

Suprasegmental Structure in Meridional French and its Provençal Substrate

Alex Chabot

The University of Virginia

Journées PFC à la Nouvelle-Orléans
June 26-28, 2008

Meridional French vs. Standard French

Meridional French (MF) is a variety of French distinct from Standard French (SF). The differences can be characterized by four major phonological elements (Durand, 1988; Coquillon, 2005):

- ▶ Preponderance of stable schwa, closely corresponding to orthographic “e”
- ▶ Post vocalic nasal consonants where SF has phonemic nasal vowels
- ▶ A rigid pattern mid vowel alternations (known as *la loi de position*)
- ▶ Common penultimate stress in lexical items, in contrast to SF's fixed final stress

Geographical Limits of Provençal



Suprasegmental Structures

- ▶ Coquillon (2004) showed that speakers of Meridional French can be identified by speech which has been treated by a low-pass filter.
- ▶ The F_0 formant is thought to correlate with suprasegmental prosodic features such as stress.
- ▶ The importance of suprasegmental structures in speech is demonstrated by the fact that 75.2 percent of French speakers could identify Meridional French speakers uniquely by prosody.

Meridional French's Provençal Substrate

- ▶ Séguy (1950) first made explicit the connection between Occitan, of which Provençal is a dialect, and Meridional French.
- ▶ Blanchet (1992) agrees that the characteristics of Meridional French which make it distinct from SF are generally due to the Provençal substrate.
- ▶ This difference can be traced to the knowledge that speakers of Provençal had, and that they applied, as French replaced the language of southern France.
- ▶ Specifically, the manifestations of this knowledge are the suprasegmental structures the *syllable* and the *metrical foot*.

Schwa and Orthographic “e”

Séguy made explicit the connection between schwa and orthographic “e”. However, this connection is not systematic:

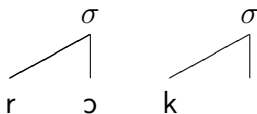
- ▶ avek [avɛkə]
- ▶ vraie [vʁe]
- ▶ boue [bu]

Schwa's Syllable Opening Effect in Meridional French

- (1) *natte* 'pleated hair'
 - a. Standard French: [nat]
 - b. Meridional French: [na.tə]
- (2) *tête* 'head'
 - a. Standard French: [tɛt]
 - b. Meridional French: [tɛ.tə]

Schematic Representation of a Degenerate Syllable

(3)



Simplification of Consonant Clusters

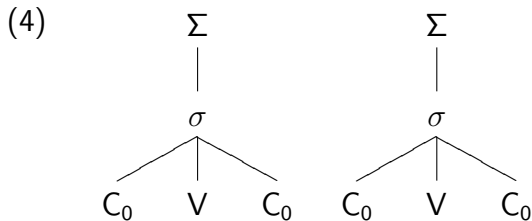
- ▶ *affection* 'affection'
 - ▶ Standard French: [a.fɛk.sjɔ̃]
 - ▶ Meridional French: [a.fe.sjɔ̃]
- ▶ *facteur* 'mail man'
 - ▶ Standard French: [fak.tœʁ]
 - ▶ Meridional French: [fa.tœʁ]
- ▶ *avek*
 - ▶ Standard French: [avɛk]
 - ▶ Meridional French: [ave]

Resyllabification Across Word Boundaries

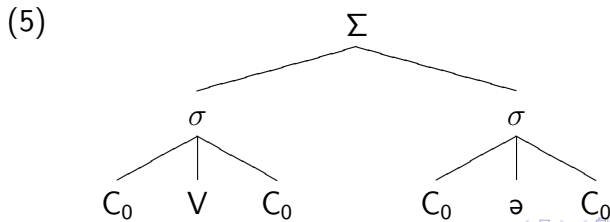
- ▶ lac alpin [la.kal.pɛ̃ŋ]
- ▶ bac estival [ba.kɛs.ti.val]

French Foot Formation

Following Selkirk, French feet are composed of one syllable only.

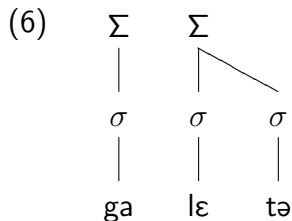


However, if a word ends in schwa, that syllable cannot be stressed, and does not stand on its own, so will join together with another to form a metrical foot:



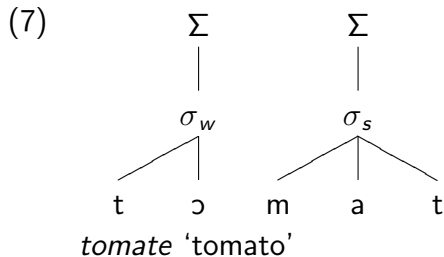
Meridional French Foot Formation

The word *galette* 'cake' [gaɛtə] as pronounced by a Meridional French speaker would be, according to Watbled, represented suprasegmentally as follows:



According to this analysis, the head of a foot is treated as a closed syllable as far as mid vowels are concerned. In such situations the mid vowels /E œ O/ are realized as their open variants, even though they are realized in open syllables lower down on the prosodic structure.

