

## *On Cicero's fine-grained perception of prosodic features in Latin*

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### *Abstract*

The long tradition of philological and linguistic studies acknowledges the distinctive value of vowel length in Latin phonology, in agreement with the parallel assumption for ancient Indo-European languages.

However, thinking of Latin as a spoken language, and not only as a literary one, implies the adoption of a sociolinguistic perspective based on the idea of variation, at all levels of grammar. In this view, with due caution, it is possible to argue that vowel length was unstable *ab antiquo* in spoken Latin, at least in the low diaphasic and diastratic levels (Pulgram 1975; Vineis 1984; Giannini & Marotta 1989; Benedetti & Marotta 2014; Marotta 2015).

In this view, I shall analyse some passages by Cicero which are often interpreted as evidence in favour of the maintenance of contrastive vowel length in the phonological competence of Roman speakers. In these passages, Cicero compares the performance of orators in the *forum* to that of actors in theatre. This comparison is based on the fact that the phonetic and prosodic elements of the spoken language determine the success of the locutory act in both communicative contexts.

On the basis of a detailed analysis of the texts, it is legitimate to suppose that the whistles of the audience in theatre that Cicero mentions to us refer to prosodic errors concerning the length of the verse rather than that of the vowel. Therefore, these testimonies should not be considered evidence in favour of the fine-grained perception of vowel length by speakers of Latin.

### *Selected References*

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