

Syllables Lost in Malagasy Possessives

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1. Introduction

Certain Malagasy nouns lose their final syllable in possessive constructions. In this squib, I show that these nouns all have the same stress pattern, and that similar nouns with different stress patterns do not undergo this change. On the basis of these stress patterns I provide a preliminary account of syllable loss in Malagasy, paying especial attention to the logically possible but unused alternatives to syncope.

2. Nouns with deletion

The favorite word of Malagasy field methods students is *sífaka* 'lemur'. The paradigm of *sífaka* includes *sífaku* 'my lemur' and *sífani* 'his/her lemur', where /-ku/ and /-ni/ are the common Malagasy clitics for first and third person singular possessives. *Sífaka*, then is a form that undergoes this final syllable loss. Other nouns that follow this pattern include: *námana* 'friend', *latábatra* 'table', and *zánaka* 'child'. Table 1 shows several forms of the relevant type.

	-ku	-náv	-ni	-náj	-ntsíka	-naréw
sífaka	sífaku	sífakáv	sífani	sífakáj	sífatsíka	sífakaréw
námana	námaku		námani			
latábatra	latábatru	latàbatráw	latábani			

Table 1: Possessed nouns with antepenultimate stress

The nouns that lose their final syllable all have antepenultimate stress. In *The Tonophobic Process of Coronal Neutralization in Malagasy*, I showed that words with stress on the antepenult have one of three final consonants: *n*, *k*, or the affricate *tr* (and possibly *m* as well). My theory about this non-natural class is

that it is a group of archetypal segments for each [\pm coronal] and [\pm nasal] combination. One might then wonder if it is these archetypes rather than the stress pattern that conditions the final syllable deletion. This is clearly not the case, however. The archetypes can all appear as the final consonant of words with penultimate stress as well and these words do not undergo final syllable deletion, as shown in Table 2.

	-ku	-náv	-ni	-náj	-ntsíka	-naréw
alíka	alíkaku		alíkani	alíkanáj	alíkantsíka	

Table 2: possessed nouns with penultimate stress

3. Preliminary Analysis

3.1. Identifying the Problem

Having seen this data, how is one to analyze it? As the metrical properties of a noun predict its behaviors when possessed, I propose that the analysis should be based on meter. The mere fact that Malagasy allows antepenultimate stress (with no following secondary stress) demonstrates that Malagasy tolerates lapses in stress, at least at the end of the word. It is this allowance for lapse that will shape this preliminary analysis.

When a word with penultimate stress like *alíka* 'dog' takes an affix like /-ku/, the result *a.lí.ka.ku* has a word final lapse, which is fine; otherwise there would not be words like *sí.fa.ka*. Suffixing *sífaka* with /-ni/, however, creates **sí.fa.ka.ni* with an extended lapse, which must be corrected. Likewise, the concatenation of /-náv/ onto *súruka* 'shoulder' results in **sù.ru.ka.náv*, which has a lapse in the middle of the word; this is also intolerable.

3.2. Repairing the Problem

There are many ways that these metrical dilemmas could be resolved. Perhaps the most painless way (for the word, that is) to resolve an extended lapse would be to add a stress to the middle syllable of the lapse, e.g. *sì.fa.ká.ku. In the case of a word-medial, non-extended lapse, additional stress on either syllable would create a stress clash.

A second possibility would be to merely delete one of the offending vowels. Indeed, this seems to be part of the solution that Malagasy employs in lapse resolution. As an example *námana* 'friend' with /-ku/ would be *ná.man.ku (either with or without nasal place assimilation). This solution is insufficient because this is the weak syllable environment identified in *The Tonophobic Process of Coronal Neutralization in Malagasy*. There are no consonant clusters in this position; only *tr*, *n*, and *k*. Moreover, Malagasy has a strict coda condition which allows only nasals homorganic to a following oral stop in the coda position.

The complete solution to the problem, then, is to both delete a vowel and then simplify the resulting cluster. There are non-trivial elements in both cases.

For the first step, a vowel must be chosen. To the best of my knowledge this is always the final vowel of the stem. In a sense it seems like Malagasy hedges its bets with faithfulness to stems and affixes; by deleting the final stem vowel, the cluster to be simplified contains a stem consonant and an affix consonant. Deleting the *u* of /-ku/ (e.g., *sí.fa.kak) would leave the deletion of the final *k* as

the only way to resolve the bad coda, in which case the possessive morpheme would completely fail to be realized. Deleting an earlier stem consonant would force the consonant deletion decision to choose between two stem consonants.

For the second step, compare *sùnⁿunáw* (from *súruka* and *náw*) with *sif^fakáw* (from *sífaka* and *náw*). In the first case *nk* is reduced to *n*, while it reduces to *k* in the second case. I do not have a strong explanation for this variance, but a direction to explore would be the place of articulation of the preceding consonant (marked in green above). In the first case the preceding consonant is coronal (as is the survivor) and in the second case the preceding consonant is grave (just like the survivor). As this is only based on two forms, it is quite likely a coincidence, but it is all I have got.

4. Conclusion

Malagasy words cannot get too long without additional stresses. The syllable at the end of a dactyl must deal with a highly restricted inventory, and nothing can follow a dactyl. Combined with the Malagasy resistance to adding stresses to a word, these facts make the phonology of suffixation quite complicated. In this paper, I have shown that in order to satisfy metrical requirements, possessed nouns in Malagasy lose a syllable. The easiest way to do this with Malagasy's massively open syllable structure is to sycopate a vowel, but that would create invalid consonant clusters. The solution that Malagasy employs, then, involves the syncope of both a consonant and a vowel.