

The Lateral Variant of (r) in Cuban Spanish

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1. Background

1.1 Variants of syllable final (r)

In Cuban Spanish, syllable final (r) has four variants: the standard variant, assimilation, aspiration, and lateralization. The standard variant, the same sound found in other varieties of Spanish, is the prestige variant and it appears preceding a vowel, consonant, or pause. Assimilation renders a realization of /r/ that depends on the features of the following consonant, as in [taɾˈde] ‘tarde’ *afternoon* and [foɾma] ‘forma’ *form*; assimilation varies regionally and socially (Choy López, 1986; Goodgall de Pruna, 1970; Guitart, 1976, 1980; López Morales, 1992). Aspiration is limited to contexts preceding [n] and [l], for example [ohno] ‘horno’ *oven* and [kahlos] ‘Carlos’ *Carlos*; it has been found to occur at low rates of 1% to 3% (Fails, 1984; Terrell, 1976) across regional varieties (Choy López, 1986). The lateral variant, discussed in greater detail in the next section, appears in preconsonantal word internal or final position, as in [kalta] ‘carta’ *letter* and [bel komo] ‘ver como’ *see how*, and preceding a vowel or pause when (r) is word final, [benil a] ‘venir a’ *come to* and [mexol] ‘mejor’ *better*.

1.2 The lateral variant

The lateral realization of syllable final /r/ dates back to XVI century Andalusian Spanish (Boyd-Bowman, 1975). In the Americas, it is found in coastal areas of the Pacific and the Caribbean (Catalán, 1989). In the varieties of the insular Caribbean, its frequency and social distribution vary; for instance, it is widespread in Puerto Rican Spanish, according to López Morales (1992), who reported rates of 48.8% for casual speech in San Juan, and who noted that frequencies correlated with social status, tending to decrease as social status increased. López Morales noted that even as early as 1927-28, Navarro Tomás reported a frequency of 41% in San Juan, with the same pattern of increasing frequency among the lower status groups. In Dominican Spanish, rates of 4% and 6% were found for three social status groups by Alba (1992), who suggested that the lateral is not a socially significant variant in the variety of Dominican Spanish he studied because it is the vocalized variant of (r) that carries negative social evaluation, being stigmatized and sharply stratified. For Cuban Spanish, studies have reported rates of between 0% and 5% (Almendros, 1958; Guitart, 1980; Haden & Matluck, 1977; López Morales, 1970, 1992; Terrell, 1976; Vallejo-Claros, 1970).

In Cuban Spanish, [l] has been described as a stable, nonstandard variant of (r). According to observations and studies from the 1950s and 1960s, this variant was socially stratified and associated with vernacular speakers, an association that caused it to be stigmatized (Almendros, 1958; Guitart, 1980; Vallejo-Claros, 1970). In these studies, there was no mention of the lateral being involved in change. A very different picture was painted, however, by studies in the 1980s, which pointed to a change in the frequency of the lateral across social status groups. García González (1980), for instance, noted that it is ‘un fenómeno muy frecuente en nuestra habla popular...este uso ha trascendido al habla culta, en la cual, no obstante, predomina la pronunciación normal’ (p. 118). Choy López (1986) similarly suggested that the lateral realization of /r/ was becoming more widely used by younger speakers: ‘en el habla culta son bastante infrecuentes estos casos de neutralización, aunque en las provincias occidentales, específicamente en Ciudad de La Habana, comienzan a tomar fuerza sobre todo entre los grupos más jóvenes’ (p. 409).

The present study examines the increased frequency of the lateral variant among younger speakers that was noted by García González (1980) and Choy López (1986) by comparing two generations of speakers. In addition to age, other social and linguistic factors that may contribute to the variation are considered, including following context, gender, and social status.

2. The study

The research presented in this paper examined the variation of syllable final (r) among a group of adult speakers of Cuban Spanish. Although interviewed in Miami, Florida, these individuals are assumed to remain representative speakers of the dialect spoken in central Cuba because of their brief length of residence in Miami and their adherence to a community network of other immigrants from their hometown. When Cubans settle in Miami after immigrating from Cuba, they encounter their own variety spoken by large numbers of other recently arrived immigrants from their home regions, and, because they are able to immerse themselves in a community that supports their dialect, they experience minimal pressure to modify their speech. Also contributing to persistence of the immigrant variety is the fact that Cuban immigrants who settle in Miami readily reestablish previously broken network ties and they socialize, and often work and live with, family and friends from home. This is the case for a large number of the subjects in this study, who work together because they helped one another find employment.

