The Basque substratum in the intonation of Spanish in the Basque Country and the relevance of social factors

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The present study is part of a wider research project that seeks to determine whether there are intonational features of Basque in the Spanish varieties of areas where the two languages are in contact, and to observe to what extent social factors can determine the degree of linguistic transfer. For Bilbao Spanish we have recorded so far two monolingual speakers of Spanish and two L1 Spanish-L2 Basque bilingual speakers, who engaged in semi-spontaneous conversations with an interviewer. First, the subjects responded to questions about their views of the Spanish and Basque ethnolinguistic groups, so as to obtain declarative utterances from the subjects. Then, the subjects posed the same questions to the interviewer, so as to collect absolute (yes/no) and partial (wh-) interrogative utterances from the subjects. The questions were interiorized by the subjects and asked in as natural a style as possible (they were not read). We report results from 119 declarative sentences and 60 absolute questions, distributed in roughly equivalent numbers in the four subjects.

The four speakers present a substantial amount of prenuclear accents with early peaks, that is, pitch accents with H* on the tonic syllable. The most frequent one is L+H*, followed by H* and then H*+L. The speakers have percentages of occurrence of early peaks ranging from 42% to 48% of their total amount of prenuclear accents. This result contrasts with the well-known fact that prenuclear accents in Peninsular Spanish varieties are rising accents with delayed peaks (L+>H*, with H tones realized on the posttonic syllable, cf. Face 2008, Estebas-Vilaplana and Prieto 2008, 2010, i.a.). Interestingly, Elordieta (2003, 2006) and Elordieta and Calleja (2005) found prenuclear rising accents with early peaks in the Spanish of native NBB bilingual speakers. These authors argue that Lekeitio speakers transfer the early peak alignment of their only existing pitch accent, H*+L, producing L+H* accents instead of Standard Spanish L+>H* accents. But the Bilbao speakers are native speakers of Spanish (monolingual or Spanish-dominant).

Then, all four speakers have absolute interrogatives ending in a L+H* HL% contour, that is, rising accents followed by a circumflex falling boundary tone (reported for read speech by Robles-Puente 2011, 2012). This nuclear contour differs from the L* H% nuclear contour in absolute questions in Peninsular Spanish, i.e. a low nuclear accent followed by a pitch rise (Face 2008, Estebas-Vilaplana and Prieto 2008, 2010). This is arguably an influence from NBB, where absolute questions end in a HL% or L% boundary tone (Elordieta 1998, Robles-Puente 2012). Interestingly, the speakers had different degrees of use of this nuclear contour, which correlated with the sociolinguistic attitudes of the subjects towards Basque and the Basque ethnolinguistic community. The speakers showing a neutral or a positive attitude used L+H* HL% in 100% of their absolute interrogatives, and those showing a distant attitude used that contour in only 60% of their absolute interrogatives. The language attitudes were more determinant than the degree of knowledge of Basque, as one of the monolingual Spanish speakers had L+H* HL% in 100% of his absolute interrogatives.
References


