

No /n/ in Sight: Function and Stigma in Latin American Spanish

Michol Hoffman

The variable realization of word-final /n/ is one of the most studied features in Spanish sociolinguistics (e.g. Cedergren 1973, Terrell 1975, Poplack 1986, Lipski 1987). There are three principal variants: normative alveo-dental [n] (e.g. [orden] "order"); velar [N] ([ordeN]); and deletion of /n/ with nasalization of the preceding vowel ([ord~e]). Studies have revealed geographical and social constraints on the distribution of variants, but, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Poplack 1986), they typically do not go beyond a rudimentary exploration of the variable's phonological conditioning. More interestingly, while functional constraints on the aspiration and deletion of final /s/ have been the subject of much debate, the functional role of /n/ velarization and deletion has been less studied. The verbal suffix *-n* distinguishes singular from plural in the third person, e.g. *vive* "s/he lives" versus *viven* "they live".

In this paper I report on quantitative multivariate analysis of word-final (n) in Salvadorean Spanish in Toronto, Canada. The data (4230 tokens of /n/) are taken from sociolinguistic interviews with 30 English/Spanish bilingual youth. Linguistic constraints investigated include preceding phonological segment, following phonological segment, current syllable stress and grammatical function. Social constraints include sex, class and age of arrival in Canada. I also compare the distribution of variants across three styles: conversation, reading passage and word list.

Although the social constraints on velarization are weak, speakers from the highest socio-economic class are more likely to choose the velar variant. This result, combined with high rates of velarization in more formal styles suggests that, contrary to prior findings, velarization is not socially stigmatized in this community. Social constraints differ for deletion, with speakers with the latest ages of arrival (15-20 years old) and speakers from lower socio-economic groups favouring this variant. There are few instances of this latter variant in the more formal styles.

The linguistic factors show somewhat different conditioning for velarization and deletion. Place of articulation of the following consonant, as one might expect, exhibits a strong articulatory effect on velarization, with labials and alveolars disfavouring the velar variant and velars, following vowels and pauses favouring. In contrast, manner of articulation is the strongest factor conditioning deletion: continuants favour deletion and stops disfavour. The results for grammatical function are contrary to expectations: verbs favour deletion and monomorphemes disfavour. Moreover, the presence or absence of an overt subject is not significant. These findings contradict a functional hypothesis, which predicts that absence of plural marking would disfavour deletion and encourage disambiguating information.

Thus, this study shows that, contrary to findings for final (s), there are no functional or syntactic constraints on the conditioning of final (n) in this community. I argue that these results derive from the relatively low social salience of (n) in a multidialectal, multilingual context.

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