This study is based on conversational data collected from twenty-four individuals between the ages of 30-43 and 62-77. All of the subjects were born, raised, and had lived until their late twenties to mid-thirties, in and around a town in the northwest part of the central region of Cuba. As noted above, they were interviewed in Miami, Florida, where they had lived for varying lengths of time ranging from several weeks to four years. The data collection method involved gathering several participants together in a situation that they considered a social event. This method was chosen with the background and characteristics of this particular group in mind, and it facilitated data collection by reducing the anxiety individuals felt about being tape-recorded. Apart from encouraging participants to converse freely, they were also asked to read a word list and reading passage, but only the results from the conversations are presented here. Each data collection session rendered at least one hour of tape-recorded data. GOLDVARB was used to analyze the data statistically.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Phonetic context

The overall frequency of the lateral variant was 9.8% (289/2962). The lateral increased to 34.4% (98/285) preceding a pause, a context in which it competes with the standard variant, and decreased to 6.6% (137/2071) preceding a consonant, an environment in which it competes with assimilation, which occurred in 26.2% of cases of preconsonantal (r).

The results obtained with GOLDVARB indicated that following phonetic context has the strongest effect on the variation, with a range of 43, as shown in Table 1. A following pause favors the lateral (.85), as does a vowel (.62), but not a consonant (.42).

Table 1 Following context

Factor	Weight	Percent	Total	Range
Consonant	.42	6.6	137/2071	43
Vowel	.62	13.7	54/395	
Pause	.85	34.4	98/285	

N = 2751; Input .06; Log likelihood = -747.66; Sig. = 0.004

These findings, particularly frequency before a pause, are different from those reported in earlier studies on this variety, which found low rates of [l] across phonetic contexts. Fails (1984), for instance, found 5.8% lateralization before a pause, 1.4% before a consonant, and 0% before a vowel. Other studies found no significant differences preceding a pause and a consonant. Terrell (1976) reported 8% before a pause, 7% before a consonant, and 3% before a vowel. García González (1980) also reported similar rates before a consonant or a pause, as did López Morales (1992), who also noted that the lateral is disfavored preceding a vowel.

3.2 Age

Among the social factors examined, age had the strongest effect on the variation, as indicated by a range of 38, compared to 11 for gender, 14 for social status, and 25 for secondary economic activity. As shown in Table 2, the group of older speakers disfavored the lateral (.25), whereas the younger speakers favored it (.63). The 2.9% rate found here for the older speakers corroborates findings of earlier studies, which reported rates of 0% to 5% for speakers from this generation (López Morales, 1970, 1992; Terrell, 1976; Vallejo-Claros, 1970). The group of younger speakers used the lateral at an overall rate of 14.2%.

Table 2 Age

Factor	Weight	Percent	Total	Range
Older	.25	2.9	26/904	38
Younger	.63	14.2	263/1847	

N = 2751; Input .06; Log likelihood = -747.66; Sig. = 0.004

This increase in the frequency of [l] in the speech of the younger generation indicates that it has been involved in change and that it is no longer a stable variant that marks social status rather than age (Labov, 2001). The differences found here for the older and younger generations substantiate the claims made by García González (1980) and Choy López (1986) that the lateral variant had been increasing among younger speakers.

3.3 Gender

Gender, shown in Table 3, was also selected as a significant factor, but its effect on the variation is weak, as indicated by a range of 11. Men slightly favor the lateral (.55) and women slightly disfavor it (.45). It was expected that as a stable variant associated with lower status speech the lateral would show a stronger gender effect, and that women would be more conservative in their use, as has been found in studies on the lateral in Puerto Rican Spanish by, for example, Terrell (1982), who reported rates of 33% in word final position for men from the highest socioeconomic status group but only 11% for women from the same group. López Morales (1992) noted that men use more of this variant than women in San Juan because of its negative social evaluation. If the increase in the frequency of the lateral described here is a change from below, however, then women would show a tendency to actively participate in the change.

