Phonological Differences Across Varieties of Latin American Spanish

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ABSTRACT: Latin America is a diverse linguistic landscape, evident in the extensive phonological variations within its dominant language, Spanish. This study explores the phonological diversity across Latin American Spanish dialects, including processes such as lateralization and weakening of the /ɾ/ and /l/ phonemes, elisions and reductions of the /s/ consonant, and changes in nasal sounds (/n/, /m/, and /ɲ/) within specific linguistic contexts. Understanding these linguistic differences fosters a fresh perspective on Latin Americans from diverse backgrounds. The study considers demographic and socioeconomic factors that shape these variations and their connection to shared historical and cultural aspects. Information from online corpora and previous studies on Latin American Spanish phonology identifies repetitive phonological processes, comparing them across dialects to determine commonalities and differences. Understanding these phonological processes is critical for dispelling stigmas and contributing to bilingual education, mainly in regions where Spanish is learned as a second language. Educators exposed to the diversity of Latin American Spanish can create inclusive learning environments that accommodate students from various backgrounds and dialects.

KEYWORDS: Latin America, Spanish, dialects, phonological diversity, language variation, bilingual education

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Latin America is a rich and diverse region reflected in the wide variety of phonological differences exhibited in their majority language, Spanish.[1] Phonological varieties that differ across Latin American Spanish dialects include lateralization and weakening experienced by phonemes /ɾ/ and /l/,[2] elisions and reduction /s/ undergoes[3] and changes nasals, /n/, /m/, and /ɲ/, experience in specific environments.[4] The different phonological processes introduced in this paper are often used to stigmatize specific demographics. Gaining a deeper understanding of these common linguistic differences enables us to attain a fresh perspective toward Latin Americans of various backgrounds and encourages us to be sensitive toward dialectal differences and celebrate them. Research on this topic is essential to highlight variations within regions while considering the demographic and socioeconomic factors of the regions' key shared historical and cultural aspects. Thoroughly understanding different varieties of Spanish is essential– not only to avoid stigmas but to contribute to bilingual education in areas where Spanish is shared as a second language. Educators being exposed to Spanish from various Latin American regions encourages them to be sensitive, accommodate students of different backgrounds and dialects, and help them feel comfortable in the learning environment. Various changes have been adopted in the field of education, reflecting competing perspectives on the role that education should play in shaping the future of society. This paper aims to discover different phonological processes in Latin American Spanish and unveils how these cultural variations manifest within phonological systems among these regions. This ties into the existing field of phonology as it gives us a deeper insight into the dialects and phonological differences within multiple Latin American languages. Different regions, statuses, and education levels are all factors that alter the way one may produce a language. Like with any linguistic change, socioeconomic status, age, and gender must be considered to expand our understanding of Latin American Spanish fully. The phonological processes of lateralization, reduction, elisions, and weakening, as well as the environments of nasals, exhibit variations across Latin American Spanish. Furthermore, there are several common phonological processes within these varieties.

Method and Materials

The primary data presented in this paper comes from various online corpora and previous papers written on phonological phenomena in Latin America. Repetitive phonological processes that appear throughout each variety's transcriptions from the obtained data are identified and analyzed. Within each identified data is a comparison and contrast of the phonological processes, observing any similarities and differences.

Neutralization and Elision of Coda /ɾ/ and /l/

In Latin American Spanish, /l/ and /ɾ/ in the coda position are susceptible to weakening processes. The coda position is the most vulnerable component of the syllable, which influences the weakening and deletion of these phonemes.[5]

Elision of Final /ɾ/ in Verb Infinitives -eɾ Endings and Nouns with Final /ɾ/

There are various ways in which the phonemes /ɾ/ and /l/ may undergo a phonological process. It is typical for final /ɾ/ to undergo complete elision in regions of Cuba, the Caribbean coast of Colombia, and regions of Panama.[6] These changes are prominent in verb infinitives with -er endings or nouns with a final /ɾ/ following a stressed vowel.[7] An example of this can be seen with the infinitive *caminar* 'to walk', /ka.mi.naɾ/ → [ka.mi.na]. The final /ɾ/ in the coda position in this infinitive is weak and therefore is susceptible to total deletion. The same can be seen with the noun *poder* 'power', /po.déɾ/ → [po.dé]. The noun ends with a final /ɾ/ in the coda position and is preceded by a stressed vowel, thus resulting in total elision of the /ɾ/.

