

## Re: How many vowel lengths are there

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13 Sep 2004 23:40:53 -0700: ranjit\_mathews@yahoo.com (M. Ranjit Mathews): in sci.lang:

>A Hungarian who lived in France for a time said that he wouldn't spell  
>the French name Thoma with a long o. I was surprised by this because  
>in Malayalam, Thoma is spelt with a long o and the French  
>pronunciation sounds to me quite close to the Malayalam [t[OmA] spelt  
>with 2 long vowels <O> and <A>.

>

>How many vowel lengths are there in common use, according to  
>phoneticians?

Inifinitely many, to a phonetician. To a phonologist, the number is much more limited. E.g. one in French (or zero, which is the same thing in this sense, i.e. vowel length is not relevant), two in Hungarian.

>How many of these vowel lengths are considered short and  
>how many are considered long?

Depends on what role it plays in a given (variant of a) language.

When comparing languages, it start getting difficult. A Hungarian long vowel is longer than a Hungarian short vowel (and sometimes it also has a different timbre, in the case of a/á and e/é).

A Malayalam long vowel I suppose is longer than a Malayalam short vowel. And yet it is quite possible that a French vowel (of indifferent length, to French speakers) is perceived as long by a Malayalam speaker, and as short by a Hungarian speaker.

At the same time, perhaps a Hungarian speaker may perceive the length of Malayalam vowels correctly. Or maybe they do not.

Perhaps Malayalam is one of those languages that sound incredibly fast to my ears? (I don't know if I ever heard it, but I may have heard related languages). Perhaps is has short vowels and supershort vowels? Hungarian sounds relatively slow to me. That may explain the phenomenon.

sci.lang: Re: How many vowel lengths are there

I once had a theory that languages with few phonemes need to be spoken faster than languages with many, in order to obtain the same information density: in a language with few phonemes each of them is more predictable, so its actual occurrence carries fewer bits of information. But practical example don't support this: English, Hungarian and Portuguese have roughly the same number of phonemes, but only Portuguese sounds fast. Spanish has far fewer phonemes than Portuguese, but both sound very fast.

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