

THE LOSS OF INTERVOCALIC
/D/ IN EUROPEAN
PENINSULAR SPANISH

ESTUDIOS FILOLÓGICOS

348

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People often ask me what is the most exciting thing about language,
and I say, “[That] it’s gonna change tomorrow.”

David Crystal

1. Introduction

Each and every speaker of European Peninsular Spanish will have heard, or even said, «*to pa na*» (*todo para nada* ‘all for nothing’), «*estamos apañaos*» (*estamos apañados* ‘we are in trouble’), or similar expressions in which intervocalic /d/ is missing. This deletion of /d/, which is much more common in Spain than in other Spanish-speaking countries¹, is a sociolinguistic marker; its use covaries with the speech register due to speaker awareness, which deems the variants with elision less prestigious. Although it has generally been connected with colloquial speech, the loss of the dental can also be found in official written text (Picture 1) or in the speech of university professors, in particular for the context *-ado* (where elision is most widespread).



Picture 1. Street sign in San Sebastián de los Reyes (Madrid).

1. Vid. Zamora Vicente 1970, Alba 2000.

This loss of intervocalic /d/ is part of a broader process of lenition² that includes the consonants /b, d, g/. The greatest effects are, nonetheless, found on /d/, leading to the elision of the segment in many cases. This lenition is nothing new, as the history of Spanish shows: the first occurrence took place during the transition from Latin to romance (e.g. CADERE > *caer*), where geminated consonants were simplified, voiceless occlusives became voiced, and voiced occlusives often disappeared. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, the second person plural of the verb lost the dental from their ending (*amades* > *amáis*, *amavades* > *amabais*), and as early as the 16th century we can find examples of the loss of intervocalic /d/ that still occurs today (Lapesa: 1981)³. Bustos (1960, *apud* Ariza 1992) establishes three periods in the loss of the dental: the first two, which we have already mentioned, and the final stage, which began in the 18th century. This final stage of the phenomenon will be the focus of this work.

Although the weakening and deletion of /d/ is a well-known phenomenon and has been widely explored from different perspectives, there is no overview of its peninsular distribution in literature, since studies with a dialectological or sociolinguistic approach have focused only on a small part of Iberian geography. In addition, there is no general consensus about the factors of change or their relative importance. In this work I will use two different peninsular corpora to analyse the possible factors of change. I will also assess lenition in the European Peninsular Spanish of the 20th century from a dialectological point of view. The objectives of this study are:

- to show the geographical distribution of the elision of intervocalic /d/ in the 20th century in European Peninsular Spanish data.
- to find the most relevant factors of change for the aforementioned data and assess their relative importance.

The chosen corpora –which will be described in sections 2.1. and 3.1.– are the *Atlas Lingüístico de la Península Ibérica*–*Linguistic Atlas of the Iberian Peninsula*– (ALPI), which collects data from the first third of the 20th century, and the *Corpus Oral y Sonoro del Español Rural*–*Audible Corpus of Rural Spoken Spanish*– (COSER), an ongoing project that began in the late 20th century⁴. A comparison of their data can shed light on the evolution of the phenomenon, although it is important to note that they are not fully comparable: while ALPI, a linguistic atlas, provides an answer for the same question in almost every surveyed locality, COSER is a corpus collected with

2. Lenition is understood here as the weakening of the segment (see section 1.2.2).

3. This author suggests that elision has spread from the second person of the verb to casual and very vulgar texts, and he provides examples such as *quedao*, from the anthology by Pedro del Pozo (1547), or *perdio* (1569), from letters by Sevilians in America (1981: 389). Frago Gracia (1993) finds an earlier example of elision in document from Alfonso X's scriptorium (13th century).

4. Although they are not used for this study, there are other projects in this field, such as the *Atlas Lingüístico de España y Portugal*–*Linguistic Atlas of Spain and Portugal*, ALEP– (Alvar 1974) and the regional Spanish atlases like the *Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Andalucía*–*Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas of Andalucía*, ALEA– (Alvar 1960-1973), among others.

semi-directed interviews in which it is not easy to find the exact same tokens for each location. In addition, the information from ALPI presented here corresponds to the totality of the data given for each question (i.e., data from all the localities are represented in the maps), whereas only a sample from the localities of COSER is displayed. This topic will be addressed again in section 3.2.

The fact that all informants belong to the same population sector means that we cannot conduct a sociolinguistic study here. It is, however, worth noting that sociolinguistic variables have an impact on the evolution of the consonant, as we shall see in the section on the current State of Affairs (section 1.2.2.). Stylistic variables, which are not addressed here either, also seem to influence the phenomenon: The screenshot in Picture 2, for example, illustrates the impact of register with Google's suggestion of the form «pringao» instead of «pringado» ('loser'), a word clearly belonging to colloquial speech. This suggests that the form «pringao» is used more frequently within the texts accessed by the search engine⁵. Words connected to higher registers, on the other hand, are expected to maintain the consonant even when they include the context most prone to loss (*-ado*), i.e. in cases such as *doctorado* ('doctorate') or *ilustrado* ('erudite').



