

DIPHTHONGIZATION OF NON-HIGH VOWEL SEQUENCES IN LATIN AMERICAN SPANISH

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Adjacent vowels in Spanish may be syllabified either as heterosyllabic (V.V) or tautosyllabic (VV) sequences, depending on the vowel quality and/or the position of the stress. As a general rule, sequences of non-high vowels, or a stressed high vowel in contact with a non-high vowel are to be articulated as two separate syllables (hiatus); the remaining sequence combinations are to be parsed as tautosyllabic or diphthong sequences.

Despite the established syllabification rules, previous studies on Spanish phonology report on different variation phenomena. The resulting forms of output include cases as contrastive as the articulation of ‘exceptional hiatuses’ in Peninsular Spanish (e.g. [kli.én.te] for [kljen.te] ‘customer’) and the tendency to diphthongize hiatus sequences in Latin American Spanish (e.g. [tja.tro] for [te.á.tro] ‘theater’). Given the reported variation, this research focuses on the tendency to diphthongization of canonical hiatus sequences (e.g. /ea/ > /ja/ as *desear* [de.se.ár] > [de.sjár] ‘to want’) observed in two different varieties of Latin American Spanish (Mexican and Colombian).

Data collected from 39 college students from Bogota and Mexico City were analyzed with the aim of establishing the different factors constraining this sound change. Results presented in this talk compare the pronunciation of the sequences /ea/ and /ia/ in two grammatical categories (nouns and verbs) and three different stress contexts (pretonic, tonic and posttonic). The data analyzed come from recorded speech samples (a total of 2720 tokens) and the participants’ syllabification intuitions.

The overall results confirm that the tendency to diphthongize hiatus sequences is highly spread in some Latin American varieties (data for the oral syllabification task from Bogota showed that 52.2% of the words containing the expected hiatus sequence ‘e.a’ were syllabified as diphthongs, for Mexico City, 54.6% of the sequences were syllabified as diphthongs). Additionally results from the acoustic analysis showed that the articulation of a VV sequence varies from one stress context to another. The tendency to reduce the hiatus sequence /ea/ to a tautosyllabic articulation [ja] is more likely to occur in a stress context other than tonic/initial, with posttonic position being the most favorable for diphthongization to occur.

Results from this study contribute to the field of Spanish phonology in three main aspects: they report on dialectal differences and similarities from two different varieties, they confirm the relevance of proximity to stress and relative position of the sequence in the word as a constraining factor in the articulation of adjacent vowels, and they add to methodological approaches by comparing results from two different syllabification tasks, and showing that task choice plays an important role when testing intuitive judgments.