Re-examining the front vowels in Saulteaux Ojibwe: the case for the short /e/

The different dialects of Ojibwe are typically described as having an asymmetrical vowel inventory including long and short versions of /i, a, o/ but only a long /e:/ (Logan 2001, Valentine 2001, Cote 2012, among many others). Based on my fieldwork on Saulteaux Ojibwe in Manitoba, I show evidence for the short /e/.

In this paper, I aim to extend Piggot’s (1980) analysis of the Odawa vowel space. In contrast to his analysis, though, I propose /e/ is not an abstract phoneme because its faithful allophone [e] does surface. More specifically, I show that [e] is as an allophone of both underlying /e/ and /i/.

Piggot (1980) proposes a low level process of /i/ and /o/ lowering in Odawa yielding [ɛ] and [ʌ] respectively. I find evidence for the same /i/-lowering process in Saulteaux, though the allophone’s quality is that of [e] in (2) rather than [ɛ] in (1).

(1) **Odawa** (Piggot 1980: 105)  
   ni:mi-w ‘he dances’  
   [ni:me]  

(2) **Saulteaux Ojibwe**  
   awē:si ‘animal’  
   [awē:se]

The surface form [e] also appears elsewhere in the data (i.e. non-lowering environments), diverging from Piggot’s analysis of Odawa. See (3) for a few examples.

(3)  
   [peneːjːiː] ‘bird’  
   [mgjki:3i:k] ‘eye’  
   [nepe] ‘water’  
   [an enquang] ‘ANsg pass IN along’

There are two possible explanations for the other instances of [e] at the surface. Either, [e] is the result of another process (e.g. /i/-lowering or an /e/-shortening) or there is an underlying /e/ in Saulteaux. In my analysis thus far, I do not find a predictable distribution of [e] in terms of segmental environment, place in the metrical foot, foot position within the word, or syllable type (open vs. closed). An allophonic explanation therefore falls short. Moreover, [e] often appears in the same environments as [i] within the data, though I have been unable to find true minimal pairs as of yet. Consider (4), for example.

(4)  
   [miːniːfan] ‘berries’  
   [mensiondʒ] ‘hand’

In both ‘berries’ and ‘hand’ the vowels in question appear in the segmental environment m_n, in the weak position of the first iambic foot, and in an open syllable. Therefore, given the lack of predictable distribution and notable overlap, I propose that the best explanation is in fact an underlying /e/ that surfaces faithfully. In addition to this, the neutralizing process of /i/-lowering produces a surface form [e] word-finally.

To my knowledge the proposal for a phonemic /e/ is new for Saulteaux Ojibwe, but the idea has precedent given Piggot’s (1980) analysis of Odawa. Instead of an abstract /e/ to account for apparent “exceptionalism” in certain morphemes, however, I propose that this phoneme is not abstract and is distributed more widely throughout the language. In addition to being the more plausible explanation for the presence of [e] in the data above, the addition of /e/ eliminates the gap and imbalance in the Saulteaux vowel inventory providing a cleaner account of the phonological grammar.