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## [ATR] Vowel Harmony and Lexical Borrowing in Maasai

### 1. Introduction

Maa is a Nilotic language spoken in Southern Kenya and Tanzania. Its speakers, the Maasai people, number around 800,000 and live a tribal pastoralist lifestyle in remote rural areas. Because they are a relatively insular culture, most of their trade is amongst themselves so Maa is the dominant, and often only, language spoken by the Maasai people, and their culture is clearly represented in the lexicon.

In this paper, I will discuss the phonology and the current efforts to preserve the language and culture of the Maasai people. With respect to the phonology, I will specifically be focusing on the presence of Advanced Tongue-Root Vowel Harmony, a rare feature not seen in most languages. In the second half of the paper, I will also be focusing on the history and process of lexical borrowing in Maa. Both of these phenomena result in a very interesting language that shows the Maasai's history and perseverance.

*NOTE: Because there is some confusion regarding the interchangeability of "Maa" and "Maasai", I will be using "Maasai" when referring to the people and "Maa" when referring to the language for clarity purposes.*

## 2. Advanced Tongue-Root Vowel Harmony

Though there are many interesting features of the Maa language phonetically, the most distinctive would have to be the presence of Advanced Tongue-Root (or in feature notation, [+ATR] vowel harmony). In this phenomenon, the back of the tongue is “advanced” forward similarly across all of the vowels in a word when a [+ATR] vowel is present in the verb (with a couple exceptions). This type of vowel harmony is relatively rare across languages in general, but is found within some Niger-Congo and Altaic languages as well.

	[+ATR]		[-ATR]	
HIGH	i	u	ɪ	ʊ
MID	e	o	ɛ	ɔ
LOW			ɑ	

Fig. 1. Maa contrastive vowels.

In total, Maa has nine contrastive vowels, with their pairs being shown here (the exception is /ɑ/, which is considered somewhat of a “neutral” vowel). The [+ATR] feature is considered “dominant” in Maa, as

it spreads both left and right of the initial [+ATR] vowel.

*Examples where no [+ATR] present:*

1) á-dó

1SG-be.red

‘I am red’

2) áá-jtÉ-bÉl

3>1SG-CAUS-break

‘He will make me break it’

*Where [+ATR] of suffix spreads to root:*

3) á-dór-ù

1SG-be.red-INCEP

‘I will become red’<sup>1</sup>

4) é-té-bél-íé

3-PF-break-INST.PF

‘He/she used it to break it’<sup>1</sup>

As you can see in Examples 1 and 3, when the [-ù] inceptive marker is added on to the end of the phrase, [ɔ] changes into its [+ATR] counterpart of [o]. The same can be seen in Examples 2 and 4, where the [ɛ] turns into [e] when the [-ié] instinctive/past-tense marker is added. Note as well that there are no real tonal shifts that accompany this phenomenon - the vowel harmony is separate from the tonal system entirely and the rules do not significantly overlap.

The main exception for advanced tongue-root harmony is that /a/ “blocks” the spread of the feature to whatever side it is on. /a/ does not have any advanced tongue-root counterpart in Maa, and so the harmony stops when it reaches the /a/.

5) ɛ̀-ì-bɛ̀l-ár-ʼié

3-PF-break-AWAY-INST

‘He used it to break them (one at a time)’<sup>1</sup>

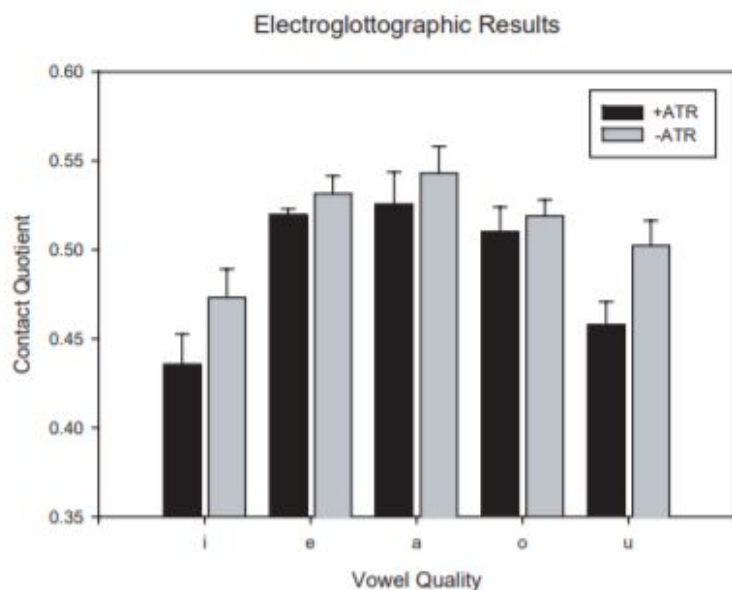
Instead of following the advanced tongue-root harmony, the /a/ instead harmonizes to an [o] as follows:

6) /ɪ-ta-sakut-a/ [ɪtasakuto]

2SG-PST

‘bewitch’<sup>2</sup>

Note how in this word, the [u] does not spread to the [ɪ] at the beginning of the word due to the /a/-blocking.



Another interesting feature of the [+ATR] vowel harmony presence is that it can help explain the supposed conscious presence of “breathy” versus “creaky” voice that some linguists have heard in languages such as Maa.

As can be seen from the chart above (taken from Guion, Post, and Payne), [+ATR] vowels have a less constricted glottis and therefore more breathy phonation, so this phenomenon can be attributed to the vowel harmony rather than some other conscious breathiness or creakiness that is expressed.

