El habla de Yucatám:
Final [m] in a Dialect in Contact

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1. Introduction

The Spanish of the Yucatan peninsula stands out in the literature as a distinct and understudied dialect within Latin American dialectology (cf. Alvar 1969, Lope Blanch 1987 among others). The combination of intense contact with an indigenous language (Yucatec Mayan), geographic, political and cultural isolation from the rest of Mexico since the conquest, and a consequent strong sense of local identity and pride has produced a distinctive variety of speech that immediately identifies the speaker as *yucateco* within the rest of Mexico. Among the frequently commented traits of Yucatan Spanish is the labialization of nasal consonants in absolute final position (i.e. before a pause) (Lope Blanch 1987, Yager 1989, Michnowicz 2006, in press); e.g. /pán/ > [pám]. This change from /n/ to [m] is attested only infrequently outside of the Yucatan, and is often identified as a marker of *yucateco* speech. As an important dialect form, it is possible that the use or non-use of [m] serves to distinguish social groups, such as gender, age, class and knowledge of Mayan, within the speech community of Yucatan. In this paper I discuss the partial results of a variationist sociolinguistic study of speakers in and around the city of Merida, Yucatan, undertaken with the goal of exploring the social value of [m] for urban speakers of the dialect. In §2, I outline the methodology and the selection of participants for the study. In §3, I present the results of the analysis of 40 sociolinguistic interviews. Finally, in §4, I discuss conclusions and areas for further study.

2. Methodology

The data for this study consist of transcribed conversations with 40 native speakers of Yucatan Spanish recorded during two separate fieldwork episodes in 2004 and 2005. A well-known problem with this type of data collection is the *observer's paradox*; i.e. the researcher is trying to observe how people talk when they are not being observed (cf. Milroy & Gordon 2003, among others). In order to mitigate to the extent possible the effects of the *observer's paradox* in this study, speakers were asked to talk freely about topics of interest to them, e.g. their families, marriage advice, local traditions, folklore, and how the city of Merida has changed since they were children. Speakers often directed the flow of the conversation, a practice which was encouraged. The speakers' comfort level with the interview was aided by the fact that in almost every case I was introduced as a 'friend of a friend' and that I lived with a local family known to many of the subjects. While the resulting conversations were undoubtedly more formal than a talk between family members or good friends, a friendly tone was maintained throughout the interviews, and the recordings exhibit many of the traits of informal dialogue (cf. Labov 1966). The average length of the recordings is 25 minutes.

Following the interview, all speakers were given a background questionnaire that permitted their placement into one of several social categories; speakers were divided by gender, social class and age, as shown in Table 1. Bilingualism or knowledge of Yucatec Mayan (hereafter *Mayan*) was also taken into account.

Table 1: Subjects by gender, age, and class

Variables	Subjects										
Gender	Male						Female				
Age	19-29		30-49		50+		19-29		30-49		50+	
Class	L	U	L	U	L	U	L	U	L	U	L	U
# of subjects	1	4	3	3	3	5	2	4	3	4	3	5

The subject pool consisted of 19 men and 21 women divided into three age groups representing three important life stages (young adulthood, middle age, and seniors) and two social classes, based primarily on occupation. Lower class speakers were defined as manual laborers and domestic servants. Upper class speakers, on the other hand, are those that are identified by title in Yucatan society (i.e. *licenciados*, lawyers, professors, architects, and business men and women, among others). With few exceptions, these speakers would be considered middle to upper-middle class, and were further defined by possessing the economic ability to hire lower class speakers as domestic workers or handymen.

Speakers were also divided into three groups based on their language(s); monolingual Spanish-speakers, fluent Mayan-speakers, and those with some (passive) knowledge of Mayan. This last group consists of speakers whose parents or grandparents speak Mayan, and who can understand at least a basic conversation in that language, although they may respond in Spanish. Of the speakers in this study, 19 are monolingual Spanish-speakers, and 21 speak at least some Mayan (13 of those speak it fluently).

In order to better understand patterns in the data, the corpus was transcribed and coded for multivariate statistical analysis (VARBRUL), run using GoldVarb 2001 for Windows. The corpus consists of 14702 non-neutralizing nasal consonants[1]; of these, 1093 occur in absolute final position. Given that previous studies, as well as the present data, confirm that [m] arises almost exclusively in absolute final position, this analysis is based solely on those tokens (cf. Lope Blanch 1987, Yager 1989, Michnowicz 2006)[2]. The results of the VARBRUL and other analyses are found in the next section.

