

Rhotic metathesis in CVrC and CrVC syllables: Evidence from Modern Croatian

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Common Slavic CVrC and CrVC syllables are known for their intricate diachronic developments in the individual Slavic daughter languages. For instance, as described by Shevelov (1964), Common Slavic *vřxǔ* ‘tip’ (CVrC) corresponds to Polish *wierzch* (CVrC), Bulgarian *vrǎx* (CrVC), Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian *vrh* (CṛC) and Northern Russian *verëx* (CVrVC). We will argue that these forms represent different degrees of rhotic metathesis and that rhotic metathesis is due to the phonetic structure of the alveolar tap [ɾ] and trill [r̄].

As shown by Proctor (2009) and Savu (2012), the rhotics [ɾ] and [r̄] contain two vocoids on each side of the constriction, yielding the structure ‘vocoid – constriction – vocoid’ (vɾv). These vocalic elements most saliently appear adjacent to a consonant, that is, in the clusters C_vɾ(v)V, V_(v)ɾvC and C_vɾvC. They can change into full vowels if they are misinterpreted by the listener as part of the intended pronunciation. Metathesis occurs, then, if the original full vowel is simultaneously parsed by the listener as the vocoid inherent in the rhotic (Czaplicki 2013).

This theoretical account has never been subject to systematic experimental investigation. We conducted a perception experiment with native speakers of Croatian, a language that has syllabic rhotics in addition to the more common consonantal rhotics. In this experiment, we examine the qualitative and quantitative thresholds for assigning phonetic clusters of the type CV_(v)ɾvC, C_vɾ(v)VC and C_vɾvC to the phonological clusters CVrC, CrVC, CṛC and CVrVC, where the vocalic elements vary in their formant structure from vocoid to full vowels as well as in their duration from values appropriate for vocoids to values typical of long vowels. The results of our study will prove profitable for linguistic research not only with regard to rhotic metathesis, but to the understanding of long-distance metathesis in general.

References:

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