

**Speaking Spanish with Style:
(s) Deletion in Argentine Spanish and Labov's Decision Tree**

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The variable aspiration and deletion of /s/ in word-final position is a prevalent (though stigmatized) feature of most varieties of Spanish. As is standard in variationist analysis, previous studies (e.g. Cedergren 1973, Weinberg 1974, Sonou de los Rios 1980, among others) have investigated the stylistic conditioning of /s/ deletion by supplementing sociolinguistic interviews (casual speech) with reading style, word lists and minimal pairs (careful speech). However, Labov (1966, 2001) developed other methods for identifying stylistic variation, such as using contextual criteria and channel cues to identify less self-monitoring. Recently Labov (2001) has proposed the Decision Tree (DT) as a methodological tool to distinguish casual and careful speech within the same interview.

This paper reports on an analysis of stylistic constraints on variable /s/ deletion in the Spanish of Corrientes, Argentina. Over 4,000 tokens of word-final /s/ were extracted from 12 sociolinguistic interviews conducted in the summer of 2002. The subjects, all native speakers of Corrientes Spanish, were selected on the basis of their membership in different social categories, and were recruited using the "friend of a friend" technique (Milroy 1987).

For each token, I noted whether /s/ was retained, aspirated or deleted, and coded for a number of linguistic and social factors. Labov's DT was used to categorize each of the tokens according to degree of formality. A first concern is the methodological difficulties in applying the DT (cf. Baugh 2001), since the contextual criteria represent a mixture of two considerations: 1) topic, such as "language", "kids", etc., and 2) discourse/genre/interaction, such as "direct response", "narrative", "group" and "tangent". This mixture often makes it difficult to classify tokens exclusively. In addition, a large portion of the tokens falls into the "residual" category.

Multivariate analysis using GoldVarb 2001 (Robinson, Tagliamonte & Lawrence 2001) shows that the degree of formality is selected as significant, with retention favoured in careful speech and deletion in casual speech. However, the range of effect between careful and casual speech is not as wide as we would expect, given the highly stigmatized nature of /s/ deletion. A finer-grained analysis of casual and careful speech shows that their constituents do not behave uniformly. For example, narratives show the least deletion among casual categories. The "residual" category shows a high probability of deletion, suggesting that it may itself be composed of more casual categories (as Labov (2001) himself noted). Labov (2001) suggests developing the DT further, rather than changing its configuration.

The results of this analysis call for a finer distinction of subcategories in the DT, which would avoid the aggregation of categories of different stylistic natures. In addition, coding the elements of the DT into two factor groups would help to extricate the effects of topic from those of discourse or interaction.

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