

Going, going, gone? Devoicing of unstressed final vowels in São Paulo Portuguese

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A salient difference between spoken European Portuguese (EP) and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is the phonetic realization of unstressed vowels (e.g. Mateus & d'Andrade 2000). Although neutralized in both varieties (though in different ways), devoicing and even deletion is common in EP (e.g. Silva 1998) and unreported in BP. However, our casual observation of native speakers in São Paulo suggests that vowel devoicing 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 & Oushiro 2012). From these interviews, we extracted a representative sample of tokens and coded them according to the voicing of the vowel 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 and social class 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.

Preliminary results indicate that devoicing is more frequent with [i] and [u] (the raised variants of /e/ and /o/, respectively) than with [a], and is favored with preceding voiceless consonants and following voiceless consonants or pauses. Devoicing also seems to be more common in the speech of men. Since these results parallel those obtained by Silva (1998) for EP, which also features vowel deletion, they raise the question of whether devoicing is the first step toward deletion. A more detailed examination of the distribution and conditioning of devoicing in apparent time will permit us to verify whether this is indeed a change in progress.

References

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