

LIQUIDS IN CUBAN SPANISH

Grisel María García Pérez¹

grisel.garcia-perez@ubc.ca

ABSTRACT: The study analyzes to what extent certain constraints of the Cuban Spanish dialect spoken in Havana can be explained in the light of the theory of generative phonology. A series of phonological rules describing the processes which characterize this variety of Spanish are presented.

KEYWORDS: generative phonology; assimilation rules; pronunciation; liquids; Cuban Spanish.

INTRODUCTION

Great attention has frequently been paid to the liquids in Spanish, and there are a number of reasons to substantiate this. Liquids, (r-l) occupy the highest position among consonants in the sonority hierarchy, they are the only non-nasal segments that can be syllabic; from the perspective of language acquisition, liquids are the last segments to be acquired by the child, and their mispronunciation is the source of many different accents in romance languages.

Spanish-American accents show very diverse forms in regard to the pronunciation of certain sounds. In Particular, Caribbean Spanish provides linguists with a wealth of data for testing theoretical constructs, especially in phonology, due to the richness of the processes that make distinctions among regional dialects. Processes such as /s/ deletion (Hammond, 1980), liquid geminization (Guitart, 1976) and word final /n/ velarization do occur in Caribbean Spanish at quantifiable rates that can be correlated with different sociolinguistic factors (Hammond and Resnick, 1988); however, different explanations have been given as to why these processes occur and what their validity is under the theoretical model used.

¹ Department of Critical Studies, University of British Columbia – UBC Okanagan.

The particular language on which this study is based is my native dialect, a variety of the Spanish spoken in Cuba, specifically in the city of Havana. As a Cuban Spanish (CS) speaker, I was the center of attention for many Spanish-speaking persons (who are not from Cuba, of course) because of the way I used to pronounce certain words. For example, these persons made me aware of the fact that I did not pronounce /sérxio/ (my husband's name) correctly; instead I said /séxxio/.

So far, a very small group of Cuban linguists who live in the United States, have studied different phenomena in the Cuban dialect of Spanish. Guitart has devoted his career to the studying of Caribbean Spanish and specially to the Spanish spoken in Havana. In a paper entitled 'Aspectos del Consonantismo' Guitart mentions assimilation as a characteristic feature of this dialect in Havana (Guitart, 1980).

Through this study, I analyze to what extent certain constraints of the Cuban Spanish dialect spoken in Havana can be explained in the light of the theory of generative phonology. I formulate a rule for the assimilation process described by Guitart in 1980, and other rules for processes which also characterize the Spanish spoken in Havana.

Generative phonology has its roots in an approach to linguistics called Generative Grammar, which was developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle in the 1950's. The major goal of generative linguistics has been to explain why any speaker knows amazing things about the structure of his or her language, things whose internalization is difficult to understand if based solely on evidence from the linguistic environment (Kenstowicz, 1995). Within the generative framework, a grammar is a model of the competence of the language user, and as such it must characterize every aspect of this competence. An important aspect is that the speaker knows the words of his language. To characterize this knowledge, a generative grammar contains a list of lexical items or what is called 'lexicon'. The information pertaining to the phonological, syntactic, and semantic properties of the lexicon is associated to every item in the lexicon.

In spite of this, we know that words can be analyzed into smaller units called morphemes, and that these morphemes can appear in more than one word. So one can assume that words are made up of morphemes.

Generative phonology is concerned with the information on pronunciation contained in lexical entries and with the fact that the same morpheme may have different pronunciations depending on its associations with other morphemes and with

syntactic markers and boundaries. The phonological information associated with each morpheme is represented in the lexicon in the form of lexical matrices, in which the rows represent sound features, and the columns, systematic phonemes which make up each morpheme. Features refer to the behavior of the vocal tract and the articulators in the production of speech. For example, the feature *consonantal* refers to the degree of narrowness of the vocal tract. Both /r/ and /l/ are consonants, so if I were to write this feature for /l/ I would write [+ cons]. The plus (+) sign means that the sound belongs to that set, but if it does not belong it would be marked with a minus (-). According to stricture, that is, depending on the way the air flows, /r/ and /l/ are *approximants*. This feature shows non-turbulent airflow.