Suprasegmental Structure of a Typical French Word



Penultimate Stress in Meridional French

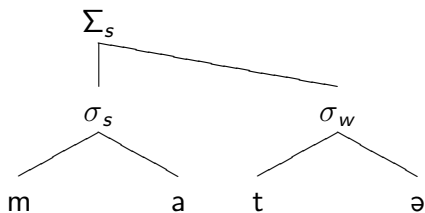
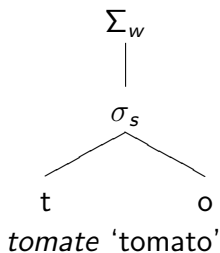
MF is generally like SF in that the last syllable carries stress. Unlike in SF, however, there are three situations in which words receive penultimate stress in MF.

- ▶ When words end in schwa (which doesn't carry stress), as in *patte* 'paw,' [pa.tə] *pile* 'battery' [pi.lə]
- ▶ When are imported directly from Provençal with their penultimate stress intact, as in *aïoli* 'garlic, egg, and olive oil sauce' [a'jɔli].
- ▶ When the two lexicons have similar or identical words for the same thing, as in *colis* 'package' [kɔ.li], and the Provençal lexical item has penultimate stress.

In such cases, SF's final syllable stress can be abandoned in favor of a penultimate stress.

Suprasegmental Structure of a Typical Meridional French Word

(8)



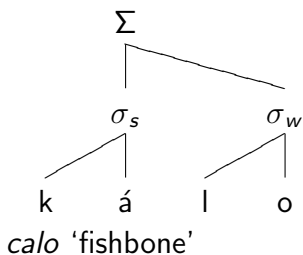
A Minimal Pair with Contrastive Stress in Provençal

- ▶ *calo* 'fish bone' ['kalo]
- ▶ *calo* 'big stick' [ka'lo]

A Minimal Pair with Contrastive Stress in Provençal

- ▶ *calo* 'fish bone' ['kalo]
- ▶ *calo* 'big stick' [ka'lo]

(10)

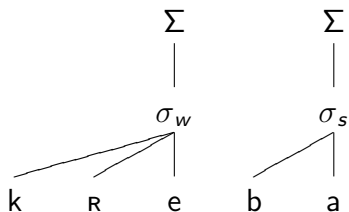


Mid Vowel Alternations in Provençal

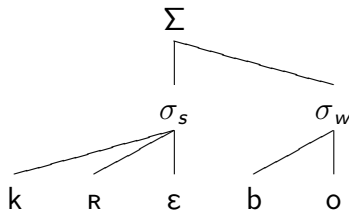
- ▶ *creba* 'to burst' [kre'ba]
- ▶ *crèbo* 'he/she bursts' ['krɛbo]
- ▶ *crèsi* 'believe 1s' ['krɛzi]
- ▶ *cresètz* 'believe 2p' [kre'zɛ]

Feet in Provençal

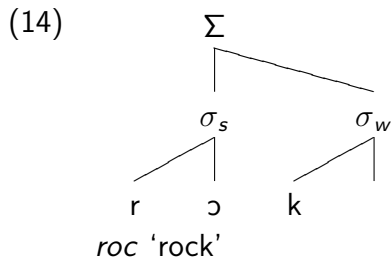
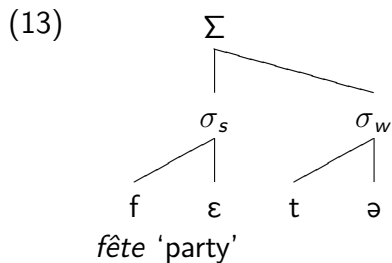
(11)



(12)



Two Trochaic Feet in Meridional French



The Effect of Variable Stress in Meridional French

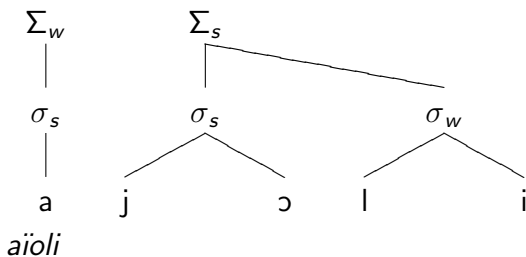
- ▶ Standard French final syllable stress: *aioli* [ajo'li]
- ▶ Provençal trochaic foot intact: *aioli* [a'jɔli]

