

*Laying the Groundwork: Intergenerational Coda /s/ Variation in Brussels Heritage Spanish*

Coda /s/ variation is one of the most studied socio-phonetic features of Spanish, allowing for a regional classification of the language into sibilance-retaining and sibilance-weakening varieties. While dialect leveling theory suggests that contact across varieties can lead to the loss of coda /s/ weakening, a feature that is often negatively perceived (Núñez-Méndez, 2022), the study of such dialect variation phenomena in heritage contexts has received far less attention. Some studies in the U.S. have shown how /s/-reduction can decrease intergenerationally among Caribbean and Central American speakers, potentially due to accommodation to sibilance-retaining dialects (Erker, 2018). However, little is known about how such processes unfold in European heritage contexts, which differ from American contexts in socio-demographic aspects, majority languages and linguistic ideologies.

This poster will introduce a research project that addresses such a gap through a sociolinguistic and sociophonetic evaluation of Spanish as a heritage language in the city of Brussels, a highly diverse setting where multiple Spanish varieties coexist. The project will examine coda /s/ variation as a lens into intergenerational dialectal accommodation and dialect leveling among heritage speakers. Data will be collected through sociolinguistic interviews with 40 first- and second-generation participants (approx. 200 tokens per speaker). Perceptual coding will categorize tokens as discrete phonemes on a reduction continuum ([s], [h], or [Ø]), and acoustic analysis in PRAAT (Boersma & Weenink, 2024) will assess (1) evidence of frication on their waveform and spectrogram, (2) duration of frication, and (3) center of gravity (Erker & Reffel, 2021). Mixed-effect regression models will evaluate the role of generational and regional factors on each outcome measure.

The poster will include exploratory results focused on speakers of Andalusian Spanish, a sibilance-reducing variety prominent in Brussels (Núñez-Méndez, 2022). The analysis of 350 tokens from three first-generation and four second-generation Andalusian speakers revealed a generational shift, where unweakened /s/ production underwent a tenfold increase in the second-generation compared to the first. These preliminary findings suggest a movement away from traditional Andalusian norms and accommodation toward sibilance-retaining varieties in the Brussels context.

Such results emphasize the relevance of the project and the importance of integrating dialectological approaches to understand variation in multidialectal heritage environments. Overall, the project seeks to advance an integrative, variation-driven approach to heritage language research and to further investigations on Spanish as a minority language in Brussels.

References:

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