

Social and structural constraints in lectal cohesion[☆]

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Available online 12 December 2015



Abstract

This paper analyzes co-variation among six sociolinguistic variables of Brazilian Portuguese (diphthongal /ê/, coda /r/-retroflexion, coda /r/-deletion, nominal number agreement, third person subject-verb agreement, and first person subject-verb agreement), in a set of structurally related and unrelated variables. The main objective is to assess which social and linguistic factors promote the co-occurrence of different language variants in speakers' speech. The results show that co-variation can occur both between structurally related variables (e.g. the syntactic variables) and structurally unrelated ones (e.g. /r/-retroflexion and nominal agreement), as well as between variables of different domains (phonological and syntactic variables). We argue that, socially, lectal cohesion is a result of greater density of communication among peers than with out-group speakers, as shown by a higher degree of lectal cohesion among less mobile speakers, living in central areas, and whose parents were also born in the community. Linguistically, independent variables such as phonic salience (which has been demonstrated to correlate with multiple sociolinguistic variables) underlie patterns of co-variation more generally, as less salient variants tend to co-occur more often than more salient ones.

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Keywords: Lectal cohesion; Density of communication; Phonic salience; Brazilian Portuguese

1. Introduction

The analysis of co-variation is a relatively unexplored area within language studies (Guy, 2013). The main question is whether multiple variables in a community correlate in individual speakers' usage: do speakers who tend to employ variant *x* of variable A also tend to employ variant *y* of variable B, or are variables independently embedded in language and society? Even though a number of sociolinguistic works have focused on multiple variables in a given community, systematic analyses of how these variables may inter-relate to one another have not been done as frequently.

On the one hand, one could expect certain variables to co-vary as the result of language-internal pressures for phonemic symmetry or paradigmatic regularization. Vowel chain shifts are a good example of how one variable phenomenon may affect other variables in the language system. On the other hand, recurrent patterns of social stratification, stylistic variation, and changes in progress described in sociolinguistic studies (see e.g. Labov, 2001) would also lead one to expect that certain pairs of variables co-vary, regardless of their structural relations. Sociolinguistic

[☆] A partial version of this paper, co-authored with Gregory Guy, has been published at *U. Penn Working Papers in Linguistics* 21(2). I thank the audiences at the International Workshop on Dialect Coherence (Amsterdam, Jan/2014) and at NWAV43 (Chicago, Oct/2014), who contributed to this paper through their many questions and suggestions. I also thank Gregory Guy, Frans Hinskens, Ronald Mendes, and the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and thoughtful comments; and FAPESP for funding this research (Grant 2012/01930-9). Any remaining faults are naturally my own.

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variables such as (ING) (see e.g. [Trudgill, 1974](#); [Labov, 2001](#)), coronal stop deletion (see e.g. [Wolfram, 1969](#); [Santa Ana, 1991](#)), and th-stopping (see e.g. [Labov, 2006 \[1966\]](#); [Dubois and Horvath, 1998](#); [Newlin-Lukowicz, 2013](#)) have repeatedly been demonstrated to correlate with speakers' sex/gender, ethnicity and/or social class in many different communities.

This paper analyzes cross-correlations among six variables of Brazilian Portuguese – diphthongal (ê), R-retroflexion, R-deletion, NP number agreement, third person plural (3PP) and first person plural (1PP) number agreement –, with the objective of identifying social and structural constraints that promote co-variation. By analyzing both phonological and syntactic variables, as well as structurally related and structurally unrelated pairs, it is possible to contrast patterns of co-variation among them and tease apart the effect of language-internal and social constraints in co-variability. Section 2 reviews previous works, which reveal a general lack of lectal cohesion based on social categories; it is generally concluded that co-variability might be better explained by structural similarity. Section 3 presents the data and methods for the present study, as well as some predictions based on the variables' social stratification and structural relations. Results are discussed in section 4, which analyzes broad patterns of co-variation among the variables, as well as the effect of social and internal constraints. From the perspective of social cohesion, we argue that co-variability is not driven by traditional categories such as sex/gender, age or social class, but rather by the more fundamental principle of *density of communication* ([Gumperz, 1971](#)) – the amount and nature of conversational interactions that members of a community may have with one another. From the perspective of structural cohesion, we show that co-variability is conditioned not only by structural similarities among dependent variables, but also by more general linguistic constraints correlated with multiple variables, such as phonic salience ([Naro, 1981](#)). Finally, section 5 summarizes the conclusions and points to future studies.