3. Results

Speakers of Yucatan Spanish have four primary nasal variants from which to choose in absolute final position; 'standard' [n], two other variants common throughout the Spanish-speaking world, [ŋ] and deletion, and the regional variant [m]. The results of a frequency analysis are seen in Figure 1. While [n] is still the preferred nasal variant in absolute final position (61%), [m] accounts for one quarter of nasal tokens (25%). The other possible variants ([ŋ] and deletion) make up the remaining 14%.

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[1] For example, Spanish neutralizes alveolar [n] and labial [m] before labial consonants, e.g. *un beso* 'a kiss' becomes [um.be.so]. These neutralizing contexts were not counted for this study.

[2] The labial [m] accounts for 2% of all (non-neutralizing) nasal consonants in the entire corpus. Of the nasals in absolute final position, however, 25% are [m].
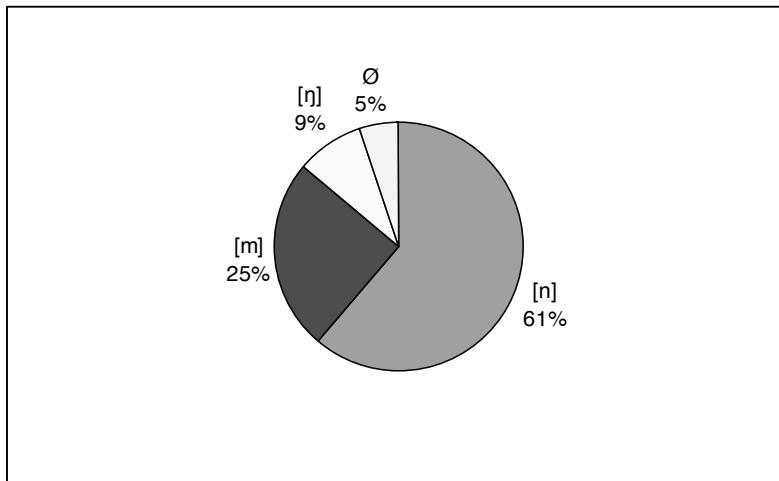
Figure 1. Frequencies of nasal variants in absolute final position.

While 'standard' [n] is still the preferred variant for these speakers of Yucatan Spanish, [m] occurs substantially more than either of the remaining two variants, both of which are widespread in neighboring dialects and throughout Spanish varieties in general (Lipski 1994). The subsequent VARBRUL analysis allows for a closer examination of who employs the regional variant [m]. The results of the statistical analysis are seen in Table 2 below; in multivariate analysis, a factor weight of < 0.5 indicates that that factor correlates positively with the variant in question (here, [m]).

Table 2. VARBRUL weights for [m] by social group. Significance indicated by *.

Factor group	Weight	
Independent factors		
*Gender		
Female	**0.568**	
Male	0.436	
*Age		
19-29	**0.546**	
30-49	**0.611**	
50+	0.386	
Collapsed factors (class and language)		
*Lower class		
Fluent Mayan	**0.518**	
Some Mayan	0.476	
Spanish only	-------	
*Upper class		
Fluent Mayan	**0.842**	1 speaker
Some Mayan	**0.557**	
Spanish only	0.456	

Chi-square per cell: 1.5975, Significance: 0.001

VARBRUL analysis demonstrates that [m] is used more often by women (0.568) than men (0.436). This result agrees with most previous work on [m], which also found labialization to be primarily characteristic of women's speech (Yager 1989, Michnowicz 2006)[3]. Additionally, speakers

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[3] Note that Michnowicz (in press) found more [m] among men in a *rapid and anonymous* survey of the word *Colón*. Given that other studies, including the present article, consistently found more labialization among women, the result in the R&A survey was likely due to the methodology; women may be more careful when speaking to a male stranger on the street than are men.

under the age of 50 are significantly more likely to produce tokens of [m] (0.546 for younger speakers, 0.611 for middle-age speakers) than are older speakers (0.386). The last two rows in Table 2 consist of the collapsed factors of class and language, given that in Yucatan society there is a strong interaction between these two factor groups; Mayan-speakers have historically belonged to the lower class, while monolingual Spanish-speakers were of the middle and upper classes; note the absence of lower class monolingual Spanish-speakers in Table 2. While this situation is slowly changing, as evidenced by the one speaker in this study who is an upper class fluent Mayan-speaker, the historical connection between class and language is still strong in Yucatan today. The VARBRUL results demonstrate that, among lower class speakers, those that speak fluent Mayan produce more [m] (0.518) than those that have passive knowledge of the indigenous language (0.476). Among upper class speakers, those that speak at least some Mayan produce [m] more frequently (0.557 for passive speakers vs. 0.456 for monolingual Spanish-speakers)[4]. When the factors class and language are separated, class does not show a strong effect, while knowing at least some Mayan continues to correlate with increased labialization. Final [m], then, appears to be a trait characteristic of bilingual speech, or more specifically, of the children and grandchildren of fluent bilinguals[5].