Lateralization of /ɾ/ in Coda Position, Word-Final, and Word-Internal

In Puerto Rico and other Caribbean Spanish dialects, a typical phonological process is the lateralization of /ɾ/ in the coda position or a word-final position.[8] An example of the lateralization of /ɾ/ can be demonstrated with *comer* (to eat), /ko.méɾ/ → [ko.mél]. The /ɾ/ found in the word-final position is lateralized and becomes an [l]. The lateralization of /ɾ/ is also found internally. For example, in the

phrase *arte* 'art', /aɾ.té/→ [al.té]. The /ɾ/ in the coda position found in the first syllable is lateralized to [l]. The word-internal combination of /ɾd/ is commonly seen to weaken to a simple [l]. For instance, the phrase *ordenar* 'to order' is modified from /oɾ.de.náɾ/ to [o.le.nál].[9] In this example, two different lateralizations can be observed: the word internal combination of [ɾd] is lateralized to [l], and the final /ɾ/is also lateralized. Since /ɾ/ appears to exist in specific environments that /l/ appears in without changing the meaning of the word, they are allophones of the same phoneme and are therefore in complementary distribution. It is important to note that, like with all phonological processes, there are exceptions to these rules. Whenever an /ɾ/ that would typically undergo lateralization precedes an /l/, the phonological process is not triggered to maintain clarity in the sentence.[10] In a phrase like *comprar los* 'buy them', [kom.pɾaɾ.lo]/, the /ɾ/ might seem like it will undergo lateralization, but because it immediately precedes an /l/, the final /ɾ/ is excluded from the process.

Weakening of Coda /ɾ/ and /l/ to Semivocalic [i̯]

Similarly to how /l/ appears to be an allophonic variant of /ɾ/, semivowel [i̯] in the north of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico regions also shares this property.[11] The /ɾ/ and /l/ in the coda position may be weakened and experience vocalization as the semivowel [i̯].[12] An example of this can be seen with the word *comer* 'to eat', /ko.meɾ/ → [ko.mei̯]. The /ɾ/ in the word-final coda position is weakened through vocalization as pronounced as [i̯]. A similar process can be seen in *algo* 'something', /al.go/ → [ai̯.go]. The /l/ in the word-internal coda position is vocalized as [i̯] due to reduction. However, there are exceptions to this phonological process. This weakening process is excluded due to resyllabification when the /ɾ/ is word-final and prevocalic.[13] This exclusion is exemplified with the phrase *comer algo* 'eat something', [ko.me.ɾal.go], since the word-final /ɾ/ appears before the vowel /a/, it does not become the semivowel [i̯]. Despite this exception appearing in Puerto Rico, there are parts of the Dominican Republic where this exclusion does not apply. The weakening process does not occur when the final /ɾ/ or /l/ is prevocalic and occurs in an unstressed determiner (as quoted by Lipski, 2011).[14] This is demonstrated in the phrases, él encontró and

el encuentro. The /l/ in the phrase *él encontró* 'he found' /el.en.kon.tro/ becomes reduced and is vocalized, producing [eḭ.en.kon.tro]. Yet, *el encuentro* 'the finding' [e.len.kwen.tro] will not undergo the phonological process since /l/ belongs to an unstressed clitic marker and precedes a vowel, thus, remaining unchanged.

Gemination of a voiced obstruent following /ɾ/ or /l/

A process commonly occurring in Cuba is the gemination of a voiced obstruent following /ɾ/ or /l/.[15] For example, in the word *largo* 'long', /laɾ.go/ → [lag.go] or the word *salgo* 'I am going out', /sal.go/ → [sag.go]. Since a voiced obstruent follows the /ɾ/ and /l/ demonstrated, they undergo elision and are replaced by a geminate of the obstruent. In Colombia and the Caribbean regions, there is a weaker version of this process where /ɾ/ and /l/ are glottalized and, therefore, only partially geminated.[16] This process could be exemplified by the words *largo* 'long', /laɾ.go/ → [laʔ.go] and *salgo* 'I am going out', /sal.go/ → [saʔ.go]. The /ɾ/ and /l/ are partially preserved before the voiced obstruents /g/ but do not undergo complete gemination since they become glottalized.

