Tetsót'iné Prefix Vowel Length: Evidence for Systematic Underspecification

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Tetsót'iné is a Dene (Athapaskan) language spoken in Canada's Northwest Territories. In Tetsót'iné prefixes, all long vowels are the result of intervocalic consonant deletion, though not all cases of intervocalic consonant deletion result in a long vowel. In this presentation I will examine three progressively more complex cases involving intervocalic consonant deletion and the resulting surface vowel length.

Tetsót'iné vowel length, like other areas of Dene phonology, is considerably complex. In the previous Dene linguistics literature, this type of complexity has been dealt with through morphological conditioning. All of the cases I will examine in this presentation are cases that seem to suggest morphological conditioning, but I will show that morphological conditioning is not required if we use certain independently motivated representational mechanisms (metrical phonology, feature geometry, level ordering). For ease of exposition, the analysis will be presented in rule-based Lexical Phonology, though I will briefly discuss a possible Stratal OT version of the proposal.