

## Change in Progress or Allophonic Variation? Unstressed Medium Vowels in Western Catalan

### Introduction and aim of the study

The importance of distinguishing linguistic behavior conditioned by space, time, sociocultural aspects and communicative situation, is a constant in the linguistics literature together with recognition that these variables give rise to both constant and variable phenomena. The study presented here sets out to analyze the realization of unstressed vowels written <e> and <a> to examine if there is a change in progress or an allophonic variation. It takes place in two towns located in the North-East of the Iberian Peninsula: a rural locality of 2,800 inhabitants (Alguaire) and a city with 120,000 inhabitants (Lleida), which is the cultural and linguistic irradiating center for all the surrounding villages. In these towns, Lleidatà (Ll), a variety of Western Catalan, is spoken.

### Methodology

72 Ll speakers were studied: 36 from Alguaire and 36 from Lleida. Their ages ranged from 3 to 70 and were of different gender, instruction, knowledge of written Catalan and sociocultural status. A one-answer-only question set was carried out to determine vowel variation in unstressed position in 21 lexical forms (7 written with <a>, such as *d<a>vantat* ‘apron’, and 14 with <e>, such as *cal<e>ndari* ‘calendar’). The lexical entries present formal differences, such as phonic context, stressed vowel, etymology, etc. These vowels have a low frequency of occurrence in Catalan, so I used a one-answer-only questionnaire to obtain a significant sample of them in non-directed speech. The statistical analysis of the data collected in this study was performed using the program Goldvarb X.

### Results and conclusions

The use of unstressed vowel [a] splits the set of words used in the study into two groups: 1) words with the unstressed vowel written <e> and 2) words with the unstressed vowel written <a>.

In the words written with <e>, the unstressed vowel [a] has a higher probability of being used in Alguaire (0.72) than in Lleida (0.53). Furthermore, it seems that the use of [a] is more related to particular lexical units rather than linguistic variables. As for the social variables, in both places the use of [a] is often connected with little knowledge of written Catalan and a low academic level. Also, age is a crucial variable in explaining this initial change in progress: a) younger speakers, who know how to write in Catalan, adapt their speech to the written forms (in this case, vowel [e]); b) middle age speakers, who have a different knowledge of written Catalan and different level of instruction use both [a] and [e] vowels, this group is where the phonetic change begins; c) older speakers are accustomed to speaking in the traditional way and most frequently use vowel [a].

In the words written with <a>, the results obtained from Alguaire and Lleida are quite similar and are determined by the position of the unstressed vowel: 1) in the unstressed initial position (as in *davantat*) the use of [a] is low (0.21 in Alguaire and 0.31 in Lleida); 2) in unstressed medial position (as in *arracades* ‘earring’) the use of [a] alternates with [e] (0.61 in Alguaire and 0.50 in Lleida). Other linguistic factors such as number of syllables, stressed vowel and analogy with other words written with <e> are also important. As for the social factors, there is little connection between the use of vowel [a] and age or instruction.