Picture 2. Screenshot made in 27/06/2015 (google.es)⁶.

The theoretical framework used in this work is the usage-based approach to language, which claims that language structure is affected by experience. According to these theories, language works as any other cognitive domain and «a general characteristic of cognition is that repetition of an activity has a cumulative effect on future behavior» (Bybee & Beckner: 2010, 829). Hence, in addition to other factors, frequency of occurrence of language units should have a strong influence on sound change, since mental representations would be updated with new information, and frequent elements will be heard and stored more than the rest. Like other authors

5. We must take this with a pinch of salt, since Google is just a search engine and we cannot be sure of criteria it uses for these suggestions nor the texts it accesses.

6. Interestingly enough, this result no longer appeared at the end of 2016; it is maintained, however, when looking for the sequence *es un pringado*.

(e.g. Bybee 2002, Alba 2000, Bedinghaus & Sedó 2014), I will explore the effect of frequency of use on the behaviour of intervocalic /d/, in this case looking at its limits.

The book is structured as follows: in chapter 1, we have an introduction to the topic and some notes about the nature of /d/, followed by a summary of the current state of affairs and a presentation of the main hypotheses. Chapter 2 is dedicated to ALPI, whose data are presented and analysed by vocalic context, and chapter 3 contains the data from COSER, which follows *grosso modo* the same structure as chapter 2 to allow a comparison between both corpora. After this, a more detailed analysis of the geography and factors affecting this change is provided (chapter 4), followed by a section devoted to special cases (chapter 5). Finally, the sixth and last chapter consists of a discussion of the results and some general conclusions.

1.1. LENITION IN SPANISH CONSONANTS: WHY /d/

The intervocalic /d/ in Spanish is a relaxed allophone of the dental stop and its realization has traditionally been considered fricative ([ð]), which would involve the production of aperiodic energy caused by the constriction of the articulators. This is how Navarro Tomás describes it in his *Manual de pronunciación española* (1918). Nowadays, however, the intervocalic /d/ is considered an approximant (Martínez Celdrán 1991, Machuca Ayuso 1997, Sola Prado 2014), which is a category between fricatives and vowels produced by the approximation of the articulators that is not enough to produce frication ([ð]). The spectrogram of an approximant presents a continuity of the formant structure that shows a decrease in the energy between the two surrounding vowels (Figure 1), which, in turn, contrasts with a fricative pronunciation (Figure 2)⁷.

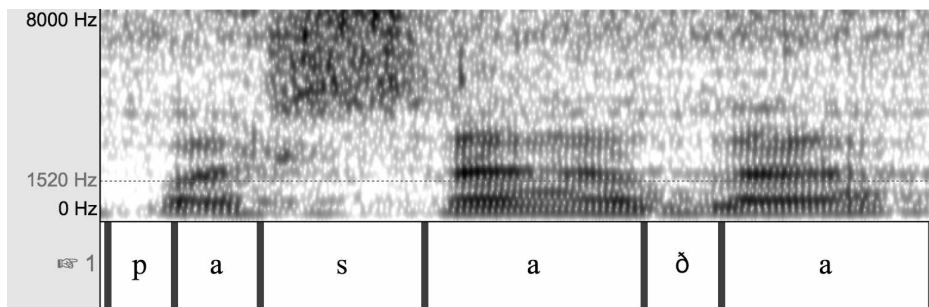


Figure 1. Approximant /d/ from the *COSER* (Humanes de Madrid 2907-01).

7. The same applies to the intervocalic allophones of /b, g/, which are no longer considered fricatives, but approximants.

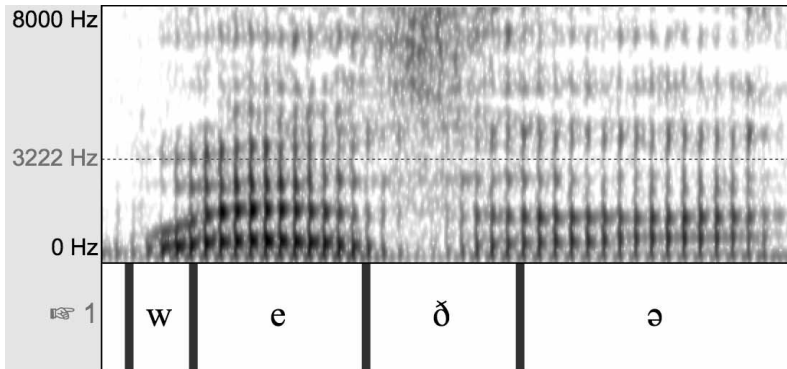


Figure 2. Fricative English /d/ (radio podcast <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b085xpzf>>).