Variation in the Phonological Processes of /s/

Among the most variable elements of Spanish phonology is the manner of the /s/ phoneme - how it acts differently in various regions of Latin America is one of the most helpful parameters in defining regional accents. Dialects spoken in the Caribbean, Central America, and regions of South America all feature a decrease in the /s/ consonant in Spanish.[17] This phonological characteristic further contributes to the rich diversity of Spanish accents across the continent.

/s/ Weakening in Word-Internal and Word-Final Contexts

The consonant /s/ in terms like e*s*to 'this', mi*s*mo 'same', i*s*la 'island'[18] might be preserved or omitted, depending on the context. If preserved, it might appear as either an aspirated [h] or a sibilant [s].[19] Word-internal and word-final contexts also exhibit /s/ weakening, as

seen in *casta* 'caste', /kás.ta/ → [káh.ta] or in *los gatos* 'the cats', /los.gá.tos/ → [loh.gá.toh].[20] The number of syllables in a word determines whether the final /s/ is deleted when verbalized. For instance, one-syllable words partially preserve the /s/ as either an aspirated /h/ or the sibilant /s/.[21] In multi-syllable words, dropping the /s/ is increasingly common. The choice of [h] or [s] depends on the word's phonetic context. The aspirated variant is more prone when the phoneme is followed by a consonant, exemplified in the phrase *dos mangos* 'two mangoes', /dos maŋ.gos/ → [doh maŋ.gos]. In this phrase, the final /s/ in *dos* is influenced by the following consonant /m/, which makes it susceptible to the aspirated /s/ variant, [h]. The decision varies among Spanish speakers when a vowel follows the /s/. In the Caribbean, speakers tend to produce an aspirated [h].[22] For example, in the sentence *vamos al cine* 'we are going to the movie theater, /va.mos al ci.ne/ → [va.moh al ci.ne].[23] The coda /s/ in [vamos] aspirates to [vamoh]. However, the /s/ remains sibilant when followed by an unstressed vowel or the first modifier in a noun phrase, ex: *los huracanes* 'the hurricanes', *las otras* 'the others'.[7] Throughout Latin America, /s/ aspiration might sound different. The use of simple aspiration [h] before consonants in the codas of syllables is the most common variant.[1] Glottalization before tonic vowels can be rendered by aspiration in the word-final prevocalic position, such as *los ojos* 'the eyes', /lo.so.jo/ → [lo.ʔo.jo].[24]

Gemination of Voiceless Plosives Following /s/ in Coda Position

Aspiration can also elicit gemination before voiceless plosives /p/, /t/, /k/.[25] An /s/ in an internal preconsonantal position may experience elision and be replaced by a geminate of the consonant.[26] This can be seen with *busca* 'search', /bus.ka/ → [buk.ka]. The /s/ in the coda position is deleted by the /k/ and is replaced by a second [k] through gemination. Another variation of this process can be the elision of the /s/, replaced by aspiration with a geminate of the following consonant.[27] This can be exemplified with *busca* 'search', /bus.ka/ → [bu^{h}k.ka]. The coda /s/ is once again deleted and replaced with aspiration and a geminate of /k/, making it [^{h}k].[28] Lastly, a variation of this process can be seen with /s/ weakening through aspiration in the gemination process with the

word *busca* ‘search’, /bus.ka/ → [buh.ka]. The coda /s/ does not experience complete deletion but is instead weakened during gemination as aspiration.

Variation in the Phonological Processes of Nasals

It is common for many regions across Latin America to vary in the articulation of the nasals /n/, /m/, and /ɲ/. The geographic region of the speakers and the environment of these nasals establishes their behaviour in pronunciation.

Elision of Word-Final Nasal and Nasalization of the Preceding Vowel

A typical phonological process is the elision of a word-final nasal and the nasalization of its preceding vowel. This is common in coastal regions of South America, the Caribbean, and Central America.[29] An example of this phonological process can be seen with the phrase *aqui están* ‘here they are’, /a.ki e.stan/ → [a.ki e.estã]. The /n/ in the word-final position is deleted and appears to influence the nasalization of its preceding vowel, /a/. This process affects nasals in a word-final context as well as those in a word-internal prevocalic coda position.[30] This can be exemplified with *pansa* ‘stomach’, /pan.sa/ → [pã.sa]. The /n/ in the prevocalic coda position is deleted and is instead represented by the nasalization of its preceding vowel [ã]. However, this nasal velarization does not occur if the nasal occurs in a syllable onset position.[31] This exception occurs in the word *cenar* ‘to dine’, the /n/ in the syllable onset will stay unaffected. It will continue being [se.nar] as opposed to [sẽ.ar].

