Devoicing and Deletion of Unstressed Final Vowels in São Paulo Portuguese

Ronald Beline Mendes (University of São Paulo) & James A. Walker (York University)

Among the features that serve to distinguish spoken European Portuguese (EP) and spoken Brazilian Portuguese (BP), one of the most salient is the treatment of unstressed vowels (Mateus & d'Andrade 2000). Although neutralized in different ways in both varieties, they are commonly devoiced or even deleted in EP. While these realizations have not previously been reported in BP, our casual observation of native speakers in São Paulo suggests that vowel devoicing and deletion is on the rise.

This paper reports on a systematic examination of the variable occurrence and conditioning of word-final unstressed vowels in spoken Portuguese in the city of São Paulo, with data taken from a sample of sociolinguistic interviews with 24 men and women recorded in 2011 (Mendes 2012). From these interviews, we extracted 1,748 tokens and coded them according to their phonetic realization and a series of linguistic and social factors: the vowel type ([i], [u], [a]), the preceding and following phonological context, the distance of the vowel from the preceding stressed syllable, and the sex, age-group, social class and neighbourhood of residence of the informant. In addition to analyzing a subsample of tokens acoustically using Praat (Boersma & Weeninck 2012), we assess the relative contribution of the above factors to devoicing through a mixed-effects multiple regression model (Johnson 2009), with the individual speaker and lexical item as random effects.

Results indicate that both devoicing and deletion are more frequent with [i] and [u] (the raised variants of /e/ and /o/, respectively) than with [a], and are favored with preceding voiceless consonants and following voiceless consonants or pauses. Devoicing also seems to be more common in the speech of men, although there are complex interactions between the social factors. These results, which parallel those obtained by Silva (1998) for EP, suggest that devoicing may be the first step toward deletion in BP.

References
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