Paraguayan Spanish in contact with Guaraní: Pronunciation of <ll> and <y>

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It is traditionally assumed that Paraguayan Spanish conserves the phonemic contrast /ʎ/:/ʝ/ (so-called lleísmo, orthographically <ll>:<y> ) and that the phoneme /ʝ/ is produced as a prepalatal affricate [dʒ], i.e. “somewhat like in Eng. John in all contexts” (Hualde 2005:30; see also Malmberg 1947, Cassano 1971, De Granda 1988). These assumptions, however, need to be revised.

We discuss these phenomena in the production of three groups of speakers: (1) eleven Spanish-dominant bilinguals (ages: 18-50), (2) eight Guaraní-dominant bilinguals (20-67), (3) two Spanish monolinguals (23, 25). The materials were collected in Asunción, San Lorenzo, Luque, and Limpio (Paraguay) in March 2014 and comprise read, semi-spontaneous, and spontaneous speech (The North Wind and the Sun, Prieto/Roseano’s 2010 intonation survey, free interviews).

As for the pronunciation of <ll>, the palatal lateral [ʎ] was found at a rate of 60% in the read data (N=42), but only occurred in 20% of the cases in (semi-)spontaneous speech (N=505). We interpret this finding as an effect of the normative pressure on reading pronunciation: Many Paraguayans learn Spanish only at school, where the traditional Castilian distinction /ʎ/:/ʝ/ is taught as the standard pronunciation. In addition, the use of Spanish is largely limited to formal contexts, whereas most speakers prefer to communicate in jopará (‘mixture’), a Guaraní-Spanish mixed variety, in informal situations, a fact that might explain their strong attempt to achieve a formal or “better” pronunciation in Spanish. However, the predominant realization of <ll> in contemporary Paraguayan Spanish (semi-)spontaneous speech is the fricative [ʝ], which leads to disappearance of lleísmo, as is the case for the majority of Spanish varieties. As in Spain, the Paraguayan lleísmo is primarily preserved in older speakers; this also holds for Guaraní-dominant bilinguals, despite of the absence of /ʎ/ from the Guaraní consonant system.

Regarding the pronunciation of <y>, the expected prepalatal affricate was detected in only 16% of the bilingual’s production (N=686), but not found at all in monolingual speech. Within the bilinguals, women more frequently produce [dʒ] than men (28% vs. 6%), independently of their dominant language. Interestingly enough, the [dʒ] was found quite frequently in the (Guaraní) word jopará. Concerning other phonetic realizations of <y>, the prevailing pronunciation was [ʝ]/[ʝ] (39%) and [j]/[j] (45%). The latter was found mostly after nasals, liquids or a pause as well as in empathic contexts, a distribution that largely patterns with the one found in Castilian Spanish (Martínez-Celdrán et al. 2003:258).

We conclude that the overall picture regarding the pronunciation of <ll> and <y> in Paraguayan Spanish is very similar to (Castilian) Spanish. Preliminary analyses performed on the Guaraní data produced by the bilinguals (groups 1 and 2) reveal that the phonetic realizations of the Guaraní alveopalatal affricate phoneme correspond to the sound repertoire produced in Spanish by the same speakers ([j]/[j] > [ʝ]/[ʝ] > ([dʒ])). Against the backdrop of the long-lasting contact and the diglossic bilingualism typical of the linguistic situation in Paraguay this speaks in favor of an at least partial convergence of the phonemic systems in the bilingual speakers.

References