

Variation and change in the sound system of Judeo-Spanish

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This project focuses on variation and change in the sound system of Judeo-Spanish (JS) and continues the PI's ongoing research on this endangered language variety. After their expulsion from Spain in 1492, descendants of the Sephardic Jews emigrated throughout the Balkans, North Africa, and elsewhere. Despite its preservation for over four hundred years, JS is currently in a state of general decline. Harris (1994:255) estimated that there were only sixty thousand proficient speakers of JS, very few fluent speakers under the age of fifty-five, and no surviving monolingual speakers.

Having evolved in isolation from other varieties of Spanish, JS differs notably in its pronunciation. Among the features identified in the cursory summaries of Penny (1992a,b, 2000:174-93) are several innovative patterns involving word-initial sequences of a consonant followed by the diphthong 'ue', e.g., *tuguerto* < *tuerto* 'one-eyed', *elguego* < *luego* 'later', *esfuelo/eshuelo* < *suelo* 'ground', *muevo* < *nuevo* 'new'. The type of change appears to have been conditioned by the initial consonant, but the lack of a comprehensive data set makes it difficult to establish firm generalizations. There exists a considerable body of fieldwork studies of JS dialects (Agard 1950, Baruch 1930, Crews 1935, Crews & Vinay 1939, Kraus 1951, Lamouche 1907, Levy 1952, Luria 1930, Sala 1971, Subak 1906, & Wagner 1914, 1930, among others). Most of these studies include phonological descriptions and language samples in phonetic transcription representing different JS dialects at a time when there were still monolingual speakers of the language.

Two research questions motivate the current project. (1) What is the complete range of attested variation in consonant + 'ue' sequences as pronounced by JS speakers in the early twentieth century? Through a comprehensive data collection survey of fieldwork studies, the PI will delineate possible types of change, phonological environments that conditioned these changes, and variation across JS dialects. (2) Are these superficially diverse innovations amenable to a unified, explanatory analysis? The PI hypothesizes that these changes resulted from the interaction over time of universal speech production and perception factors: speakers pronounced longer 'ue' diphthongs in stressed syllables, with features of the initial vowel coloring the preceding consonant; innovations took root when listeners misinterpreted the percepts of this configuration, which differed according to consonant type. Previous research merely presents these patterns as coincidental and unrelated facts about JS. Based on a convergence of data and descriptive evidence culled from fieldwork investigations, the current project purports to show that these patterns are entirely explainable by and lend further support to recent advances in articulatory phonetics (Browman & Goldstein 1990, 1992) and in theories of listener-based sound change (Ohala 1990). This research project is significant because it explains seemingly parochial facts from JS within a broader theory of sound change in human language.

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