

Sociolinguistic Correlates and Phonetic Characteristics Of Unstressed Vowel Reduction in Cusco, Peru

Ann Marie Delforge
University of California, Davis

Unstressed vowel reduction (henceforth UVR), a continuum of weakening processes ranging from shortening to devoicing and elision, is a salient feature of Andean Spanish (Lipski 1990, Gordon 1980, Hundley 1986). However, little is known about the relationship of speakers' age, gender, and social class with the tendency to exhibit UVR in the Andean region. Furthermore, as previous studies do not provide instrumentally-based descriptions of UVR, the phonetic profile of the phenomenon has yet to be thoroughly delineated. The current study examines correlations between speaker characteristics and UVR in Cusco, Peru based on sociolinguistic interviews with 90 men and 90 women, constituting a sample stratified for age and socioeconomic status. Spectrographic analysis is used to establish the phonetic characteristics of unstressed vowel reduction.

Preliminary results of multivariate analysis based on 2 minute-long samples extracted from interviews with 72 participants (23,040 unstressed vowels, 1,273 reduced) suggest that, while UVR may once have been a relatively neutral characteristic of Cusco Spanish, it has become stigmatized in recent years and is now rapidly receding. UVR is prevalent in the speech of speakers over forty-five from all social classes. However, as reduction rates are lower for women (5.8% versus 9.79% for men), middle class women exhibit the lowest rate in this age group (3.28%) and UVR occurs less frequently in text reading than in conversation, it appears that the phenomenon has non-standard connotations even for these speakers. Middle and lower class speakers in their thirties and early forties exhibit the same rates of UVR as older informants but the phenomenon virtually disappears from the speech of upper-middle class participants from this age range (1.2%). Younger speakers rarely exhibit UVR (2.1%) regardless of their social status.

As agrarian reforms abolishing the Peruvian hacienda system were instituted in 1969, wealthier speakers between 30 and 45 are the first generation from their social class to grow up in the absence of significant contact with rural Spanish and Quechua due to lengthy stays on country estates. They are also the first generation to have extensive contact with the more prestigious Spanish of coastal Peru due to the availability of mass media and improved transportation. These unique aspects of their linguistic experience are likely causes of the low rates of UVR in their speech. Younger speakers' avoidance of UVR may be attributable to increasing opportunities for higher education and social mobility in Cusco.

Spectrographic analysis indicates that devoicing is by far (80%) the most frequent phonetic outcome of UVR and that the process is similar to vowel devoicing documented in a variety of other languages including Japanese, Korean and Modern Greek. However, while high vowels are the primary targets of devoicing in most languages, the low and mid-vowels are also affected in Cusco Spanish. A variety of

evidence suggests that this unusual pattern follows from the frequency of voiceless coronal consonants in Spanish and the articulatory characteristics of coda /s/ in this dialect.