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THE STATUS OF FRENCH PHONEMIC LENGTH AS A PEDAGOGICAL NORM¹

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1.0. Introduction

The question of vowel length in French has been treated at length by linguists and traditional grammarians from Maurice Grammont (1922) through Durand (1946), Delattre (1951), Fouché (1956), Galand (1968), Schane (1968) to Léon (1966) and (1972) among others.

Most of these scholars have, however, devoted the bulk of their studies to the phonetic status of length, dwelling on objective (measurable) vowel duration, the threshold of length perception (measurable in hundredths of second) and occasionally, the rules governing conditioned length. Until Martinet (1945), the phonemic role of length in French grammar was generally dismissed in a paragraph or two, consisting mainly of a list of such minimal pairs as maître/mettre, pâte/patte, bête/belle, ras/rat, etc. in which the semantic differences are putatively attributed to the length variable; the vowel of the first word of the pair being generally longer than the vowel of the second word. Some French language (classroom) grammars and manuals have consequently assumed that length is phonemic and in some cases have devised drills of length distinctions involving relevant minimal pairs of traditional French grammar.

Thus, the manual "Fleurs de savanne et de forêt", Paris Hatier, 1967, a reader for some West African francophone schools, has drill sentences like (1) and (2) below where length distinction is underscored.

(1) La *pâte* est fine.

(2) Amina marche à quatre *pattes*.

¹ I am grateful to Albert Valdman for useful advice on this project and valuable comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

² It is an empirically verifiable hypothesis that vowel length is inversely proportional to the articulatory force of the consonant which follows it. Voiced consonants (whose articulatory force is weak) lengthen preceding vowels, while voiceless consonants, [t] and [n] (with a stronger force), shorten them. Durand (1946), Malmberg (1944), Hefner (1960).

Pupils are then drilled on the production and perception of the length distinction.

Implicit in this type of drill is the assumption that length is a productive phonemic distinction in modern French such that all learners need acquire the phonemic use of length in order to produce and perceive the differences between the relevant minimal pairs in communication. To what extent is this assumption true and what is the status of length in French in general? For the assumption to be true, all or a reasonable combination of the following must be true:

1. Native speakers of French *consistently* realize quantity distinction in the use of the putative minimal pairs mentioned above.
2. They *consistently* perceive a quantity distinction in the use of the minimal pairs.
3. The absence of quantity distinction in the normal use of these "minimal pairs" in various aspects of the communicative speech act will significantly impair perception of relevant semantic distinctions in the pair.

Tests designed to ascertain the veracity of assertions 1 to 3 would provide the required information on the phonemic status of length in French and either validate or invalidate the direct and indirect emphasis on vowel quantity distinction in French language pedagogy.

Before discussing two such experiments carried out recently by the writer, it seems appropriate to place the French vowel length issue in the context of previous studies, some of which have contributed in highlighting the question of the phonemic status of quantity in French.

2.0. *Phonetic Length*

Vowel length in French has essentially a phonetic status. Thus, it is mostly automatic and predictable in its occurrence. From the accounts of phoneticians (Durand 1946, Delattre 1956 etc.) there is a strong correlation between stress and phonetic length and the facts of conditioned length can be summarized as in (3) below:

- (3) (i) All unstressed vowels are short
- (ii) Only stressed vowels can be long
- (iii) Not all stressed vowels are automatically long, however, for length in stressed syllables is conditioned as follows:
 - (a) stressed vowels are automatically long before lengthening consonants (consonnes allongeantes): [ʁ], [ʒ], [z], [v] and consonant cluster [vr]

Examples: *rare [ʁa' : ʁ] vive [vi' : v]

* ['] indicates (primary) stress.

rase [ʁa' : z] vivre [vi' : vʁə]

rage [ʁa' : ʒ]

- (b) stressed nasal vowel are automatically long before any consonant.