Nasalization Before Frication and in Prepausal Contexts

Furthermore, nasals are vulnerable to effacement before a fricative. During nasal effacement, a nasal that appears before a fricative is elicited, and its preceding vowel is nasalized.[32] This process is conveyed in the phrase *comformar* ‘to be in agreement’, /com.foɾ.maɾ/ → [cõ.foɾ.maɾ]. The nasal /m/ follows the fricative /f/, which causes elision of the nasal and influences the preceding /o/ to become nasalized as [õ]. Nasal velarization may also occur in prepausal vocalic transitions. A ‘prepausal window’ is a cue used in

discourse when a speaker's speaking turn is about to end.[33] The articulation of speech during this wind-down may become naturally drawn out, specifically vowels, which can make preceding intervocalic nasals and word-final nasals susceptible to reduction.[34]

Hypercorrection with nasals and /s/

Within Latin America, hypercorrection is prevalent. Hypercorrection may occur because speakers are aware of the stigmatization of specific phonological processes and, as a result, may overcorrect themselves.[35] The hypercorrection process can be seen with the /s/ and /n/ phonemes since they are commonly elicited in Latin American speech. This means speakers may place these consonants in environments that are usually deleted or weakened.[36] This phenomenon can be exhibited with the word *mucho* 'a lot', /mu.t͡ʃo/ → [mun.t͡ʃo]. Although there was not originally an /n/ in this environment, the speakers overcorrected themselves by adding the nasal [n] in front of the affricate [t͡ʃ], where it would usually experience elision. Another example of this hypercorrection, the insertion of /s/, is observed by Haulde et. al. This can be seen with *fino* 'fine', /fi.no/ → [fis.no]. This word does not originally contain an /s/, but a speaker who typically exhibits /s/ deletion may hypercorrect by adding an [s] in the coda position, where it is usually deleted.

Discussion

Spanish across the vast regions of Latin America varies substantially, and factors such as gender, age and socioeconomic background can be responsible for phonological variations.

Research indicates that the retention or deletion of final /s/ can be affected by the gender of the speaker.[37] As presented in the '*Variation in the Phonological Processes of /s/'* section, many variants of the /s/ articulation are exemplified due to the flexibility afforded by the last syllable environment. The sibilant [s] is more commonly produced by women, whereas its weaker versions, such as [h], are more common among men. In the three modes of communication (informal speaking, reading aloud, and impromptu conversation), men of all

socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to minimize -/s/ in the word-final position than women.[38] Increased -/s/ production for women is a sign of prestige and high socioeconomic status, while the elision and weakening of /s/ is prominent in the speech of women of lower-middle socioeconomic class.[39] Male speakers with less formal education may potentially experience a weakening of the /s/ sound as well.[40]

To a large extent, /s/ weakening is determined by a person's level of education and socioeconomic background. For instance, most Cuban-Havana Spanish speakers retain sibilants at high levels of education, whereas those with lower levels of education tend to delete them.[41] Those with more formal education are increasingly likely to be exposed to standardized Spanish. Illiteracy is pervasive in Spanish-speaking countries and can be due to factors such as impoverishment, inaccessibility to proper education/resources, rural conditions, isolation of indigenous communities and more.[42] Furthermore, individuals in differing Latin American regions have their own opinions and beliefs on the role of phonological articulation, establishing prestige. Younger speakers in areas like San Juan view the phenomena of speakers of Puerto Rican Spanish articulating /l/ instead of /r/ as a result of being 'uneducated' or as a 'bad habit' exhibited by lower-class people.[43]

Additionally, understanding Latin America's rich history and culture can promote positive views toward diverse languages and civilizations. It is vital to investigate how phonological varieties in Latin American Spanish dialects differ among regions as it enables us to understand different types of Spanish. This can contribute to bilingual education in areas such as the southern United States, where there are many Hispanic immigrants. Educators being more conscious of different Latin American backgrounds and dialects can allow immigrant students to feel more comfortable in their new learning environments. Not only does this help to understand these students, but it can also serve as an opportunity to teach their peers to accept other varieties of Spanish they may not have ever been exposed to and avoid stigmatization. Fostering a welcoming and educational environment is effective while preserving the heritage and celebrating their culture and background.

Notes

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