

Survival and neutralization of a rare cross-linguistic contrast: The case of Romanian palatalized postalveolars

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The contrast between plain and secondarily palatalized (SP) postalveolar fricatives is rare cross-linguistically [2], possibly due to low salience resulting from gestural timing [6]. This contrast is present in Romanian as a morphophonological number marker [4], despite native speakers not being perceptually sensitive to it [3]. The results of a 1961 study [5] suggest this situation has persisted for at least 50 years. This is somewhat unexpected, as perceptually fragile contrasts tend to be enhanced or neutralized [1]. We report the results of (a) a production experiment (n=31) and (b) a perception experiment (n=30), in which the stimuli included additional morphological cues to the presence of SP. We hypothesized that the additional morphological information might yield stronger perceptual effects, especially if conflicting with the information conveyed by SP. We found that, while 87% of the speakers produce significant differences between plain and palatalized postalveolar fricatives, listeners' sensitivity to the contrast is low. Fewer speakers produced the contrast compared to 1961, signaling neutralization in progress. Neutralization was stronger in males than females. Aside from documenting this phenomenon, an explanation is sought for its longevity and it is proposed that grammatical restructuring [2] offers the best account for the observed facts. These findings add further evidence to the claim that there is no 1-to-1 correspondence between the phonetic factors triggering neutralization and actual neutralization patterns attested in languages, and that an explanation for phonotactic patterns should be sought in the interaction of phonetic and sociolinguistic factors with the phonological grammar.

References

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