Examples: [ã]pend [pã] pente [pã : t]

[ɔ̃]mont [mɔ̃] montre [mɔ̃ : tʁe]

[œ̃]l'un [lœ̃] lundi [lœ̃ : di]

[ɛ̃]plein [plɛ̃] plainte [plɛ̃ : t]

- (c) The stressed front mid-high rounded vowel [ø] and the back mid-high rounded vowel [o] behave like nasals in that they are automatically lengthened before any consonant.

Examples: [o] peau [po] paume [po : m]

[ø] noeud [nø] neutre [nø : tʁe]

Quite apart from the fact that only stressed vowels may be lengthened, another aspect in which phonetic length correlates with stress is in the behaviour of length within units larger than the word i.e. in the so called "semantic phrase units" (unité de sens or groupe rythmique). Consider the utterances in 4.

A	B
(4) pauvre [p'ɔ : vʁə]	pauvre étudiante [po. vʁ ety'dʒa' : t]
l'arbre [l'a : ʁbʁə]	l'arbre aux fleurs roses
	[la.ʔ ʁbʁ oflœ' ʁʁ'o : z]
tige [ti' : ʒ]	un tige de m let mur
	[œ tiʔʒ dəmilɛ. my:ʁ]

In isolation words carry primary stress (1) on the last stressable syllable as in A above. In context, however, words lose their primary stress to the final syllable of the semantic phrase unit and then carry secondary stress (2) or tertiary stress (3) in place of their intrinsic primary stress as exemplified by the utterances in B (when compared with the position of stress on words of A). Similarly, stressed vowels which are normally long /:/ in isolation as in A become only half long /:/ in context as in B where full length correlates with primary stress and half length with secondary or tertiary stress.³

Pierre Delattre (1950) attributes the lengthening of [o] and [ø] before consonants to the "loi de position" which stipulates that "in checked or closed syllables, vowels

³ The variation of duration in normal French speech is approximately as follows

long vowels 35—45 hundredths of a second

half long vowels 15—35 hundredths of a second

short vowels 1—15 hundredths of a second

Delattre (1956)

The quantity of each sound depends on a number of factors, among which are speed of delivery, length of groups pronounced and the phonetic quality of words pronounced—Malmberg (1944).

are open and in opened syllables vowels are closed". Examining alternations of the type pomme [pom] pause [po: m], jeune [žœn] jeûne [žœ.n] etc., he points out that in the second member of each pair, [ø] and [o] being in checked syllables, ought to be opened (i.e. [œ] and [ɔ] respectively) in accordance with the "loi de position", but they are not; instead, they are automatically accompanied by length. He therefore concludes that this length is compensatory in that the vowels are (by means of lengthening) aspiring towards the "openness" required in this environment by "loi de position".

Whatever the merits of this explanation (or speculation?) it is clear that the occurrence of vowel length in all the cases discussed in this section is predictable and as such, rule governed. From the pedagogical perspective, manuals and teachers of French would therefore progressively present the data and relevant facts in reasonable dosages to enable the learner to acquire the rules governing automatic vowel length in French.

It is the claim to a phonemic role for duration in French that raises questions with significant implications for French language teaching, particularly, the teaching of French as a second language. This is the issue to be reviewed in the next section.

3.0. Phonemic Length

From the functional perspective, the distinction between short and long vowels exists only when the vowels contrast in a given environment. It is in this sense that length has been said to be phonemic in French with respect to [a/a:] and [ɛ/ɛ:] length contrasts in words of the type: patte/pâte, mètre/maître, faites/fête, belle/bêle, rat/ras, tache/tâche, bat/bas etc.⁴

How have generations of French linguists accounted for this aspect of duration in French?

Fouché (1946) does not deal with the phonemic length of vowels at all. Grammont (1922) explains vowel length in the above minimal pairs by attributing it to the influence of the "accent circonflexe":

"le [a], devant consonne est postérieur et long lorsqu'on l'écrit avec l'accent circonflexe... sans circonflexe il est généralement bref et antérieur devant consonne unique autre que consonne allongante"⁵

This is clearly unsatisfactory because in the first place not all vowels attribu-

⁴ In the case of patte and pâte (a/a), the variables involve not only a quantity distinction but quality distinction as well. According to Martinet (1945), 30% of Southerners who distinguish between a/a claim that their distinction involves only quality. We tentatively assume that this variable may involve quantity distinction as well.

