

On the origins of a sound change: preaspirated /pp tt kk/ in Italian

This paper addresses the initiation of a sound change in a variety of Italian, involving long voiceless stops /pp tt kk/. In Sieneese Italian these long stops are frequently produced with preaspiration ie [hp ht hk] (e.g. Stevens 2007). At present, preaspiration is not reported to occur in any other variety of Italian.

We begin by briefly outlining a number of issues raised by the presence of preaspiration in a language's sound system, including the maintenance of phonological contrasts for native speakers, and the potential directionality of any further sound changes. We then concentrate specifically on why preaspiration may have arisen in Sieneese Italian, in particular, in the first place.

An issue in the literature on preaspiration is whether it had a single historical origin in early North Germanic and only spread via language contact (e.g. Hansson 2001), or whether it can arise spontaneously in a language (e.g. Andersen 2002). While the recent discovery of preaspiration in Italy supports the latter standpoint, the reasons for this spontaneous sound change are as yet unclear. One hypothesis is that preaspiration may be related to the *Gorgia toscana* (GT), which is present in Sieneese but not in most other varieties of Italian. Much like preaspiration GT involves supraglottal reduction, weakening singleton /p t k/ to voiceless / ϕ θ x/h/ and even / \emptyset / (e.g. Villafaña-Dalcher 2008). However all sources on Italian agree that GT affects only singletons, and not their geminate counterparts.

To tease apart the potential relationship between GT and preaspiration, this paper reports the results of a preliminary acoustic phonetic investigation into the realization of /pp tt kk/ in varieties of Italian other than Sieneese. Sampled varieties include those with (Florentine, Perugian) and without (Roman, all other Northern and Southern varieties) the GT. Data are drawn from the CLIPS corpus of spoken Italian (www.clips.unina.it), which involves semi-spontaneous (map-task) speech.

Preliminary results show that preaspirated stops occur, albeit infrequently, elsewhere in Italy. We discuss the significance of these patterns for our understanding of the origins of sound changes. We consider in particular the social prestige of GT, and its role in the directionality of further potential sound changes affecting geminate /pp tt kk/ in Sieneese Italian.

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