are long, or because both are [o])

This leaves the high vowels where no differentiation of quality occurred, so the only rhyme types that are actually included in Gess' study are those involving /i/, /u/ and /ui/.⁴ Thus, the orthographic rhyme *matches* he looks at are:

- i* $iC_1(e)$: $iC_1(e)$
 $isC_1(e)$: $isC_1(e)$
u $uC_1(e)$: $uC_1(e)$
 $usC_1(e)$: $usC_1(e)$
ui $uiC_1(e)$: $uiC_1(e)$
 $uisC_1(e)$: $uisC_1(e)$

and the orthographic rhyme *mismatches* he examines are:

- i* $iC_1(e)$: $isC_1(e)$
u $uC_1(e)$: $usC_1(e)$
ui $uiC_1(e)$: $uisC_1(e)$

The conclusion that Gess arrives at from this elaborate examination of rhyme matches and mismatches among the high vowels is that:

the lengthening that accompanied the deletion of syllable-final /S/ was distinctive through at least the 14th century, a century and a half after the deletion occurred. The evidence is very strong that from the middle of the 13th century through the 14th century, poets consciously segregated rhymes with orthographic *s*, an orthographic marker of length . . . , from those without it. Again, in the 15th century, or at least in the latter half of the 15th century, we see an instability in the perception of length. This instability is followed by an obvious, cataclysmic loss of distinctive vowel length in the following century (2001: 151).

What I will endeavour to show in the next section is that there is every indication that his results are a direct consequence of his decision to restrict his study to the high vowels of OF and MF.

3 VOWEL LENGTH IN CANADIAN FRENCH

As was mentioned at the outset, long vowels have all but disappeared in contemporary SF as indicated by the fact that dictionaries like *Le grand Robert de la langue française* (GR), *Le nouveau petit Robert* (PR) and *Le Robert & Collins super senior français-anglais* (RC), for example, no longer mark vowel length. Thus, forms like *bête* and *bette* are both transcribed as /bet/ in the latest editions. As noted in GR, '[l]a longueur des voyelles en français ne sert pas à distinguer des

⁴ There is no explanation for why /y/ was left out of the study even though its evolution from Latin /u:/ certainly predates /s/-deletion.

mots – sauf pour [ɛ] dans quelques cas (ex.: *mètre* [ɛ], et *maître* [ɛ:]) – ; encore cette distinction a-t-elle tendance à disparaître. C’est pourquoi nous n’avons pas noté la longueur des voyelles’ (2001: lix). On the other hand, the erstwhile length and quality opposition /a/-/ɑ:/ has simply been reduced to a quality opposition /a/-/ɑ/ in these dictionaries though it is noted in RC that ‘there is a marked tendency among speakers today to make no appreciable distinction between: [a] and [ɑ], **patte** [pat] and **pâte** [pat] both tending towards the pronunciation [pat]’ (2000: xxx). Similar observations can be found in GR (2001: lx) and PR (2000: xxii).

In contradistinction, CF has remained remarkably conservative in regard to vowel length. It is important to remember that like SF, CF is a direct descendant of Francien, or Île-de-France French, with few identifiable characteristics of any particular seventeenth-century patois. It is, in essence, the offshoot of ‘a standardized language based on the model of the administrative authorities of the community, and for all intents and purposes equivalent to eighteenth-century “Standard French”’ (Walker, 1979: 135). The only major point of contention seems to be whether a significant proportion of the early settlers already spoke French, albeit as a second language or dialect, before they arrived in Nouvelle-France, or whether the need to communicate between various *patoisants* led to the general adoption and rapid spread of French as a lingua franca. (Both sides of the issue are debated at length in Mougeon and Beniak, 1994.) Consequently, all the phonemic vowels except /ə/ (</ə/ and /œ/ dialectally) and /ɔ/-/ʌ/ (< word-internal /ɔ/ and word-final /ɑ/ dialectally) have a long and short version, as shown below (cf. Picard 1987: 57–61):

HIGH VOWELS

vise /vi:z/ vs. *vie* /vi/

jure /ʒy:ʀ/ vs. *jus* /ʒy/

bouge /bu:ʒ/ vs. *bout* /bu/

MID-HIGH VOWELS

neige /ne:ʒ/⁵ vs. *né* /ne/

creuse /krø:z/ vs. *creux* /krø/

grosse /grø:s/ vs. *gros* /grø/

MID-LOW VOWELS

épaisse /epɛ:s/ vs. *épais* /epɛ/

soeur /sø:ʀ/ vs. *seul* /sœl/(~ /sœl/)

pomme /pɔm/ (~ /pʌm) (no /ɔ:/ or /ʌ:/)

⁵ This is the non-standard version of /ne:ʒ/. The vowel /e:/ can be found only in such non-standard (but relatively widespread) pronunciations, mostly consisting of forms in *-ère*, e.g., *père*, *mère*, *frère*, *bière*, *rivière*, etc. and in English loanwords such as *brake/break*, *tape*, *rave*, etc. (cf. Walker, 1984: 86).

