

Usage of non-canonical forms in Colombian Spanish vowel sequences

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Although in citation form the articulation and syllabification of Spanish adjacent vowels as tautosyllabic (diphthong) or heterosyllabic (hiatus) is widely predictable, different studies report patterns of variability. Heterosyllabic sequences tend to be avoided and resolved via a variety of strategies including diphthongization, elision, coalescence, and epenthesis. Hiatus resolution is reported to be widely spread in Latin America (Frago Gracia, J. and M. Franco Figueroa 2001, Garrido 2013), however this phenomenon of phonological variation has been historically associated with social stigmatization (Alonso 1930). For example, hiatus sequences resolved via diphthongization (e.g. teatro > [tja.tro] 'theater') are generally described as characteristic of uneducated or lower social class speakers. Further evidence of the negative social evaluation given to some forms of hiatus resolution is the usage of hypercorrect forms, in which speakers, in an effort to avoid the stigmatized articulation, transform a canonical use of the word into a non-canonical hiatus sequence (e.g. monopolio (canonical) > monopoleo (hypercorrect) 'monopoly').

This paper analyzes speakers' attitudes and the reported usage of non-canonical forms resulting from hiatus resolution and hypercorrect forms in Colombian Spanish. Data were collected from a total of 150 participants aged between 18-30. Participants were asked to listen to a set of phrases and evaluate the correctness of each phrase on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being the least correct and 5 being the most correct). The evaluated phrases included cases of diphthongization, elision, epenthesis and hypercorrection.

Preliminary results suggest that the non-canonical pronunciation of Spanish hiatus sequences has a considerable degree of acceptability among young speakers. When grouped by hiatus resolution strategy, results show that the cases of elision received an average score of 2.85, followed by diphthongized forms with 2.57 and epenthesis with 2.34. On the other hand, cases of hypercorrection, which are generally explained as a reaction to the stigmatization associated with hiatus resolution, show a remarkable degree of acceptability as well, with a score of 2.36. Results also indicate that the acceptability of non-canonical forms vary from one lexical item to another (e.g. peor > [pjoɾ] with an average score of 1.35 vs. petróleo [pe'troljo] 'oil' with a score of 3.94). These findings provide evidence of the crucial role of social evaluation on the spreading of sound change. The degree of acceptability of the non-canonical forms discussed here is relevant to the study of phonetic/phonological variation as a process that may be motivated by internal forces, but is mediated by external factors at the speech community level. The usage and acceptability of a given form plays a determining role on its diffusion or retraction.

References

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