When looking at the lenition process of /b, d, g/, in which the elision of /d/ is usually included, we can see clear asymmetry: lenition is much stronger for the dental than for the other two consonants. The phenomenon is considered to be the same for the three segments, but it is unclear why there is asymmetry between /d/ and its labial and dorsal counterparts, since there are higher rates of elision for the dental.

The tendency towards lenition of dental segments is not specific to Spanish. According to Ernestus (2000: 112), «the absence of [t] is one of the best documented instances of reduction in the Germanic languages», and it is one of the cases that she analyses for Dutch. Zimmerer *et al.* (2014: 65), in their study about final /t/ deletion in German, also point out that the weakening of /t, d/ to various degrees has been widely explored for different languages. Schrambke (2007) states that one of the phenomena resulting from the concentration of stress in Danish is «the lenition of *p t k* > *b d g* [...]»; in some areas further fricativization to *w/u, ð, ʝ* or complete deletion occurred, **especially of t**» (2007: 104, my bolds). Honeybone (2012) notes that lenition processes are not very common in English and presents some phenomena (both synchronic and diachronic) that could be taken as such, namely: the realization of /t, d/ as a rhotic [ɾ] («flapping»), medial-*d*-spirantization, Liverpool lenition (affrication, spirantization and debuccalization)⁸ and, finally, the voicing of fricatives in the history of English. While the last case affects different consonants, the other three again indicate a stronger tendency towards lenition in dentals, something that appears to be a cross-linguistic trend⁹. A final example of this comes from Romance varieties: Giannelli & Cravens (1997) show the increased tendency towards elision of dental consonants in northern Italian dialects, where

8. It affects «all the underlying stops in the system, but is most salient and common in /t, k/ and /d/» (Honeybone 2012: 6).

9. It is important to stress that this is just a tendency and not something categorical. We can find languages in which it is not followed, e.g., Lhasa Tibetan shows lenition of [p, k, q] but not of [t] (Rice 2011), while in French the lenition and deletion of consonants took place later for Latin -t- than for -p- and -k- (Zink 1999).

/t/ has generally undergone elision in the modern varieties, whereas /p/ and /k/ are maintained in lenited form:

Although differential development dialect by dialect, essentially village by village, produces a vastly complicated array of results, a closer, but by no means microscopic look at northern dialects in a regional perspective illustrates both the common outcomes of /p/, /t/, /k/ and local differentiations. The most noticeable characteristic in Table 4.2 is the lesser survival rate of /t/ with regard to /p/ and /k/. Also, in at least Lombard and Venetan, the ultimate reflex of /t/ may be either /d/ or null (e.g. Lomb. /no 'a/ 'to swim' < */no 'tare/ and /di 'dal/ 'thimble' < digitale(m)). (1997: 33)

This differential behaviour seems not to be typical only of dentals, but of coronal consonants in general. It is argued that coronals also differ from other consonants in acquisition and speech errors (cf. Paradis & Prunet 2014), as well as in assimilation. Kiparsky (1985: 97) shows that within nasal consonants in Catalan «only the coronals assimilate to all places of articulation, while the labials assimilate only in a limited way and the palatals and velars do not assimilate at all». In Korean, coronals show more assimilation than their counterparts, as Hume (2011: §5.2) explains:

A more complex yet frequently cited example comes from place assimilation in Korean [...], where a final obstruent stop assimilates in place to a following consonant, with the following restrictions. A morpheme-final coronal assimilates to a following dorsal or labial consonant [...]. A morpheme-final labial also assimilates to a following dorsal, but fails to assimilate to a following coronal [...]. [A] final dorsal consonant does not assimilate to either a following labial or coronal consonant.

Consonantal strength has been proposed as a possible explanation for this behaviour: In line with Hooper (1976), Alba (2000) suggests that, since dentals cannot form a syllable-initial consonantal group with /l/, the first ones have a weaker consonantal strength. Other authors, like Paradis & Prunet (2014) and Kiparsky (1985), maintain that coronals behave differently due to their unmarked place of articulation, which makes them more prone to phenomena such as reduction or assimilation.

From the point of view of the Optimality Theory and Generative Grammar, markedness is nothing more than a set of constraints for each sound in the Universal Grammar, which is reflected in the frequency of the segments in world languages inventories, the order of acquisition by children¹⁰, proneness to reduction, assimilation and deletion, etc. Although markedness seems to be a popular explanation for the special nature of coronals, some authors are sceptical about the concept itself. Hume (2011) shows the lack of consensus about how to measure it and, as Haspelmath (2006) points out, the concept can be very vague. Blevins (2004), for her part, maintains that markedness is merely an emergent property and claims that

10. Some authors argue against this last point (cf. Hume 2011), as the order of acquisition varies across languages and depends on other factors such as the frequency of exposure to each phoneme.