

The hypo-hyperarticulation continuum in Nicaraguan Spanish

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Nicaraguan Spanish is a dialect categorized by the reduction of syllable-final /s/ to glottal frication or full elision (Lipski 1994), e.g. [ma.ɦal.to]¹ or [ma.al.to] for *más alto* ‘higher’, and the use of glottal frication is nearly categorical (Lipski 1984). The glottal stop is also found as a variant of word-final /s/ between vowels (Quesada Pacheco 1996; Rosales Solís 2010), e.g. [da.ʔu.na] for *das una* ‘you give one (f.)’, but no previous studies have investigated this variant’s use of social meaning in depth. In order to delve into how the variants are used in both casual settings and more formal environments, I recorded 36 native Managuan Spanish speakers of both genders, three age ranges, and three education ranges in a casual sociolinguistic interview, a guided image identification task, and a more formal reading task.

To examine the use of [s], [h], ø, and [ʔ] in the V/s/#V environment in Nicaraguan speech I conducted an acoustic analysis of 3,701 tokens. I coded each token for several independent variables, including gender, age, education, task, preceding and following word class, preceding and following vowel, preceding and following stress, and preceding word length. In addition to the binary logistic regression models I fit to the data, I also used speakers’ observations in my analysis to explore their perception of the variants.

Based on the results of my study, I argue that there is a clear continuum from hypo- to hyper-articulation at work in Nicaraguan Spanish: ø < [h] < [ʔ] < [s]. The speakers’ use of the variants in tasks of different levels of formality support this conclusion: the use of the hypoarticulated variants [h] and ø decrease and the use of the hyperarticulated variants [ʔ] and [s] increase as formality increases in Nicaraguan Spanish. In the sociolinguistic interview several participants indicated their conscious awareness of this continuum when they told me that typical Nicaraguan Spanish is “lazy” and that Nicaraguans pronounce their /s/ “badly”, which leads them to hyper-articulate in more formal tasks. Interestingly, the youngest and most educated speakers opted for sibilance the most in the formal reading task, while the oldest and less educated speakers used the glottal stop at higher rates. That is, while the younger and more educated speakers approximate the Standard Spanish they have been taught in school, the glottal stop serves as a local hyperarticulation strategy for the oldest and least educated, a fortition of the glottal frication that is used nearly categorically in casual Nicaraguan speech.

Bucholtz (2001) points out that a “precisely enunciated speech style has semiotic connections to literacy” (92), and Eckert (2008) furthers this notion, arguing that the “attention to the continuum of articulation level thus can be seen as part of a broader national ideology that links hyperarticulation to clarity and clarity to education and power” (470). The youngest and most educated speakers of Nicaraguan Spanish hyperarticulate the most, even in informal settings, to align themselves with an identity imbued with education and power. Because they have had more recent or prolonged exposure to a prescriptive education emphasizing Standard Spanish sibilance, the variants most commonly called upon to construct this powerful and educated identity involve sibilance. However, when older and less educated individuals hyperarticulate to align themselves with a more powerful and educated identity in formal tasks, they tend to hyperarticulate more with a glottal stop, maximally demarcating between adjacent vowels with full glottal closure.

¹ Postlexical resyllabification is shown in this example; at the lexical level, the reduction of /s/ takes place in coda position.

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