

THE INHERENT VOWEL FEATURE: THE CASE OF FIJIAN

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All natural languages are bound by rules/constraints relating to phonotactics and phonological structure. When languages borrow words from other languages, various rules/constraints apply in order to ensure that borrowed material complies with the structural requirements of the borrowing language. Of these rules/constraints, one of the most frequently discussed concerns vowel epenthesis – a process typically observed in strict CVCV languages which results in a ban on word-final consonants and on consonant clusters. Although epenthetic vowels differ in number and type from one language to another, their default quality is sensitive to the following three statements (Uffmann 2006).

Epenthetic vowels are either: 1) maximally unmarked, underspecified or phonetically shortest and non-peripheral in vowel space; 2) copied vowels of source words in a donor language (e.g. Paradis 1996); 3) vowels which are affected by the quality of adjacent consonants (e.g. Akinlabi 1993, Batibo 1995, Smith 1977).

The present study investigates what kind of vowel epenthesis is observed when Fijian creates a novel loanword by borrowing from English. The patterns examined are all based on data we collected from four informants of Fijian native speakers in Fiji during August 2014.

This study claims that /i/ is the unmarked epenthetic vowel in Fijian, and presents phonological arguments, rather than phonetic arguments, for why the vowel in question behaves as it does. Its behavior is attributed to the status of the feature [dip] in Fijian: [dip], as opposed to [mass] or [rump], is the inherent feature serving as the base for building phonological structure in Fijian. The phonetic manifestation of a sole [dip] (with lighter timbre) is the high front vowel /i/. This tells us why /e/ is the second most frequent epenthetic vowel in the language: /e/ contains [dip] in its internal structure (Backley 2011). Typologically speaking, the same inherent role is played by [rump] in Japanese and [mass] in English: the inherent vowel [rump] phonetically manifests itself as /u/ in Japanese, while inherent [mass] is realised as /ə/ in English. These two vowels function as default epenthetic vowels in loanwords in the respective languages. Identifying the inherent vowel feature helps us analyse vowel-driven phonological phenomena in a given language.