

## **Phonological Variation in Multi-dialectal Italy: distinguishing /e/ from /ɛ/**

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Inquiry into the conditioning and interpretation of linguistic variation may be complicated by diglossia or proximity to regional dialect boundaries in the community under study. Despite the existence of an acknowledged standard, local dialects remain in use in Italy. Most Italians claim at least passive knowledge of one. Regional Italian, the variety spoken natively by most Italians, takes Standard Italian as its model but varies in lexicon and phonology due to the influence of local and regional dialects. Studies on Italian frequently label variation as performance error or free variation, attribute it to dialect mixing or creolization or, occasionally, acknowledge it as an inherent property of language. Some of the resulting models account for variation by positing several or many dialects in a community of speakers who switch rapidly among them. In contrast, this study evaluates the generality of the approach that acknowledges inherent variation by applying it to a situation characterized by long standing dialect contact, the Regional Italian spoken in the city of L'Aquila, Abruzzo. L'Aquila sits near a dialect boundary (Giammarco 1979) and acts as a local center of attraction. Speakers are commonly diglossic, controlling both local dialect and Regional Italian. To understand the interaction of these varieties, this work began with reviews of the relevant linguistic history and the current structure of Italian and local dialects and with detailed observation of the speech community. Sociolinguistic interviews of 35 Aquilani, selected from a total of 75, were completely transcribed, time aligned and sampled to ensure that tokens were balanced across linguistic and social environments. Over 7000 tokens were selected and analyzed acoustically to measure F1-F3 at positions in the stressed vowel that captured their central tendency. F1 and F2 were analyzed statistically and correlated with linguistic and extralinguistic factors including several peculiar to this community, for example the effect of domicile within or outside the city walls. The current work will report on a subset of the findings. Specifically /e/ Height is a stable sociolinguistic marker; residents of the city center and members of higher socioeconomic classes use higher variants. /ɛ/ Lowering is a change in progress, lead by young women, which increases the distance in phonological space between the open and closed mid vowels. Taken together, the apparent time data on /e/ and /ɛ/ present some of the features of a near merger in the process of being undone. However, at the moment, there is not enough data on the historical distinction between the two in Regional Italian or their perception among contemporary speakers and the phonological status of /e/ and /ɛ/ is not without controversy. In any case, it has become clear that Regional Italian in this community obeys the principles identified during the last 40 years of the quantitative study of linguistic variation and that a model admitting inherent variation within a small number of dialects is most appropriate.

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