While gender and language play a role in the use of [m], the most important factor, based on the largest difference in VARBRUL weights, is age (0.611 for middle age speakers vs. 0.386 for older speakers). From most to least, labialization shows the following pattern: middle age speakers > younger speakers > older speakers. This peak among middle aged speakers can also be seen in a comparison of real and apparent time frequencies of [m].
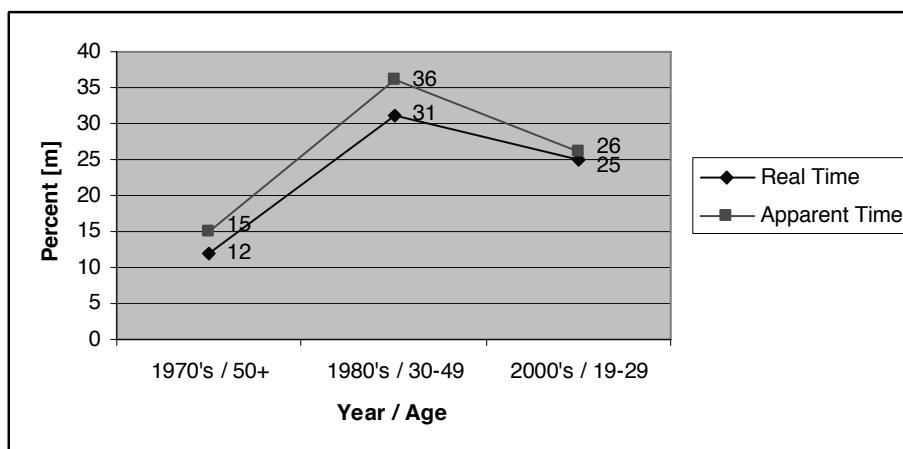

Figure 2. Correlation of real and apparent time for [m].

Apparent time data, consisting of frequencies of [m] for the three age groups in this study, show a sharp increase from the oldest group (15%) to the middle age group (36%). This is followed by a 10% drop in frequency to 26% among the youngest speakers. Apparent time has previously been shown to be indicative of trends in real time data, which consist of frequencies from samples collected at different times over a period of years (cf. Labov 1994 for examples). In Figure 2, real time data is comprised of four different studies. Lope Blanch (1987) found 12% [m] in his conversation data collected during the 1970's. The frequencies from two studies from the 1980's were averaged to obtain

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[4] Recall that the factor group of upper class fluent Mayan-speakers consists of only 1 speaker. This reflects the rarity with which this combination exists in the Yucatan. This particular speaker grew up in a Mayan-speaking household, and is an anthropologist who also teaches courses in Mayan language. It is possible that the future entrance of lower class speakers into the middle and upper classes may further extend bilingual traits into the dialect as a whole (cf. Michnowicz 2006). Future research is needed to test this hypothesis.

[5] As a group, the speakers that produce the highest frequencies of [m], as indicated by the VARBRUL analysis, are upper class passive speakers of Mayan. Their Mayan heritage and residual language skills point to their families' past as lower class members of Yucatan society. It is only recently that these speakers have begun to enter the socioeconomic mainstream in Merida, and this shift may be having an effect on their choice of final nasal (cf. Michnowicz 2006).

