

On-going sound change in the Catalan of Barcelona:

Differences across districts

The influence of Spanish on Catalan phonology has been described as some general tendencies for certain typically Catalan sounds to disappear, and to be replaced by Spanish ones. This paper focuses on a detailed description of the kind of changes taking place in segmental production. In order to study such a sound change, Catalan vowels that do not exist in Spanish (i.e., /ɛ/, /ɔ/ and [ə]) and the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ in initial and intervocalic position have been analyzed when produced by Catalan speakers of three different age groups: G1 (3-5 year olds), G2 (19-23 year olds) and G3 (32-40 year olds) in 2 areas of Barcelona (Gràcia-Eixample and Nou Barris). The two areas were selected because of their ranking in the linguistic census of 2006 (IDESCAT 2006). Gràcia and Nou Barris are almost at either end of the continuum for Catalan proficiency. Eixample's results, although being in an intermediate position between the other districts in the ranking, show that production there is similar to that in Gràcia. Therefore, we pooled the data from Gràcia and Eixample together and consider them a single group.

The production of these segments was both auditorily and acoustically analyzed. First, two native speakers of Catalan listened to the data and provided a transcription of the target segments. Then, in the case of the vowels, the segments that were considered to be good exemplars of the target segment by the Catalan speakers were compared to the vowel that exists both in Spanish and Catalan, which is claimed to be used instead of the Catalan vowel (i.e., /e/ for /ɛ/, /o/ for /ɔ/, and /a/ for [ə]). In the case of the fricative, the auditory analysis was not as straightforward as for vowels and, therefore, a combination of both the auditory and acoustic analysis helped us discern which segments were target-like from the non-target-like ones.

Our analyses led to clear-cut results: whereas adults showed a similar production across districts, the two youngest generations showed significant differences across districts. The children and youngsters in Gràcia-Eixample produce all these segments significantly more often in a target-like manner than their corresponding age groups in Nou Barris. As far as the acoustic analysis of the vowels is concerned, the two vowels /ɛ/-/e/ produced by the children in Nou Barris are very similar to one another in terms of F1 and F2 values. That is, F1 and F2 values hardly show any differences between both vowels in this pair, which lead us to conclude that this is the clearest example of a change in apparent time in the Catalan spoken in Barcelona. All things remaining equal, we could predict that in the near future the merged production could persist in Nou Barris, the highly Spanish-influenced district, and the contrast would not be maintained in the speech of older generations there, in spite of the fact that these speakers are instructed in Catalan at school because pronunciation is mostly ignored by the partakers of the Catalan normalization. Thus, the differences across districts are likely to increase and grow stronger.

Reference:

- IDESCAT (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya). 2006. 'Societat: llengua'. <http://www.idescat.net/cat/societat/soclleng.html>, December 13, 2006.