LOW VOWELS

passion /pæ:sjɔ̃/ vs. *passif* /pæ:sɪf/⁶
grasse /grɑ:s/(~/grɔ:s/) vs. *gras* /grɑ/(~/grɔ/)

NASAL VOWELS

sainte /sɛ:t/ vs. *saint* /sɛ/
défunte /defœ:t/ vs. *défunt* /defœ/
blanche /blā:f/ vs. *blanc* /blā/
ronde /rɔ̃:d/ vs. *rond* /rɔ̃/

Having established that [+long] is a pervasive feature of the present-day CF vowel system, much as it was in MF, we can now seek to determine whether the vowel length that specifically emanates from CL, i.e., the one that Gess maintains had all but disappeared by the sixteenth century, is still productive in that dialect. If we divide the long vowels from this source as Gess does, viz., into a high set and a non-high set, we find that the latter group still fully reflects the older state of affairs. Forms like *tête* (<*teste*), *côte* (<*coste*) and *pâte* (<*paste*), for instance, still contain the original CL-induced long vowels, as can easily be ascertained by the fact that all are phonetically diphthongized, i.e., pronounced [tæet] (< /tɛ:t/), [kɔut] (< /ko:t/), [pɑot] (< /pɑ:t/), as only long vowels can be in native words.⁷

On the other hand, when we consider the high vowels that emerged as a result of CL, such as in *dîne* (<*disne*), *bûche* (<*busche*), *croûte* (<*crouste*), we find that they are inevitably short. This can easily be verified by the fact that in CF all such short high vowels are lowered in stressed (= final) closed syllables (cf. Picard, 1983), and that, accordingly, the forms above are pronounced [dʒɪn], [byʃ] and [krut] respectively. It is important to note that this is not due to any sort of generalized constraint against long high vowels in this position, as these may appear either before the so-called *consonnes allongéantes* /R v z ʒ/,⁸ and are thus resistant to lowering, e.g., *dire* /di:R/, *cuve* /ky:v/, *ruse* /Ry:z/, *rouge* /Ru:ʒ/, or in English loanwords like *jeans* /dʒi:n/, *deal* /di:l/, *blues* /blu:z/, *cute* /kju:t/.

⁶ This is the only length alternation that does not occur in final syllables. On the other hand, not all of the other length alternations are found in penultimate syllables, as we will see shortly.

⁷ Thus, as noted by Dumas, 'le français québécois . . . utilise la diphtongaison comme mode de réalisation privilégié de la durée dans certains contextes' (1981: 1). More specifically, 'toute voyelle longue se détend par diphtongaison si elle est suivie d'au moins une consonne finale, surtout si cette consonne est finale de mot plutôt que simplement de morphème, et à plus forte raison dans ce cas si la voyelle est accentuée' (50). However, English loanwords containing diphthongs, as in *lighter*, *cowboy*, *rye*, usually maintain them whether they appear in stressed or unstressed syllables.

⁸ It is interesting to note that even in the latest edition of the venerable *grammaire Grevisse*, the observation is made that '[e]n français central (à Paris notamment) . . . les voyelles toniques sont longues devant les consonnes continues sonores [v], [z], [ʒ] et [R] non suivi d'une autre consonne: *sève* [sɛ:v], *visé* [vi:z], *rouge* [Ru:ʒ], *corps* [kɔ:R], mais *morte* [mɔ:R]' (1993: 34) [*sic*].

Moreover, an extremely conservative trait of CF is the retention of CL-induced long vowels in pretonic position, and here again a clearcut distinction between high and non-high vowels manifests itself. Thus, among the latter, we find nothing but forms like *tétu* /te:tsy/, *côté* /ko:te/ and *pâté* /pa:te/ whereas no trace of CL can be uncovered in the high vowels, as shown by forms such as *dîner* /dʒine/, *bûcher* /byʃe/, *croûté* /crute/. Though the long high vowels produced through the effect of the *consonnes allongeantes* have also been shortened in pre-stress position, e.g., *dirait* /di:re/, *cuwée* /kyve/, *rusé* /ryze/, *rougir* /ruʒir/, those in English loanwords are still maintained, as in *booster* /bu:ste/, *cruiser* /kru:ze/, *dealer* /di:le/, *meeting* /mi:tiŋ/, showing that nothing specifically precludes long high vowels from appearing in penultimate syllables.

4 CONCLUSION

The systematic difference we have observed regarding the after effects of CL in CF, whereby vowel length is totally absent in high vowels and universally maintained in non-high vowels, can only be reasonably explained by assuming that the (standard) language that was implanted in Nouvelle-France in the 1600s no longer had these long high vowels. In other words, the French colonists who settled there brought only CL-induced non-high long vowels with them.

It now seems clear why Gess, in choosing to focus exclusively on high vowels in his quest for evidence of CL in the centuries following its emergence, was led to infer that vowel length emanating from this process was completely lost by the sixteenth century. The inescapable reality is that these segments had simply been shortened by that time, that is, before the period in MF when the long vowels produced by the *consonnes allongeantes* made their appearance.⁹ This, of course, can easily be deduced from the fact that the long high vowels stemming from this source are still present in CF, unlike those that sprang from CL. In sum, had Gess chosen to consider manifestations of non-high long vowels in addition to or instead of focusing on high vowels, he could not possibly have arrived at the same conclusion.

According to Morin, claims to the effect that ‘le système prosodique du français du XVI^e siècle ignorait les distinctions de durée vocalique, ou que, s’il les connaissait, elles étaient secondaires et peu perceptibles . . . semblent résulter d’une approche philologique non-comparative de l’histoire du français dans laquelle on se limite aux témoignages anciens . . . sans tenir compte des données ultérieures’ (2000: 23). The evidence that has been presented here concerning the differential development of vowel length in CF would certainly seem to add support to his contention, contra Gess, that ‘[i]l n’y a aucune raison de douter que le français

⁹ This lengthening certainly occurred in the 1500s at the very latest since sixteenth-century grammarians such as Péletier (1549), Saint-Liens (1580) and Bèze (1584) had already begun to remark upon it (cf. Pope, 1934: 207; Fouché, 1961: 391–2).

du XVI^e siècle connaissait des oppositions de durée vocalique aussi bien pour les toniques que pour les prétoniques' (24).

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