⁵ "Before a consonant, the vowel [a] is long and back when it is written with "accent circonflexe" ... without circonflexe it is generally short and front before a single consonant other than the lengthening consonant".

ted length are written with "accent circonflexe" as exemplified by: bas [ba:], ras [ʁa:] etc. Secondly explaining length on the basis of an orthographic diacritic implies that in language acquisition, the knowledge of the graphic representation of a word precedes the knowledge of its phonetic realization. This is untenable (at least for native speakers).

Because some grammarians like Fouché and others were silent on phonemic length and because some others questioned the phonemic status of length in French, Martinet (1945), Reichstein (1960), Deyhime (1967), Galland (1968) and Léon (1972) have successively monitored and reported on the productivity of length contrasts in French.

Research undertaken by Martinet (1945) and Deyhime (1967) claim that phonemic length is attested in French, for, speakers appear to distinguish between certain pairs of words on the basis of quantity distinction. Table I gives a summary of the percentage of informants who according to Martinet and Deyhime distinguish [a/a:] and [ɛ/ɛ:] in Southern France (M), i.e.; meridional and elsewhere (Nm) i.e., non-meridional.

Table 1

Variables and Items		a/a:		ɛ/ɛ:	
Martinet 1945	Region	Patte/pâte	rat/ras	faites/fête	belle/bèle
	M	44%	27%	36%	60%
	NM	95%	68%	65%	87%
Deyhime 1967		patte/pâte	rat/ras	faites/fête	belle/bèle
	M	22% (15%)	7% (2%)	15% (11%)	19% (17%)
	NM	100% (92%)	50% (42%)	44% (39%)	45% (41%)

Martinet interviewed a large number of speakers mainly soldiers and relied exclusively on the informants' declaration about the vowel length distinctions they make. Deyhime (1967) in addition to informants' declaration, taped and analysed the actual performance with respect to the target words. Figures in parenthesis represent the analyst's evaluation as opposed to informant's declaration.⁶

⁶ As a trained linguist, using a tape recorder, Deyhime's figures (in parenthesis) might be more reliable, but we have indicated informants' declaration to allow for comparison with Martinet's figures which are all the result of informants' declarations. Given the consistent difference between Deyhime's (objective) figures (in parenthesis) and the figures of his informant's (subjective) declaration, we can expect lower objective figures for Martinet's informants as well.

Galland's (1968) study of vocalic distinctions in a variety of Bourguignon, indicates that in addition to [a/a:] and [ɛ/a:] length distinctions, morphological distinctions with length as the variable are possible with other vowels, in regional varieties of French:

i/i: ami/amie

y/y: perdu/perdue

u/u: loup/loue

o/o: sot/saut

Here, the quantity distinction is complicated by quality distinctions [a/a:] and [ɛ/a:] as well as [a/a:]. Unfortunately, Galland does not establish a systematic hierarchy for the distinctions observed, so that one runs into difficulties relating his observations to the vowel system of standard French. However, it does appear that some dialects give more importance to length than "standard French" and that in particular, length is phonemicized to distinguish between homophones. Thus for instance, when the homophones involve a gender distinction, the vowel of the feminine, carries length: ami/amie [ami]/[ami:].⁷

Schane (1968) adopts a morphonemic solution to vowel length. Examining morphophonemic alternations of the type *bestial/bête*, *festin/fête*, etc. (and with support from historical facts about the evolution of the language), he postulates abstract underlying forms: /*bestia*/, /*festa*/ etc., from which [bet] *bête* and [fɛt] *fête* are derived by applying a series of rules, one of which lengthens the vowel following a deletion of the preconsonantal [s]. The details of the formulation and their order of application are irrelevant to the issue under discussion.

Despite the observations of Martinet (1945) and Deyhime (1967), our own spontaneous observations of native speakers' French (since 1970) indicates that while varying degrees of length could be distinguished, speakers never appeared to be sensitive to its putative contrastive function. Then Pierre Léon's (1972) study which led to the conclusion that the phonemic length distinction had declined considerably in Paris and we decided to verify the validity of attributing a phonemic status to length in French in general.

