

Is Albanian losing its vowel length contrast? Evidence from children and adults

Conceição Cunha¹, Josiane Riverin-Coutlée¹, Enkeleida Kopia^{1,2} & Jonathan Harrington¹

¹Institute of Phonetics and Speech Processing, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

²Academy of Albanological Sciences

Albanian, an empirically understudied language, comprises two major dialects: Tosk and Gheg. Gheg, spoken in north and central Albania, has traditionally been described as containing vowel length contrasts, for example /plak/ vs. /pla:k/ ‘old man/old woman’ [1,2,4,6]. However, length contrasts have been reported to disappear [5, 7] as a consequence of the greater movement of individuals after communism in 1990.

Our aims are twofold: 1) to establish empirically whether contrastive length exists in Gheg; 2) to analyse whether there is any evidence for a loss of contrastive length via an apparent-time study. We start from the assumption that if length contrasts are disappearing, then they should be more reduced in child speech compared to adults [3].

Fifty-nine Albanian born monolinguals participated in a picture naming task: 22 adult caretakers (20 women; aged 38-74 years); 37 children (20 girls; aged 6-7 years). They were screened for dialect background and language impairment and were recorded locally. The participants were asked to name 23 images of relevant cultural objects presented on a laptop monitor. The instructions were to say the word as they would in their local, home environment. Each image was presented four times in a randomized and counterbalanced order, and each corresponded to a word featuring one of six stressed vowels, /i y u e o a/. Seventeen words belong to the “length” condition; 6 to the “non-length” condition. The acoustic analysis was performed in EMU-SDMS [8].

Figure 1 shows the results for adult and child speakers, per vowel and condition. The data shows a significantly greater duration of the lengthened vowels, for both adults and children ($F[1, 21.9]=5.7, p<0.05$). Length contrasts seem to be better preserved in some vowels than others (e.g., /i/ vs. /u/), which could be due to the phonetic environment and structure of the words uttered. Moreover, children produced significantly longer vowels ($F[1, 70.5]=12.9, p<0.001$). We interpret this as evidence that length contrasts are being maintained in Gheg: not only do adults maintain the distinction, so do children, albeit within another duration range.

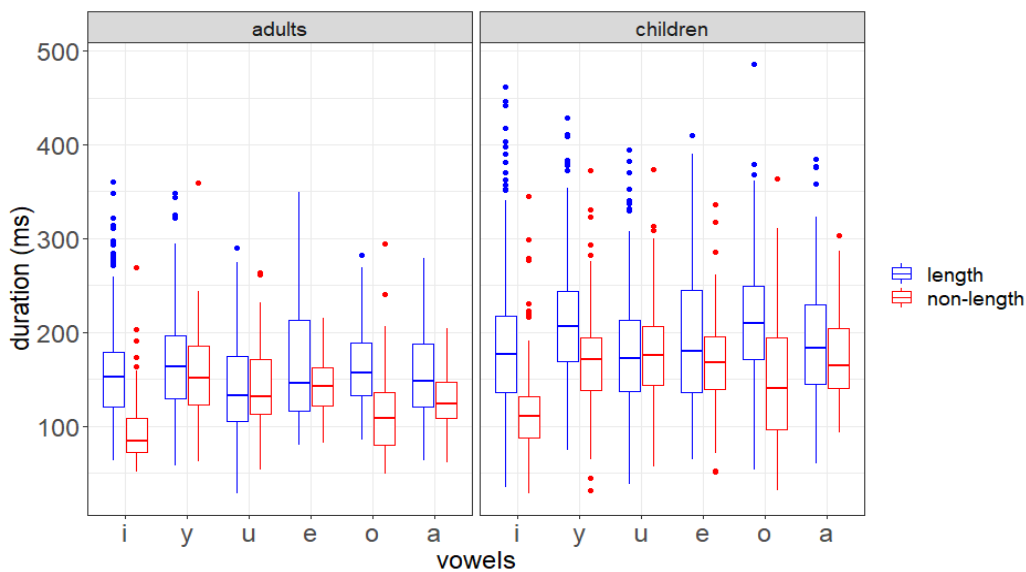


Figure 1. Vowel duration per group of speakers (children vs. adults) and condition (length vs. non-length)

References

- [1] Beci, B. (1995). *Të folmet veriperëndimore të shqipes dhe sistemi fonetik i të folmes së Shkodrës*. [Varieties of Northeastern Albanian and the phonetic system of the Shkodra variety] Akademia e Shkencave.
- [2] Gjinari, J., Beci, B., Shkurtaç, Gj., Gosturani, Xh., Dodi, A. (2007). *Atlasi Dialektologjik i Gjuhës Shqipe*. [Dialectological Atlas of Albanian Language] Università degli studi di Napoli L'Orientale, Dipartimento di studi dell'Europa orientale.
- [3] Labov, W. (1994). *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors* (Vol. 1). Blackwell.
- [4] Lloshi, Xh. (1999). Albanian. In U. Hindrichs (Ed.), *Handbuch der Südosteuropa-Linguistik*, (pp. 277–299). Harrassowitz Verlag.
- [5] Moosmüller, S., & Granser, T. (2006). The spread of standard Albanian: An illustration based on an analysis of vowels. *Language Variation and Change*, 18(2), 121–140.
- [6] Shkurtaç, Gj. (2004). *Etnografi e të folurit të shqipes*. [The Ethnography of speaking Albanian] SHBLU.
- [7] Topalli, K. (2007). *Fonetika historike e gjuhës shqipe* [Historical Phonetics of Albanian Language]. Akademia e Shkencave të Shqipërisë. Instituti i Gjuhësisë. Tiranë.
- [8] Winkelmann, R., Harrington, J., & Jänsch, K. (2017). *EMU-SDMS: Advanced speech database management and analysis in R*. *Computer Speech & Language*, 45, 392–410.