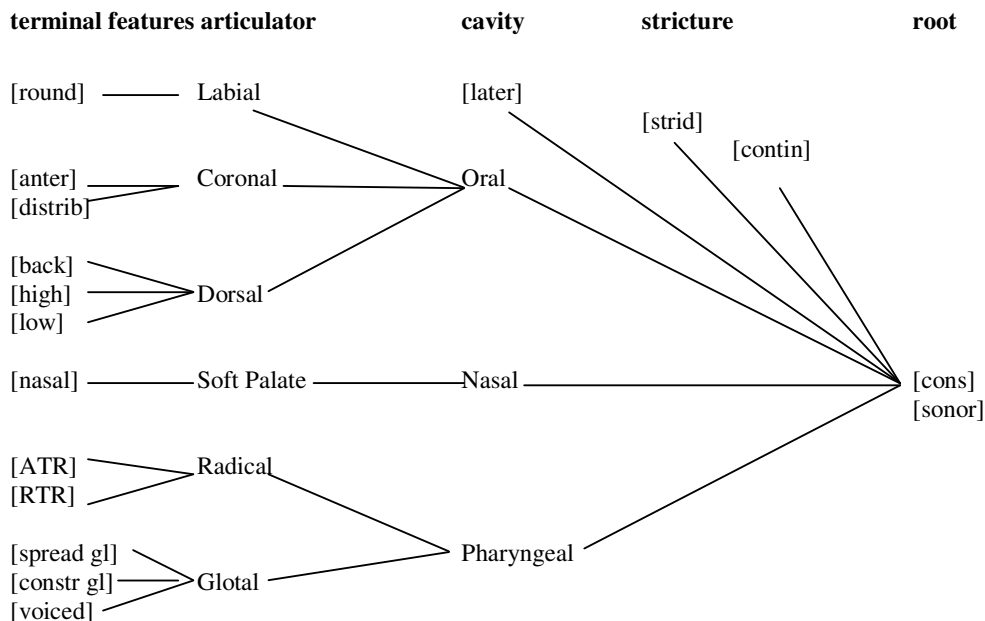


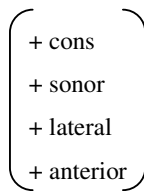
Figure 1: Halle's model of a hierarchical tree

According to generative phonologists, features can be organized in trees. There is one model proposed by Halle (1992) which would be used in our study (Figure 1). In this model, several hierarchical distinctions are introduced among the features. The root of the tree is formed by major class features [consonantal] and [sonorant] and there are two intermediate levels of structure:

a) six articulators, and

b) three cavity nodes to which they are assigned.

If features are organized following this hierarchical tree, a rationale would be provided to substantiate the fact that certain features refine distinctions in other features, and that certain features may undergo changes due to the presence of other nearby features. A feature tree generated from Figure 1 for the lateral [l] is shown in Figure 2. This means that if we are asked to tell what sound the following characteristics represent, we would immediately recognize that it is the [l]:



With this in mind, and by knowing that the basis of defining a phonological segment is the Universal Grammar set of features, by looking for regularities that contribute to the creation of the language inventory of phonological elements, by determining patterns in the distribution of these elements, and by studying the alternations in the shapes of morphemes the word may have, we will be able to formulate phonological rules that give an answer to our study.

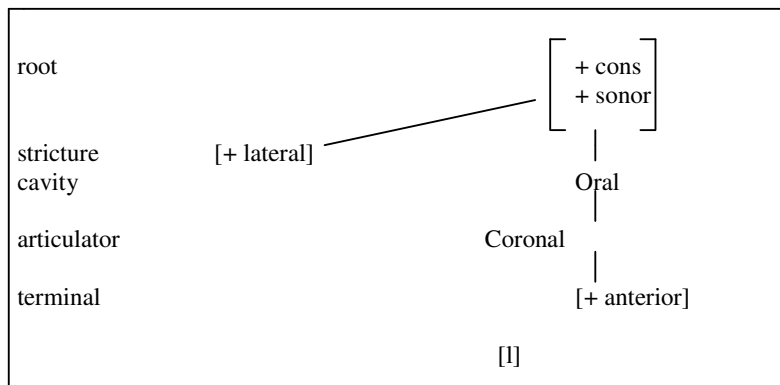


Figure 2: Feature tree generated from Figure 1

1. METHOD

The data in the study was drawn from two videos produced in Havana and recorded from the TV here in Vancouver (*Los Balseiros*, and *In Cuba*), and a Cuban movie which was shown in Vancouver and I rented from a video store (*Strawberry and Chocolate*). Although I had a series of other Cuban movies that I could use as a source of analysis, and I had a friend who I could talk to and record our conversations, I just used the sources mentioned above because of two main reasons:

- a) The other movies I could use as a source of data were from the 60's and did not provide me with an updated array of data
- b) My friend had been living in Canada for a while, was married to a South American Spanish speaking person, had acquired his spouse's accent, and had consequently lost the pure Cuban accent.

The videos last one hour each. They develop a specific theme through the comments made by the Cuban population (in Spanish with English subtitles) and by the journalist who is leading the viewer through the theme. The movie lasts almost two hours, it develops the theme of prejudices Cuban men have, and Spanish is also spoken with English subtitles.

