

Contrast and variation in three Romance vowel systems

Margaret E. L. Renwick, University of Georgia

As the ten Latin vowels historically lost their quantity contrast, a seven-vowel system emerged in popular Latin, including /i e ε a ɔ o u/. This set has been further shaped by subsequent changes specific to each Romance variety, giving rise to distinct phonological inventories across languages. In this talk, I use data from three Romance languages to show that fluctuations in vowel quality still occur synchronically, particularly in the dimension of vowel height. Is this variation a “threat” to phonological contrast, indicating impending change?

In Romanian, a major change to the seven-vowel system was the development of central vowels /ʌ ɨ/, which are historical allophones. Synchronically, the phonetic distributions of these lexically rare vowels are heavily overlapping, particularly in continuous speech. I argue that this overlap is tolerated because of the strong contextual restrictions that still affect /ʌ ɨ/. Speaker-hearers can rely on phonological environment, not just acoustics, to identify the vowel.

In Catalan, the mid vowel pairs /e ε/ and /o ɔ/ contrast in height. Their lexical assignments vary across dialects, and these oppositions are potentially affected by speakers’ bilingualism in Spanish, which lacks a height contrast in mid vowels. I show that most Catalan-dominant speakers maintain four mid vowels, even if their intuitions of lexical assignment are poor; however, social factors including language dominance and age affect speakers’ lexical assignment of mid vowel height.

Standard Italian also distinguishes /e ε/ and /o ɔ/; as in Catalan, their lexical implementation varies systematically across regions. Via a laboratory study and a large-scale corpus analysis, I show that variation in stressed mid vowel height occurs within individual speakers, and within Italian cities. While mid vowels in some words behave consistently, others are highly variable; word-specific patterns may also override broader, phonologically conditioned tendencies. This widespread variation provides evidence that the mappings between lexicon and phonetics are weak for the Italian mid vowels, and its geographically specific nature shows regionality also has a role to play.

In Romanian, Catalan, and Italian, these height-based instabilities all affect phonetically adjacent vowels, whose distinctions are supported by only a few minimal pairs – they are *marginal contrasts* – and thus we may ask whether mergers are underway. After all, contrasts lacking minimal pairs are more likely to merge over historical time. In fact, in all three languages, most native speakers maintain intuitions that these vowel pairs are distinct, and phonetic evidence for separate vowel categories is readily available. Nonetheless, the lexical, structural, and socio-geographical variation illustrated here may be implicated in future phonological restructuring of these Romance vowel systems.