Vowel Harmony and its Congener in Brazilian Portuguese

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In Brazilian Portuguese (BP), vowel harmony (VH) is a variable regressive assimilation process that reaches the pretonic mid vowels e, o and is triggered by high vowels, as in alegria ~ aligria (‘happiness’) and bonito ~ bunito (‘beautiful’). A contiguous relation between the trigger and the target is essential to its definition because the high vowel substitutes the antecedent mid vowel without breaks, as in peregrino ~ pirigrino (‘pilgrim’), but not *piregrino (Bisol, 1981). Apparent exceptions, i.e., breaks as in poderia ~ puderia (‘could’), are explained by the action of a variable congener process referred to as ‘vowel raising without a trigger’ (VRWT) (Bisol, 2010). Our goal here is to provide quantitative evidence from Southern Brazilian spoken varieties for the existence of these variable processes in BP.

Through a Quantitative Sociolinguistic analysis, the morphological vowel status is a relevant factor in the internal organization of VH (Bisol, 1981). The unstressed vowels that are not derived from stressed vowels (as in bonito) are the best triggers. Unstressed vowels derived from stressed e, o tend to block VH, as in tenista (‘tennis player’), from ‘tênis’ (‘tennis’), but not *tinista, and contista (‘short story writer’), from ‘conto’ (‘short story’), but not *cuntista. However, when especially e vowel derive from e vowel, the process is variably allowed, as in alegria ~ aligria (‘happiness’), from alegre (‘cheerful’) (Bisol, 1981).

The stressed vowel trigger is also relevant. The high vowel trigger may be stressed (bonito ~ bunito) or not (procissão ~ prucissão, ‘procession’), but the stressed vowel has a more active role in VH (Bisol, 1981). Additionally, there is the quality of the trigger vowel. The i vowel is a stronger conditioner than the u vowel because it raises both the [-back] vowel (feliz ~ filiz, ‘happy’) and the [+back] vowel (bonito ~ bunito), while the u vowel raises [+back] vowels (coruja ~ curuja, ‘owl’), but rarely raises [-back] vowels (legume but not *ligume, ‘vegetable’) (Bisol, 1981; Casagrande, 2003).

Quantitative Sociolinguistics is shown to be limited in explaining the VRWT process. Results from different studies (Klunck, 2007; Cruz, 2010; Silva, 2014) indicate that it is not governed by a specific segmental and/or prosodic conditioning factor because the process is of a lexical nature.

Regarding sociocultural variables such as age, sex and education, the results from different samples are inconsistent. Concerning ethnicity, it follows that the raising processes are less productive in communities where BP is influenced by European languages.

The current investigation aims to address these linguistic and social aspects by specifically laying emphasis on the quantitative arguments for the two processes. To this end, we extracted data from seven analyses on VH and/or VRWT (Bisol, 1981; Schwindt, 2002; Casagrande, 2003; Klunck, 2007; Cruz, 2010 and Silva, 2014) conducted with the Variation Theory methodology (Labov, 1972, 2001; Tagliamonte, 2006).
In conclusion, the results suggest that VH is an assimilation process that is part of the variable system of BP and VRWT in Southern Brazilian Portuguese is closer to a diffusion process, whose expansion is still incipient.

References