The final interesting fact about the [+ATR] feature in Maa is how it came about. As was mentioned earlier, there are not that many languages that have this distinction other than some Niger-Congo languages, Altaic languages, and some languages closely related to Maa. So how did this come about?

The best explanation is that the proto-Nilo-Saharan vowel shortening morphed into advanced-tongue-root somewhere along the way. Though proto-Nilo-Saharan does not have many features that can be properly determined because the languages spoken today are quite old, one of the features that it is thought to have is a seven-vowel system with harmony between vowels in terms of length. According to Guion, Post, and Payne, a potential explanation for how the [ATR] distinction arose is that somewhere along the way this length distinction was taken as

people pronouncing different vowels entirely when the Nilotic branch first broke off, as most Nilotic languages have a ten-vowel system with [ATR] harmony<sup>1</sup>. However, in Maa, all low-vowel distinctions must have faded away, leaving us with [ɑ] as the only low vowel and [ATR] distinction for the other three pairs.

### **3. Lexical Borrowing in Maa**

The Maasai people have generally been very insular for most of their existence and other than the Cushitic peoples have not mixed with other language families on any meaningful scale until the 1900's. When Swahili began to become the dominant language of Tanzania and Kenya and Africa started to tend in general towards Westernization, Maasai groups started to feel the effects in their daily lifestyles. Being a semi-nomadic group in an increasingly sedentary society deeply influenced not only their culture, but their language as well.

In order to educate the Maasai, the Kenyan and Tanzanian governments introduced a new form of town, called "ujamaa villages". These villages, which typically consisted of a health center (or "dispensary"), a school, and perhaps a store, were made for the purpose of making the Maasai and other groups such as the Hadzabe more sedentary and standardize the lifestyles across the countries. Here, Maasai families would be provided with elementary schooling for their children, but it would be taught only in Swahili.

Other instances where language contact occurs is with the increased amount of tourism that the Maasai participate in. Their unique lifestyle helped to play into the 20th-century obsession with the "uncivilized peoples" and through this kind of tourism they have met mostly English-speaking travelers. The Maasai also have a large unregulated hunting range, where they

hunt (sometimes endangered) animals such as lions and other big game, which also attracts hunters from around the world.

The result is that since the 1970s and 80s, Maa has borrowed a significant amount of vocabulary from Swahili (and increasingly other languages such as English as well). These loanwords typically relate to the modern world, grooming practices, household living, and agriculture.

There are some rules regarding what can and cannot be borrowed into Maa, most notably

<i>en-kíné</i>	'goat (general), female goat'	that their borrowing is almost exclusively
<i>ol-kúòò</i>	'kid'	additive and not substitutive. That is to say, if the
<i>ol-órá</i>	'he-goat'	word already exists in the language, they do not
<i>ol-mérègèsh</i>	'ram'	see a reason to use a word from another language
<i>ol-kér</i>	'castrated ram'	in its place. Though sometimes they do borrow
<i>en-kítéŋ</i>	'cow, bovine (general)'	words if they are simpler than the original Maa
<i>in-kíshú</i>	'cattle'	variant, there is an explicit set of words that are
<i>ol-áshê</i>	'calf'	deliberately not borrowed despite complicated
<i>ol-búŋàì</i>	'bull calf'	
<i>ol-ol ŋónì</i>	'bull'	
<i>ol-súnàsh</i>	'castrated bull'	

Nilotic vocabulary. These words relate to the Maa pastoralist lifestyle typically, as seen here<sup>4</sup>.

Another rule about borrowing in Maa is that words that are borrowed into the language must follow the same phonological and morphological rules that the language already has. Below are some examples taken from Payne and Ole-Kotikash's "Maa Dictionary"<sup>4</sup>:

<i>English-book-SG</i>	<i>Maa-SG</i>	<i>Maa-PL</i>
"book"	"em-búku"	"im-búkúí"
<i>Swahili-shop-SG</i>	<i>Maa-SG</i>	<i>Maa-PL</i>
"duka"	"ol-dúka"	"il-dúkaí"

Note the adding of standard Maa affixes and the adding of [i] to make both words plural. Also note that the [+ATR] feature of the [i] does not spread to the rest of the word in the Maa plural form of “shop”. A paper by Professor Amani Lusekelo of the University of Dar Es Salaam also has a good chart of borrowed words from Swahili that illustrates this point even-further<sup>3</sup>:

MAASAI	SWAHILI	GLOSS
<b>imwalimuni</b>	<b>walimu</b>	teachers
<b>ingera eshule</b>	<b>wanafunzi</b>	pupils, school children
<b>ibegii</b>	<b>mikebe</b>	canisters
---	<b>dawa, madawa</b>	drugs, medicines
<b>ibegii</b>	<b>mabegi</b>	bags
<b>ijengoi</b>	<b>majengo</b>	buildings

Note that in all of the loan words, [i] is added in the beginning and for most of the loanwords in the plural form the [i] is added at the end as well.

There is also a phenomenon of semantic extension that typically occurs, especially with new religious concepts. Instead of borrowing the Swahili or English word for something, occasionally Maa will just add that definition on to something they already have that is mildly similar in meaning. For example, the Maasai people did not have a word for what Christianity would consider a “priest”, but they did have their own religion that had some sort of priest-like figure. Thus, instead of borrowing “priest” into the language, they just extended the meaning of “olasayani” to also encompass the Christian counterpart<sup>2</sup>.

### Works Cited

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