2. Previous works

Strong evidence of the *structural* cohesion of sociolects was shown in [Labov's \(2006 \[1966\]\)](#) seminal work on New York City English, in which he demonstrates co-variability between certain pairs of phonetic variables: (aeh)- and (oh)-raising as in *bad* and *law* respectively; (ay) and (aw) as in *ride* and *loud*; (ah) and (oh) as in *hot* and *law*. For instance, speakers who have a low index for (aeh)-raising also tend to have a low index for (oh)-raising, and, conversely, those who have a high index for (aeh) also tend to have a high index for (oh) ([Labov, 2006 \[1966\]:363](#)). Labov concludes that the organization of the vowel space of New York City English follows Martinet's principle of functional economy, a tendency towards equal spacing of phonemic units.

[Guy \(2013\)](#) shows that co-variation can also occur across linguistic domains, between phonological and syntactic variables. In a sample of 20 Brazilian Portuguese speakers from Rio de Janeiro, Guy analyzes four stable sociolinguistic variables which are sharply socially stratified: -S deletion (as in *menos/meno-Ø* 'less'), denasalization of final unstressed vowels (as in *vagem/vage* 'green bean'), NP number agreement (as in *os leões/os leão-Ø* 'the lions') and 3PP VP number agreement (as in *eles disseram/disse-Ø* 'they said'). There are significant negative correlations between final -S deletion and NP plural marking (Pearson's $r = -0.74$, $p < 0.01$), and between denasalization and 3PP verb agreement ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.05$). In both these cases, there may also be structural motivations for the observed correlations, as the two pairs have a surface trading relationship; in Brazilian Portuguese, standard NP plural marking is realized with a plural morpheme -S in many cases (as in *os amigos/os amigo-Ø* 'the friends'), and the standard 3PP number morpheme is the nasalization of the final vowel in some verb tenses (as in *eles comem/eles come-Ø* 'they eat'). Although each pair of variables refer to distinct linguistic phenomena (phonological and morphosyntactic processes), they are structurally related; thus, the correlations between -S deletion/NP plural marking and denasalization/3PP plural marking could be learned from surface linguistic forms rather than a social perception that these variables have similar patterns of social stratification. NP and VP number agreement are also structurally related and exhibit a significant positive correlation in speakers' usage ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$). The other three pairs of variables – denasalization/-S deletion, VP agreement/-S deletion, and denasalization/NP agreement – are not structurally related, and only the latter of these pairs has a significant correlation ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.05$).

[Guy \(2013\)](#) also investigated broader patterns of variant clustering by classifying speakers' usage rates into "high" (H), "middle" (M), and "low" (L), from which one would expect greater social cohesion when all four variables have the same rating (HHHH, MMMM, or LLLL). Although he finds a better-than-chance distribution with 50% of the speakers employing either three or all four variants at the same rate, the results are not overwhelming: the other 50% of his sample have the same ratings for only two of the variables with no meaningful clustering. [Guy \(2013\)](#) concludes that the overall results for this set of variables seem to be more reliably attributed to language internal reasons than to socially motivated correlations or sociolectal cohesion.

[Tagliamonte and Waters \(2011\)](#) have investigated co-variation among changes in progress in Toronto English, with the hypothesis that innovators would share a repertoire of innovative variants in their speech. Two recent changes (quotatives *be like/say/go*, etc. and intensifiers *so/very/really/pretty*, etc.) and two longitudinal changes (deontic *have to/have got to*

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