4.0. *Experiments*

The results of two experiments carried out with five native speakers of French, three non-Parisians-B₁ (NP₁) B₂ (NP₂) B₃ (NP₃), one Parisian — P, and one French Southerner (M), throw some light on the direction of quantity distinctions in French.⁸

⁷ Masculine-feminine distinctions by phonemicization of vowel length have been reported by Durand (1946) in Paris, Beardsmore (1971) in Brussels and Chumbow (1971) in Cameroon.

⁸ All five informants were graduate students in Indiana University (USA).

4.1. Production of Quantity Distinctions:

The first experiment was designed to test the realisation of quality distinction between [a] (front low vowel) and [ɑ] back low vowel and the quantity distinction [a/a:] and [ɛ/ɛ:]. Informants' reading of a text in which twenty-eight target items were embedded (at varying intervals) was recorded and analysed for quality and quantity distinctions. Sixteen of the target words of the type l'âne, tâche etc., involve (long) back vowels (by standard French). Table 2 gives the relative frequency of [ɛ]/[ɛ:] [ɑ]/[ɑ:] quality and quantity distinctions for each informant.

What emerges from this experiment is that except for P, the distinction between long and short vowels at the level of production is generally low.

Whereas Martinet relied exclusively on declarations by informants, and whereas Deyhime in addition tape-verified informant's declarations, our experiment although limited in terms of number of informants, adds yet a new dimension to empirical studies of this nature; namely the verification of the linguistic intuition of informants with respect to the distinctions they make or don't make.⁹

This may take the form of questions and perception tests. Thus, when casually asked what distinctions they thought they were making between patte/pâte, l'oie/lois, etc., all but M (with a linguistic background) were not conscious of making any distinctions. P replied: "Vous croyez que j'y pense? S'il y a distinction, c'est une distinction uniquement mentale."¹⁰ Even M, (a linguist by training) faced with the same question then exclaimed that she did not notice a few "circonflexes" on some of the target words in the course of the reading. This suggests that for her, (and presumably for many native speakers of the language), length distinction is essentially an academic exercise where one lengthens vowels with orthographic circonflexe.

This led us to asking the question, to what extent is length a phonological variable in the linguistic competence of speakers? Does length distinction have any psychological reality? If (as it appears to be the case), native speaker

Table 2

Informants	Quantity ɛ/ɛ:	Quantity ɑ/ɑ:	Quantity a/a:
B ₁ /NP ₁ /	9%	12½%	25%
B ₂ /NP ₂ /	16%	58½%	25%
B ₃ /NP ₃ /	8½%	31¼%	12½%
M/M/	14%	25%	6½%
P/P/	34½%	81¼%	31¼%

Slightly posteriorized front vowels [a^ʲ] are counted as back vowels [ɑ^ʲ]

⁹ This is why informants were limited to a manageable number.

¹⁰ "Do you believe I think about it? If there is any distinction at all, it is a purely mental distinction".

of French are not always conscious of phonemic length in the production of speech, do they nevertheless perceive length as phonemic or relevant in decoding a message?

4.2. Perception of Quantity Distinctions

The second experiment was designed precisely to verify the perception of length as a phonemic feature in French by the same set of informants.

Informants listened to pairs of sentences containing target words in (A) an undifferentiated context with the quantity of the vowel of the target word as the only variable between the two sentences, (B) a partially differentiated context with length variable and (C) a clearly differentiated context. Example:

(I)	(II)
<i>Sentences Read</i>	<i>Informant's Sheet</i>
2a Voici trois mètres [ɛ]	2a) maîtres/mètres
b Voici trois maîtres [ɛ:]	b) mètres/maîtres

Sentences are read with the vowel of the target word as indicated in (I), and informants have to choose one of two words (from II) corresponding to the target word.