The Effect of Variable Stress in Meridional French

- ▶ Standard French final syllable stress: *aïoli* [ajo'li]
- ▶ Provençal trochaic foot intact: *aïoli* [a'jɔli]
- ▶ Final Syllable: *heureux* 'happy' [ø'Rø]
- ▶ Penultimate Syllable: *heure* 'hour' ['œRə]

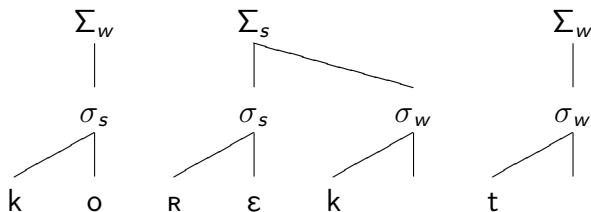
The Vowel Lowering Effect of Stress

(15)



Suprasegmentals Across Syllables

(16)



correcte 'correct, proper' (Eychenne, 2006)

Standard French pronunciation: [kɔʁɛkt]



Thank You

Appendix

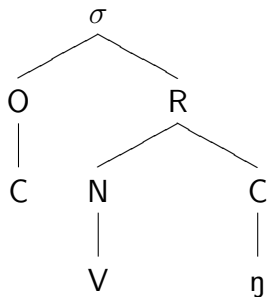
Postvocalic Nasal Consonants

Diachronic Concerns

Postvocalic Nasal Consonants

- ▶ Provençal admits a highly restricted number of segments as syllable codas. The most common is likely [ŋ].
- ▶ Following Goldsmith (1990) this segment is thought to be “licensed” by the coda.

This can be rendered schematically:



Place assimilation of Postvocalic Nasal Consonants

In Provençal, postvocalic consonants are homorganic with segment which follow them.

- ▶ *un paire* 'a father' [ym_̥pa_̥ire]
- ▶ *un chivau* 'a horse' [yntʃiva_̥u]
- ▶ *un fraire* 'a brother' [ym_̥fɾa_̥ire]
- ▶ *un soulèu* 'a sun' [u_̥ŋsulɛ_̥u]
- ▶ *un gàrri* 'a rat' [yŋgari]
- ▶ *n'a un* 'there is one' [na_̥u_̥]

Syllable final nasal consonants are realized as [ŋ] when preceding /s z k g ʁ l/, or when utterance final.

The segments which provoke place assimilation have the following features in common:

[+ant
-cont]

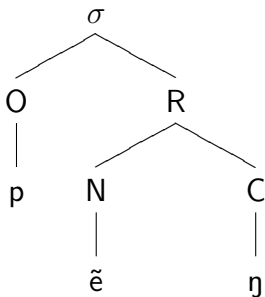
Post Vocalic Nasal Consonants in Meridional French

Meridional French has a variably nasalized vowel followed by a full nasal consonant where Standard French has a phonemic nasal vowel. Durand (1988):

- (17) a. Standard French: *pain* 'bread' [pɛ̃]
b. Meridional French: *pain* 'bread' [pɛ̃ŋ]

[ŋ] is also subject to the same place assimilation as in Provençal

- ▶ Both Durand (1988) and Eychenne (2006) note that, in words ending in a postvocalic nasal, the vowel in question can also be realized mid-close in some speaker's idiolects.
- ▶ Thus 'pain' can be realized as [pɛ̃ŋ] **or as** [pẽŋ].
- ▶ This second realization is suggested to be the result of feature licensing, where the more marked Provençal syllable, CVŋ, was admitted alongside the core CV syllable.



Diachronic Concerns

Problem: How do we know it was Provençal which was affected by French, and not French which *affected* Provençal?

- ▶ Orthography can shed some light:
 - ▶ Frédéric Mistral created standardized, generally phonetically based writing system
 - ▶ We see that in the mid 19th century there was, for example, variation between [e] and [ɛ] depending on stress, and a dearth of final consonants.
- ▶ Sociolinguistics can also be used:
 - ▶ French only became the *lingua franca* in Southern France relatively recently, and its ascendancy was a slow affair that took several centuries to reach the most remote parts of the countryside.
 - ▶ Blanchet (1992) says that it is only within the last fifty years that French/Provençal bilingualism became universal in Provence.

Diachronic Concerns II:

- ▶ And Historical Linguistics :
 - ▶ This is less than a generation after Ronjat's very detailed *Grammaire historique (sic) des parlers provençaux modernes*, in which he notes that mid vowel alternations were widespread in verbal paradigms (Ronjat, 1930).
 - ▶ Provence is geographically farther from Paris than other parts of Southern France. Bec (1963) says Provençal is the most conservative dialect of Occitan, least distant from the language spoken in the Middle ages, and most distant from the evolution of varieties in contact with French for longer.
 - ▶ Bec says that an Occitan speaker from the 12th century (before the introduction of French) would have had little trouble understanding a speaker from the 20th century. It seems clear then that it was Occitan which affected Meridional French, and not French which affected Occitan.