Table 3 Gender

Factor	Weight	Percent	Total	Range
Female	.44	7.1	97/1357	11
Male	.55	13.8	192/1394	

N = 2751; Input .06; Log likelihood = -747.66; Sig. = 0.004

3.4 Social Status

Social status, defined by education and occupation, also proved to have a relatively weak effect. As shown in Table 4, higher status speakers (professionals with university degrees) had a weight of .46, whereas lower status (skilled labor and high school or less) had a weight of .60. The fact that lower status favors the lateral variant was expected given its historical social distribution. Earlier studies reported that in all regional varieties of Cuban Spanish, the frequency of the lateral variant increased as social status decreased (Vallejo-Claros, 1970). Almendros (1958) maintained that the lateral occurred only in the speech of the lower socioeconomic status groups, and Guitart (1980) noted that because it was a stigmatized form, its frequency differentiated educated and noneducated speech.

Viewing the lateral variant from this perspective highlights the finding that higher status does not strongly disfavor it, as would be expected. This suggests that the earlier negative social evaluation of this variant has changed. Indeed, as noted earlier, studies published in the 1980s noted the change in the social distribution of the lateral variant, claiming that it had increased in 'el habla culta' (Choy López, 1986; García González, 1980).

Table 4 Social status

Factor	Weight	Percent	Total	Range
Higher	.46	10.0	193/1929	14
Lower	.60	11.7	96/822	

N = 2751; Input .06; Log likelihood = -747.66; Sig. = 0.004

3.5 Secondary economic activity

The results for age shown earlier suggest a change in apparent time. When the group of younger speakers is examined, considerable interspeaker variation is revealed, with rates ranging from 39% to 0%, shown in Figure 1. The highest rates (39% and 29%) are found for two of the men, and the lowest (0%) for two men and one woman. These two men with 0% and the one with 29% (Antonio) are cousins; they studied at the same university, are mechanical engineers, have similar social networks, and share a positive orientation to the local community (Hazen, 2002). In other words, they appear to be similar in every way. They differed, however, in one aspect: Antonio (29%) had always been active in producing and selling goods to supplement his extended family's income, whereas the other two men had never engaged in any economic activity beyond the occupation of engineer for which they had formally trained.

Portes and Hoffman (2003) write that 'Latin America is different from the advanced societies in that a significant proportion of the population is not incorporated into fully commodified, legally regulated working relations, but survives at their margin in a wide variety of subsistence and semi-clandestine economic activities' (p. 43). In an attempt to account for the variation found among the younger speakers, the factor secondary economic activity was introduced into the analysis. This factor was designed to capture participation in economic activities in which some of these subjects actively engaged but which did not correspond to their primary occupations or educational backgrounds. Based on subjects' accounts of their activities in Cuba, and subsequent inquiry into the nature of those activities, individuals were sorted into two groups, those who produced and sold goods as a secondary economic activity and those who did not. Collecting this information was straightforward because there is no stigma or shame attached to the behavior and subjects usually boasted about their activities, proud of their ability to generate income and goods for their family in spite of a difficult economic situation.

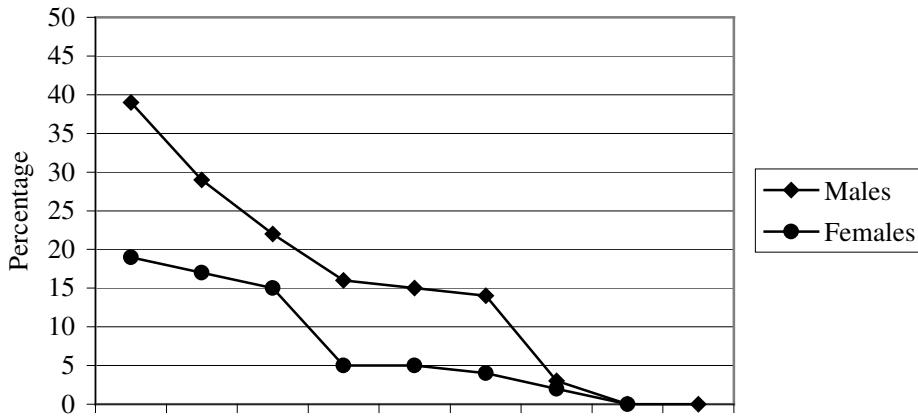


Figure 1 Younger speakers' lateral rates

Among the social factors, secondary economic activity had the second strongest effect on the occurrence of the lateral, after age. The results in Table 5 indicate that the lateral tends to be favored by active participation in secondary economic activities (.66), whereas no participation disfavors it (.41).

