

Spanish fricative lenition as an example of phonemic shift

It is a well-known fact that syllable-final *s* undergoes aspiration in several Spanish dialects. The process is typically described as positionally-conditioned segment weakening originating in southern Spanish Andalusian dialects. Typically, coda *s* is weakened to *h* in preconsonantal contexts and can be divided into several advancement stages, depending on the dialect, spreading from word-medial to word-final and then to phrase-final position. Thus, in the most advanced Spanish varieties, it encompasses all syllable-final environments and even extends to prevocalic contexts across a word boundary, which can be analysed as an analogical extension rather than a phonetically conditioned weakening process (e.g. Lipski 1999). This behaviour of *s* draws attention to the nature and limits of sound change as an ongoing process.

As argued by linguists, sound change can be analysed both in diachronic and synchronic terms and Spanish *s*-aspiration is an interesting instance of the latter approach as a clear manifestation of segment lenition conditioned by prosody. In this paper, it will be argued that the analysis of Spanish *s* lenition across word boundaries in prevocalic contexts as pure analogy or lexical diffusion (Kiparsky 1995, Bybee 2000, 2003, Hualde 2010) is flawed, which can be demonstrated with the use of Chilean Spanish data where an interaction between *s* debuccalisation and total segment loss refutes the paradigmatic regularity argument. Lexical frequency does not play a crucial role in this dialect, the phonological conditioning being the predominant force behind the observed lenition process. This is based on the following observations: word-final coda *s* is deleted phrase-finally in Chilean (*una vez* ‘one time’ and *cinco veces* ‘five times’ are realised as [u.na.βɛ] and [siŋ.kɔ.βɛ.sɛ], respectively). Otherwise, either deletion or debuccalisation applies, depending on what follows. *S* is lost before a consonant as in *una vez comí* ‘once I ate’ [u.na.βɛ.kɔ.mi], while an opacity effect may be observed before a vowel. Due to resyllabification, the coda segment of *vez* is forced into the empty onset position of the following word, but its featural specification changes. It is thus *h* that surfaces as the onset of the following word – a visible trace of *s*-aspiration with no manifest motivation on the surface (*una vez es demasiado* ‘one time is too much’ [u.na.βɛ.hɛ.ðɛ.ma.sja.ðɔ]).¹

In line with some of the Neogrammarian views on sound change followed by Labov (1994, 2006) and Kiparsky (1995), among others, and drawing on the precepts of Articulatory Phonology (Browmann & Goldstein 1991), it will be proposed that Spanish *s* reduction is a more in-depth and complex process of ongoing lenition spreading from the weakest to other contexts and advancing in its articulatory consequences. Weakening ceases to be solely syllable-final and Chilean *s* is slowly being pushed out of the phonological system (via deletion), which leads to a distributional shift in the Spanish phonemic inventory. Note that weakening leads to the addition of a new phoneme into the Spanish phonemic inventory (the only other non-anterior fricative prior to this change being /x/, restricted to the onset position) to occupy the coda position and then extend to the onset position (across a word boundary), the next stage, with preconsonantal *s* loss, being presumably its shift to onset position only, which complements the inventory of sounds admitted in Spanish onsets by one phoneme.

¹ The analysis of this interesting interaction with full-fledged overapplication is couched within the optimality-theoretic framework.