

Deletion of /r/ in Andalusian Spanish: a Usage-based Approach

Studies on Andalusian Spanish claim that final /r/ is normally weakened or deleted in word-final position (*come[Ø]*, *muje[Ø]*), especially in Western Andalusia (Mena 1975, Carbonero 1982, Alvar 1988, Uruburu 1990, Carbonero 1992, Gordón 1994, Jiménez 1999, Carbonero 2003, Narbona et al. 2003, among others). Regarding word-internal /r/, these investigations have focused on the sequences /-rɫ/ and /-rn/ and have pointed out the following realizations: [r] (*deci[r]lo*, *ca[r]ne*), [h] (*deci[h]lo*, *ca[h]ne*), gemination (*deci[l.l]om ca[n.n]e*), and deletion (*deci [Ø]lo*, *ca[Ø]ne*). These studies, however, lack a theoretical basis and none of them has specifically examined or given a satisfactory account of this variable phenomenon. Sociolinguistic research on the linguistic and extralinguistic factors that influence deletion of /r/ in syllable-final position in this Spanish variety has been very limited.

In addition to a traditional sociolinguistic analysis of both the linguistic and social factors that variably affect the deletion of final /r/ in the Andalusian variety of Alcalá de Guadaíra (Seville), my study adopts a usage-based approach with the purpose of determining the role of lexical frequency in this phonological phenomenon. According to this model, frequency determines the phonological representations of words, creating similar exemplars and reinforcing the more frequent phonetic characteristics. My hypothesis is that variability in the deletion of /r/ in syllable-final position in this variety is not random or categorical but can be accounted for by the interaction of linguistic and social factors, as well as by the effect of lexical frequency. The data consist of 5,000 tokens taken from a corpus of approximately 24 hours of tape-recorded, sociolinguistic-style interviews conducted with 48 native speakers of this variety and were statistically analyzed with Goldvarb 2001. In the first part of the analysis several internal constraints (i.e. phonetic context, grammatical category, following and morphemic unit) and external constraints (i.e. age, education, and gender) were taken into consideration with the purpose of providing a general perspective of deletion of syllable-final /r/. The second part of the analysis focuses on the role of frequency in this variable phonological phenomenon: lexical frequency, frequency by grammatical category, and frequency by phonetic context.

The results show that four factors: phonetic context, grammatical category, age, and education, are relevant factors in the deletion of syllable-final /r/, which occurs more frequently before pause and obstruents, in infinitives and in the speech of the younger generation and of those with a low educational level. Regarding frequency, deletion tends to be more common in the most frequent grammatical category (infinitives) and in the most frequent phonetic context (pause and obstruents) in the corpus as well as in high frequency words. These results support previous research that shows that phonological change spreads from more frequent words or expressions and contexts to less frequent ones (Brown 2004, Alba 2005, Díaz-Campos 2005) and reveals that deletion of syllable-final /r/ in this Spanish variety follows the pattern of lexical diffusion and falls into the category of what Bybee (2001) has called “gradual and phonetically conditioned changes”: phonetically conditioned changes which are both lexical and phonologically gradual.

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