Table 5 Secondary economic activity

Factor	Weight	Percent	Total	Range
Yes	.66	20.3	188/927	25
No	.41	5.5	101/1824	

N = 2751; Input .06; Log likelihood = -747.66; Sig. = 0.004

Speakers tended to use the lateral variant more frequently if they participated in the secondary economy, regardless of the nature of their occupational activities within the legitimized economy. The activities individuals engaged in when producing for the secondary economy are in effect working class activities, involving manual or agricultural labor, and were carried out on a small scale. For instance, the participants in this study, regardless of their primary occupation, educational attainment, or gender, made shoes, soap, and ice cream, and raised pigs and chickens in their homes to sell or barter. Antonio, for example, the young engineer referred to earlier, recounted his attempts to produce various goods, including shoes, which he set out to make with his mother, a teacher, and his brother, an engineer. An excerpt from his story follows (use of the lateral is indicated in bold):

Nosotros empezamos allá una vez a hacer zapatos, ahora con- en medio de todo el rollo este. Empezamos a incursionar a hacer zapatos, en la casa. Y entonces mi mamá los cosía, por arriba, y mi hermano y yo los montábamos. Pero eso lo aprendimos con el tiempo eso no fue así de pronto... Hicimos el primer par de zapatos lo hicimos- lo hicimos para probarlo uno mismo no? Me pongo mis zapatos beigecitos, y me acuerdo fui a ver a María a Santa Clara... Cuando yo llegué a mi casa le dije a mami- no mami hay algo que nos ha fallado... No y tuvimos que ir a buscar ayuda técnica....

Individuals who carry out secondary economic activities have strong ties to the local community and interact with individuals of diverse backgrounds in their trade negotiations and in arranging to

purchase (on the black market) the goods they need to produce their own products. Thus, an engineer who makes shoes must somehow obtain leather, material for the soles, glue, gasoline to transport the goods (if indeed the individual owns a car), and so on. Within the secondary economy, a barter system operates that allows individuals to obtain necessary materials in exchange for other items. Moreover, the shadow economy is illegal and a person may be sentenced to prison if caught; therefore, individuals develop intense relationships based on mutual trust with the individuals with whom they carry out negotiations. It is imperative that these individuals have strong ties to their peer network, and the strength of these links is evident in their use of the nonstandard lateral variant (J. Milroy, 2003).

I suggest that the lateral variant has taken on an additional layer of social significance that extends its covert prestige to include secondary illegal activities that are working and rural class in nature. These activities not only embody ‘the roughness and toughness supposedly characteristic of WC life,’ described by Trudgill (1972, p. 183), they also symbolize individual enterprise and initiative, the ability to *resolver*, or find solutions to the problems created by scarcity of basic goods.

4. Conclusion

The lateral variant of syllable final (r) in Cuban Spanish has gone largely uninvestigated in the last two to three decades. While the lateral was traditionally considered a stable variant that marked lower status, embedded in works by the linguists Choy López (1986) and García González (1980) were suggestions that its frequency was increasing among educated and younger speakers. This paper presented findings that confirmed that the lateral has been involved in generational change.

The factors that were found to constrain the variation of [l] are shown in Table 6. Following phonetic context has the strongest effect, and it was shown that a following pause strongly favors the lateral, whereas a consonant disfavors it slightly. Age was the external factor with the strongest effect, and the results pointed to clear differences between the older and younger groups, with the younger group favoring and the older group disfavoring the lateral. The social factor with the second strongest effect was participation in secondary economic activities, which are those in which individuals, regardless of their occupation or educational level, participate to supplement their incomes, and which may diverge radically from the primary ones carried out in their legitimate occupations. It was found that engaging in these types of activities tends to favor use of the lateral. Social status and gender were found to have small effects on the variation.

Table 6 Constraints on [l]

Factor	Range
Following context	43
Age	38
Secondary economic activity	25
Social status	14
Gender	11

This paper has presented an exploratory study of the lateral variant of syllable final (r) in a variety of Cuban Spanish. Future research should examine the variant synchronically and diachronically in both this variety and other Caribbean varieties, particularly Puerto Rican Spanish.

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