

To be or not to be nasal: a Case Study of Basque

This poster will report work in progress which has two main aims: (1) to identify a developing sound change in Basque — the addition of nasal vowels to the phonemic inventory of Eastern varieties— age being the independent variable in informal conversational data collected from Basque speakers, and (2) to examine alternative patterns which may be indicative of change in the future.

Language variation can mark stable class differences or stable sex differences in communities, but it can also indicate instability and change. When it marks change, the primary social correlate is age (Chambers 2002), and the change reveals itself prototypically in a pattern whereby some minor variant in the speech of the oldest generation occurs with greater frequency in the middle generation and with still greater frequency in the youngest generation. If the incoming variant truly represents a linguistic change (Labov 1994, Trudgill 1974), as opposed to an ephemeral innovation as for some slang expressions or an age-graded change, it will be marked by increasing frequency down the age scale.

We will consider the applicability of these concepts to data emerging from *Measuring the rhythm of Basque varieties* project*, in which we explore with the SYS-1M (Scicon R&D) speech analyzing program the nasal and the oral flow of the recorded speech. With this aerodynamic measuring tool we will analyze the introduction of nasal vowels into Basque, where previously only oral vowels existed phonemically. We will focus on two age groups: youngs (-30) and octogenarians from the Labourdin subarea (France). All of the informants have the Basque language as their mother tongue and home language, but the older ones received education only in French language and use French in formal (and often informal) situations, in oral and in written communication. The data come from recorded interviews —individual as well as in-group— held in Basque, and from word lists. A sample of data is analysed in detail in light of the Natural Phonology framework (Donegan 1985), in order to determine whether or not the linguistic features favouring change can be found.

References

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