Dialect formation and dialectal differences in Latin American Spanish

Dialects and identifiable differences among those dialects are present in every language; one such difference is the sound system of each variety. For example, Mexican highland speakers sound differently from those from Buenos Aires, both of whom differ from Madrileños. At the root of these differences are processes related to sound change. The question that naturally falls out from this is why certain sounds are subject to change while others are not—the so called actuation problem first posed by Weinreich et al. (1968).

In this talk, I address this very question as it applies to particular varieties of Latin American Spanish. Depending on various social and linguistic factors, the sounds [f] (e.g., foto ‘photo’) and [x] (gema ‘gemstone’) can be realized as [ɸ]/[x] and [ç], respectively. These alternations are not found across all Spanish dialects nor indeed across all speakers of these dialects. In this presentation I propose motivations for the dialectal specificity of these alternations.

I follow Baker et al. (2011), which proposes three conditions to account for a sound change and its propagation through a speech community: (1) the sound’s context (phonetic motivations); (2) variability in articulation of the segment (how much speakers vary in the way that they produce the sound during each utterance); and (3) association with particular social factors to facilitate dispersion of the property (who exactly produces the modified sound and what their role is in the speech community).

Results from a four-person production study (Chile n=2, Mexico n=2) show that conditions (1) and (2) are identical for the two properties under consideration for all participants. The question that arises from these results is as follows: if the facts of conditions (1) and (2) are the same for both processes, what explanation—all else being equal—based on condition (3) accounts for a lack of universal /f/ and /x/ alternation throughout Latin America? I argue that formal education, orthographic effects and, in the case of [x] productions of foto, the desire to avoid confusion with the phoneme /x/ in words such as gema play a role in the asymmetrical appearance of the two properties.

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