the frequency of 31%[6]. Finally, the present study found an average frequency of 25% across age groups. It is unclear at the present time if the decrease in frequency between middle aged and younger speakers indicates that the change has peaked and is now in regression, or if this decline is due to the peak in apparent time indicative of changes in progress through logistic incrementation (cf. Labov 2001 pp. 454-455). Either way, both real and apparent time data indicate an increased use of final [m] among the two youngest age groups relative to the oldest speakers. These facts, along with the VARBRUL analysis in Table 2, indicate that the variant [m] represents a change in progress in Yucatan Spanish. Additionally, labialization of /n/ is not mentioned in early studies of the dialect (Barrera Vasquez 1937, Nykl 1938, Suarez 1945/1979, Médiz Bolio 1951), and frequency data is not available until the 1970's. The fact that a variant that figures so prominently in later studies is absent in earlier work suggests that the change /n/ > [m] is a fairly recent development, an observation supported by the sharp rise in frequency of [m] between older and middle age speakers in this study.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The frequencies, VARBRUL analysis, and comparison of real and apparent time data in the previous section indicate that [m] is a current change in progress in Yucatan Spanish; over the past 20-30 years the regional variant [m] has been gaining ground at the expense of 'standard' [n] and widespread [ŋ]. As mentioned above, labialization is most prominent among the passive bilingual children and grandchildren of fluent bilinguals, and may be expanding as these speakers enter the socioeconomic mainstream, thereby enjoying increased prestige within the community[7]. The question remains of why Yucatan Spanish might be adopting a previously sporadic variant, especially when one considers that overall the dialect is approximating pan-Hispanic norms by eliminating other regional pronunciations (cf. Michnowicz 2006). The answer appears to lie in the socio-historical environment in which the dialect evolved, and in recent demographic changes underway in Yucatan.

As mentioned in §1, Yucatan evolved largely independently from the rest of Spanish Mexico from the time of the conquest until the middle of the 20th century. Prior to independence, while legally a part of Mexico, the Yucatan peninsula maintained more direct contact with Spain than with the viceroy in Mexico City (Mosely 1980). Isolated from the rest of the country, Yucatan was able to foster its own culture, traditions, and way of speech that set it apart from the rest of the nation. A sense of loyalty to the *patria chica* was exhibited in dramatic fashion during the political turmoil following independence from Spain, when Yucatan twice declared itself a republic separate from Mexico. Due to native uprisings, however, Yucatan was compelled to ask for Mexican military aid, thus grudgingly rejoining that country politically (Quezada 2001). In spite of the political reality of union with Mexico, the sense of Yucatan independence and regional pride in local customs, history, and language is by and large maintained to the present day, with many people identifying themselves as *yucateco* rather than as *mexicano* (Michnowicz 2006). This strong sense of regionalism can have important linguistic consequences for the local dialect.

Importantly, the isolation in which Yucatan has existed is rapidly diminishing, due in large part to economic reasons related to tourism and industry (Michnowicz 2006). Speakers of Yucatan Spanish are now in constant contact with speakers of other varieties of Spanish, especially from central Mexico; during the 1990's, Merida witnessed a 46.3% increase in immigration from Mexico City alone (INEGI 2000). Immigrants from Mexico City are blamed for increased traffic, pollution, crime, and the loss of Yucatecan traditions. Regardless of the veracity of these claims, speakers may be adopting an easily identifiable regional variant as a marker of local identity in the face of increased immigration and the subsequent loss of local traditions, even as the dialect overall is rapidly standardizing (cf. Tabouret-Keller 1997, Labov 1963, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1995).

While not all speakers, even some who use [m] with regularity, profess awareness of the labial variant, it is clear that many speakers are not only conscious of the change, but also view [m] as a marker of Yucatecan pride. This is most visibly reflected in the popular culture through the t-shirts and

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[6] García Fajardo (1984) found 20% [m], and Yager (1989) found 41%. This difference appears to be due to each study's subject pool, the present study also found a great range of inter-speaker variation for [m]; although it is possible that the 5 years between studies may be a factor, given the apparent rapidity of labialization.
[7] This possibility will be explored in further research. See also Michnowicz (2006).

other items one frequently sees in Merida. These popular items display Yucatecan phrases, such as *Vaya biem* 'go well/have a nice day', in which the change /n/ > [m] is clearly displayed. Thus just as natives of Martha's Vineyard adopted centralized dipthongs (Labov 1963), and residents of Ocracoke Island expanded their use of [oy] for (ay) (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1995), speakers of Yucatan Spanish may be asserting their status as native *yucatecos* in the face of increasing immigration and contact with their historical rivals from central Mexico. Thus for some speakers, especially the middle class descendents of poorer Mayan-speaking families, pronouncing *pan* 'bread' as [pam] serves as a type of shibboleth, identifying them as locals while at the same time separating them from the recent immigrants from Mexico City. These speakers are likewise identifying with local traditions and ways of life, as these customs are assimilating to national norms.

It remains to be seen whether [m] will continue to expand as Yucatan faces increased contact with other areas of Mexico and Latin America, or if it will follow the path of many other traits of this dialect and succumb to the pressures of standardization. Additionally, while initial results suggest a connection between speakers who self-identify as *yucatecos* and the use of regional forms, more research is needed and planned to address these questions. Further research into this and other understudied dialects can help answer important questions about dialect change and loss, and the crucial role that non-linguistic (social) factors have in this process.

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