When organizing the data, I first grouped the verbs in their infinitive form. Spanish has the characteristic that its verbs, if not conjugated, end in /r/, and some Cuban speakers have a tendency to pronounce an [l] instead of an /r/ at the end of a word.

Word	CS Pronunciation	Meaning
decir	/desil/	'to tell'
molestar	/molestal/	'to bother'
ver	/bel/	'to see'
aceptar	/aseptal/	'to accept'
conversar	/konbessal/	'to talk'
venir	/benil/	'to come'
andar	/andal/	'to walk'
amor	/amol/	'love'
hacer	/asel/	'to do'

mayor	/mayol/	'oldest, biggest'
sacar	/sakal/	'to take out'
mar	/mal/	'sea'
comer	/komel/	'to eat'
lavar	/labal/	'to wash'
caminar	/kaminal/	'to walk'
cocinar	/kosinal/	'to cook'
averiguar	/aberigwal/	'to find out'
seguir	/segil/	'to follow'

The previous data poses a rule of lateralization which I formulate in the following way.

$$r \rightarrow l / _ \#$$

This rule explains that /r/ becomes /l/ in the environment at the end of a word. The fact that Guitart did not observe this phenomena when he studied consonants in Spanish spoken in Havana can be easily explained. Guitart's data was drawn from educated people from Havana who had left Cuba in the 60's. After these years, the capital of Cuba, Havana, was the center of attention of many Western Cubans among whom this phenomenon was common. Generally speaking, the phenomenon spread among the less educated people from Havana, and is now very common in the city. This process may also cause in some cases, phonetic neutralization, because for example *mar* /mal/ 'sea' is pronounced in the same way as *mal* /mal/ 'evil'. The actual meaning of the word can only be understood from the context in which it is used.

The second group includes words in which the /r/ appears before a nasal or in which indirect and direct object pronouns are following an infinitive verb.

Word	CS Pronunciation	Meaning
carnet	/kanne/ or /kahne/	'I.D. card'
moderno	/modenno/	'modern'
confortarme	/konfottamme/	'to be happy with'
decirme	/desimme/ or /desihme/	'to tell it to me'
hermana	/emmana/	'sister'
forma	/fomma/ or /fohma/	'form'

decirlo	/desillo/ or /desihlo/	'to tell it'
contárselo	/kontasselo/	'to tell it to him, her, them'
decírselo	/desisselo/	'to tell it to him, her, them'
molestarlo	/molestallo/	'to bother him'
verlo	/bello/	'to see him'
aceptarlo	/aseptallo/	'to accept it'
porciento	/possiento/	'percentage'

This second group shows a process of aspiration of the /r/ and another of assimilation of the liquid to the consonant which follows. There is a tendency to aspirate the /r/ when it is followed by a nasal or a lateral. The following rule represents what I stated before:

$$r \longrightarrow h / \begin{matrix} \text{---} \\ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} [+nasal] \\ [+lateral] \end{array} \right\} \end{matrix}$$

Assimilation occurs in these cases when the features of the /r/ are assimilated to the consonant that follows, that is, an association has been established between two nodes in one tree. For example, let us take the segments /r/ and /m/ in /**er**mana/ 'sister' (See Figure 3). In this case, all the features characterizing /r/ must assimilate. Kenstowicz, says the given an /r/ C string (where C is any consonant), the root node comprising the C is associated to the timing slot that dominates /r/, simultaneously delinking all the features of the original /r/ by detaching it from its timing slot. The result is a sequence of two skeletal positions associated with the same root node - a geminate. That is why we get /emmana/ 'sister' out of /ermana/.

