

Tobias Scheer
Université de Nice, CNRS 6039
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The origin of Western Slavic vowel length is Western Slavic

Until the late 50s, Western Slavic vowel length was accounted for with exclusive reference to Common Slavic intonation and its subsequent modifications due to Lehr-Spławiński's metatony or versions thereof. In more recent work, metatony is either questioned as such, or its responsibility in segmental alternations is substantially watered down: while in traditional approaches almost any prosodic and quantitative variation was blindly ascribed to some metatony of variable definition (which had also to rely on important analogical activity for those items that did not match the expected pattern), it is now believed that a good deal of the alternations at hand are language-specific and entirely unrelated to intonation in general, and to metatony in particular. This is the result of work by Kuryłowicz (1952, 1968), Stang (1957), Sadnik (1959), Nonnemacher-Pribić (1961), Shevelov (1964:563f), Kortlandt (1975) and others. Voices such as Stang (1957:21) and Garde (1976:IX) deny the existence of metatony in Slavic altogether.

Whatever the general Slavic status of metatony, Šaur (1995) shows that the notion of metatony was abusively extended to languages such as Czech. He concludes that Czech quantity is entirely unrelated to any kind of metatony: every paradigm that features an alternation in vowel length needs to be explored in its own right.

I argue that there is no solution for Western Slavic quantity in general, and for Czech quantity in particular in absence the distinction between diachronic evolution and synchronic derivation:

- synchronically, the quantity of lexical items is a lexical property, i.e. arbitrary: it cannot be the result of a synchronically active phonological operation. Lexical recordings are the targets of diachronic evolution. The quantity of lexically recorded items is thus to be explained by diachronic evolution.
- on the other hand, the relationship of different items within a paradigm is under the control of a synchronic derivation: there is a grammatical mechanism that produces for example an iterative on the basis of a non-iterative. That is, while the non-iterative is recorded in the lexicon, the iterative is not. Therefore its properties cannot be the result of diachronic evolution. In further evolution, the result of a formerly productive iterative formation may of course enter the lexicon.

This means that the genesis of typical Czech and Slovak length alternations that are related to a specific paradigm (infinitive - non-infinitive, iterative - non-iterative, diminutive - non-diminutive etc.) is necessarily synchronic, where "synchronic" means that the alternations at hand are the result of a derivational mechanism that was once synchronically active or is still active today. Therefore the properties of derived categories (iteratives, diminutives etc.) cannot be defined by diachronic evolution: Western Slavic quantity of derived forms is a Western Slavic invention.

I argue that the synchronic mechanism which is responsible for relevant alternations is templatic in kind: a minimal and/or maximal size is associated to derived categories. This size is measured in morae whereby short vowels (and syllabic consonants) weigh one mora, against long vowels that weigh two morae. Czech iteratives, then, must weigh exactly three morae: this is why short vowels of non-iteratives that produce 2-mora iteratives have to lengthen (*sadit* → [sázet]_{3μ}, *[sazet]_{2μ} "to plant"), while long vowels of non-iteratives that produce 4-mora iteratives have to shorten (*líznout* → [lízovat]_{3μ}, *[lízovat]_{4μ} "to lick").