

Negative prestige and sound change: a sociolinguistic study of the assibilation of /r/ in Brazilian Portuguese.

Recent studies have correlated sociolinguistic notions such as prestige, innovation, and solidarity to the assibilation of /r/ in regional variants of Spanish (e.g., Adams 2003; Chela-Flores & Chela-Flores 2002; Gomez 2003; Matus-Mendoza 2004). Until now no work has been done to document and analyze a similar sound change within Brazilian Portuguese (BP). The purpose of this study was to carry out a sociolinguistic analysis using traditional methods in the northeast region of Brazil, specifically in the city of Piripiri, Piauí, with regards to the assibilation of the phoneme /r/. In standard BP, the phoneme /r/, found post-vocally in coda position, has many possible realizations, such as: [r, h, x, ʁ, ʁ̃]. However, in Piripiri, the pronunciation of /r/ in coda position before /t/ (as in *quarta-feira*) becomes assibilated and is realized as a voiceless apical alveolar fricative [ʃ]. Because of Piauí's very high illiteracy rate (40% according to the state government), oral interviews were the primary source for the corpus. Interviews were done with 85 natives of Piripiri, using a combination of pictures and questions to elicit various token words. Variable rule analyses were performed in order to determine the influence of non-linguistic variables of age, sex, and class, as well as the surrounding linguistic environments on this pronunciation. The results, along with some interesting observations made during fieldwork, show that the pronunciation has acquired negative prestige among middle- and upper-class citizens of Piripiri, although it has not disappeared completely. To the middle and upper classes, which subsequently have more contact with the neighboring capital Teresina, the assibilated variant of /r/ has become associated with illiteracy and a lack of education.

References:

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