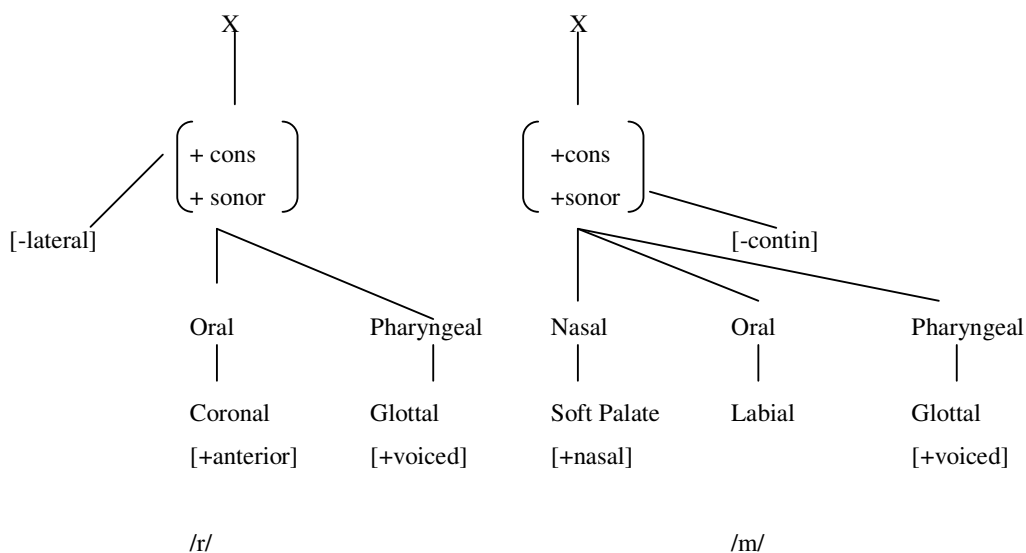


Figure 3: Process showing how /r/ assimilates to /m/

The third group includes a series of segments in which the /r/ precedes voiceless stops in the middle of the word.

Word	CS Pronunciation	Meaning
porque	/pogke/	'because'
particular	/padticular/	'particular'
tortilla	/todtiya/	'homelette'
insultó	/insudto/	'insult'
comportarse	/konpodtasse/	'to behave oneself'
parte	/padte/	'part'
salto	/sadto/	'jump'
puerta	/pwedta/	'door'
cuarto	/kwadto/	'bedroom'
balcón	/bagkon/	'balcony'

This group poses a voicing rule after liquids. If we take into consideration that underlying /patte/ (after undergoing a process of assimilation), becomes /padte/, then we can account for the fact that voicing occurs. The evidence is given from the behavior of derived voiced stops from underlying /p,t,k/. Lozano goes further explaining this phenomena by saying that after voicing, spirantization occurs. Moreover, Kenstowicz

argues that if spirantization is ordered after assimilation, then one can appeal to the Uniformity condition to explain the validity of the process of spirantization in the Havana dialect stops, and the fact that parte is pronounced /padte/.

The voicing rule can be formulated as follows:

$$\begin{pmatrix} - \text{voiced} \\ + \text{obstr} \end{pmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{pmatrix} + \text{voiced} \\ + \text{obstr} \end{pmatrix} / _ \begin{pmatrix} - \text{voiced} \\ + \text{obstr} \end{pmatrix}$$

The last group includes phrases in which all the rules stated above apply.

Word	CS Pronunciation	Meaning
por supuesto	/possupuesto/	'of course'
por venir	/pobbenil/	'about to come'
por verlo	/pobbello/	'about to see him'
por tanto	/podtanto/	'so'
al salir	/assalil/	'when leaving'
por cuanto	/pogkwanto/	'so'
al comprar	/agkonpral/	'when buying'
el barco	/ebbagko/	'the ship'
por facil	/poffasi/	'because it is easy'

However in the last phrase por facil /poffasi/, the /l/ does not appear at the end. I formulated an elision rule for this:

$$[+\text{lateral}] \longrightarrow \emptyset / \#$$

This rule reads that /l/ is elided at the end of a word.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study updates previous studies on Cuban Spanish Dialectology. It provides phonologists with an array of updated data taken from real life situations in Havana, Cuba. ²

Having a closer view at the data, one can see that the /r/ is much more susceptible to changes than the /l/. May be the fact that the feature [+lateral] distinguishes the /l/ from most of the consonants, substantiates its strength as to not letting neighboring sounds affect its nature.

In this study, I analyzed and give examples to substantiate the fact that certain constraints of the Cuban Spanish dialect spoken in Havana can be explained in the light of the theory of generative phonology. I formulated a set of rules in a given order that account for the changes liquids undergo in Cuban Spanish spoken, namely:

- a) Lateralization
- b) Aspiration
- c) Assimilation (Geminization)
- d) Voicing
- e) Spirantization
- f) Elision

To my knowledge, no such detailed and updated study has been recently done. So, it should serve as a source of reference for phonologists interested in this field of study.

² It is good to note that for example, Hammond had carried out a previous study on Cuban Dialectology in 1980. The source of his study were 21 Cubans, who were living in Florida, 19 out of the 21 had finished university studies, and the other two had been studying in secondary school. On the other hand, Guitart notes that the preferred dialect used in Miami is closer to the one used in Havana, because the Cuban population in Miami came from the eastern provinces of Cuba: Pinar del Río, Havana and Matanzas.

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RESUMO: O trabalho analisa em que nível algumas restrições do dialeto do espanhol cubano falado em Havana podem ser explicadas à luz da teoria da fonologia gerativa. Uma série de regras fonológicas descrevendo os processos que caracterizam essa variedade do espanhol é apresentada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: fonologia gerativa; regras de assimilação; pronúncia; líquidas; espanhol cubano.

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