Except for P, it is evident (from the results in Table 3) that informants were unable to systematically determine the minimal pairs in the undifferentiated context (and elsewhere) on the basis of length alone. In the process of verifying informants intuition, when they were shown four sentences of the type in A and asked whether they are grammatical, they all recognized that they are. When asked whether it occurred to them (at the time of the exercise) that in (2) (Table 3 p. 49) both words were being given at different times, answers varied from a categorical "non" to "Je n'y avais pas songé", (and of course a "oui" for P).

Following the same pattern of questioning, informants indicated that for partially differentiated type B sentences, 3b and 4b are grammatical but they are rather far fetched. For type C, they indicated, as expected, that only 5b and 6a were intended, the context eliminating the other sentences (although 6b may be grammatical in some remote sense). Thus, it is evident that context and not phonemic length seems to be the decisive clue to determining the meaning of the target words.

5.0. Results

This seems to conflict with a similar experiment by Levelt, Zwanenburg and Ouweneel (1970) who concluded that in French, different phrase structures correspond to different phonetic forms on the basis of which the hearer can detect and interpret patterns. Our experiments, however, confirm Léon (1972),

whose experiment with Parisian youths led to the conclusion that length distinction is on the decline in Paris.

The weakness of the first experiment we carried out with the variables *a/a* is that facts of the length distinction tested could be obscured by the quality distinction involved. However, the results were sufficient to indicate that the productivity of quantity distinction was low. The second experiment, along

Table 3.

Gives some of the sentences read, the variables, and informants' responses, as well as the perception of lengths distinction for each informant with respect to sentence types.

A	Sentence	Variable—Item	B ₁	B ₃	S	P
A	1a La <i>pâte</i> est fine ([a]) [a>:]	[[a:]] pâte	pâte	pâte	pâte	pâte
	b La <i>patte</i> est fine ([a]) [a]	[[a]] [a] patte	patte	pate	pate	pate
	2a Voici trois <i>maîtres</i> [ɛ:]	[ɛ:] maîtres	maîtres	maîtres	maîtres	maîtres
	b Voici trois <i>mètres</i> [ɛ]	[ɛ] mètres	maitres	maîtres	maîtres	mètres
B	3a Notre chat mange une <i>pâte</i> fine [a]	[a:] pâte	pâte	pâte	pâte	pâte
	b *Amina mange une <i>patte</i> fine [a]	[a] patte	pate	pate	pate	pate
	4a *Voici trois <i>maîtres</i> d'étoffe [ɛ:]	[ɛ:] maîtres	mètres	mètres	mètres	mètres
	b Voici trois <i>mètres</i> d'étoffe [ɛ]	[ɛ] mètres	maitres	mètres	mètres	mètres
C	5a *Notre chat a quatre <i>pâtes</i> fines [a]	[a] pâtes	pattes	pattes	pattes	pattes
	b Notre chat a quatre <i>pattes</i> fines [a]	[a] patters	pattes	pattes	pattes	pattes
	6a Voici trois <i>maîtres</i> d'école [ɛ]	[ɛ:] maîtres	maitres	maîtres	maîtres	maîtres
	b *Voici trois <i>mètres</i> d'école [ɛ]	[ɛ] mètres	maitres	maîtres	maîtres	maîtres
RESULTS The results indicate an overwhelming zero perception of length distinctions (that are phonetically actualised).		Sentence Type	Perception of Length Distinction			
		A. Undifferentiated context	25%	—%	—%	60%
		B. Partially differentiated context	25%	—%	—%	—%
		C. Differentiated context	—%	—%	—%	—%

B₁'s, perception in the partially differentiated sentences may, strictly speaking, be regarded as zero because it seems to involve random choice; as he associates *metre* with length and *maître* with absence of length, whereas, it is actually the reverse that he is exposed to.

¹¹ The sentences in A are most appropriate in determining the perception of length as a phonemic variable since length is the only variable in each pair of sentences. The experiment could have been limited to type A sentences, but type B and C sentences are included for comparison purposes.

with the investigation of the linguistic intuition of informants, showed much more conclusively that minimal pairs which have traditionally been used as examples of the case for phonemic length in French are not distinguished on the basis of length alone but more often on the basis of context or the 'likelihood' of the situation as indicated by verified informants' intuition.

