

The vowels of Majang

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Majang is a Nilo-Saharan language of the Surmic subfamily, spoken in western Ethiopia. The descriptions available so far do not agree about the vowel system of Majang. Bender (1983, p. 114) posits 6 vowels, whereas Moges (2007, p. 256) presents a fully fledged 10 vowel system. Unseth (2007, p. 628) instead proposes a 9-vowel inventory. None of the researchers identified an ATR-based vowel harmony, although this feature would be expected of a Surmic language. This paper will confirm Unseth's hypothesis of a nine-vowel inventory, and it will also present the rules of the ATR vowel harmony, which is indeed at work in the language. The key to analyzing the vowel harmony is the behavior of the neutral vowel /a/, which can follow both +ATR and -ATR vowels. However, if it is a short /a/, it is inherently +ATR; if it is a long /aa/, it is inherently -ATR. This correlation can be shown from measuring the formants of the respective vowels. Therefore, all vowels following a long /aa/ are of the -ATR set, whereas following a short /a/ only +ATR vowels can occur within the same word.