The main issue under investigation, was the psychological reality of phonemic length in the communicative use of French. The investigation reveals the following facts.

1. Native speakers of French do realise quantity distinctions in putative minimal pairs. The productivity of these distinctions is, however, very low, ranging from 64% to 34½% of possible cases of length distinctions (see table 2).
2. They do occasionally perceive length distinctions. However, the perception of length distinctions is equally low and generally inconsistent (see table 3).
 - a) Only two of the informants B₁ and P appear to perceive length distinction in decoding the message in an undifferentiated context with a 25% and 60% score respectively (table 3, A)
 - b) Only one (B₁) perceived length in a partially differentiated context (table 3B) and with only a 25% score (which is low enough to be attributed to chance).
 - c) None of the informants was sensitive to length distinctions in context (i.e.; when relevant elements were embedded in a context). In such cases, only contextual cues (and not length) become the real determinants in the decoding process. Thus, for instance, utterances like those in (i) below, consistently received the incorrect (but more reasonable) decoding in (ii) rather than the required (but contextually unlikely responses) in (iii).

i.	ii.	iii.
Trois <i>mètres</i> d'école	maître [mɛ : tʁə]	[matʁə]
Trois <i>maîtres</i> d'étoffe	mètre [matʁə]	[mɛ : tʁə]

This indicates that length was irrelevant in the decoding process.

3. The absence (or deliberate distortion) of quantity distinctions in the use of the relevant minimal pairs in normal communication does not impair communicative efficiency. This is evident from informants intuition tapped by oral interviews and perception tests. Such tests consistently show that relevant semantic distinctions in minimal pairs (uttered without the length variable) are spontaneously selected by means of contextual cues. Thus for instance, target words in sentences like those in (i) below are decoded as in (ii) when delivered with or without length.

- | | |
|---|--------|
| i | ii |
| a) Le bébé marche à quatre pâtes* }
pattes } | pattes |
| b) { La pâte est fine
patte* } | pâte |

Conclusion

The results of this study (taken along with the findings of Léon (1972)) clearly undermine the validity of a phonemic status for vowel length in French. The once phonemic length is apparently no longer phonemic.¹² The absence of consistency in the production and perception of length distinctions makes it difficult to reasonably assign a phonemic status to length distinctions.

Even if we assigned a phonemic status to length, (real or imagined), it is nevertheless true that in the communication process, vowel length distinctions play a negligible role in distinguishing between minimal pairs with length as the putative variable (as shown by results in table 3).

It seems to be the case that the apparent length distinctions in French today, (for those who still realise vowel length distinctions) are essentially idiosyncratic, involving a series of words acquired automatically (by individuals) from the "milieu ambiant" without necessarily attaching a phonemic value to it. This would explain why its functional load fluctuates according to the origin of the speaker (recall that only P, from a Parisian middle class, demonstrated a *limit* degree of length productivity).

It follows from the foregoing that emphasis on drills aimed at phonemic length in French language pedagogy by textbook writers and language teachers is misplaced and indeed, unnecessary. Foreign language teaching, particularly foreign language in a multilingual setting, is already laden with myriads of inherent problems and need not be saddled with those issues that can be dispensed with.¹³ Once students learn the lexical and situational meaning of near-homophonous words of the type under consideration (*mètre-maitre bèle-belle* etc.), they would most likely interpret and use them correctly subsequently, on the basis of relevant syntactic and semantic cues.

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¹² It is historically true that length was phonemic in French and the set of words we are dealing with are apparently vestiges of the classical Latin quantity distinctions maintained through old French or else the remains of the loss of preconsonantal consonants which resulted in compensatory length for the preceding vowel /*ɛ*sta → *ɛː* : t/.

¹³ The problems of foreign language teaching have been treated at length by linguists and constitute the object of on-going research; for discussions of problems of French language teaching in Africa, see, for instance, Makouta Mboukou (1973) Chumbow (1971, 1974 and 1978) among others.

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