

Neutralization of the place contrast in the posterior sounds in Croatian

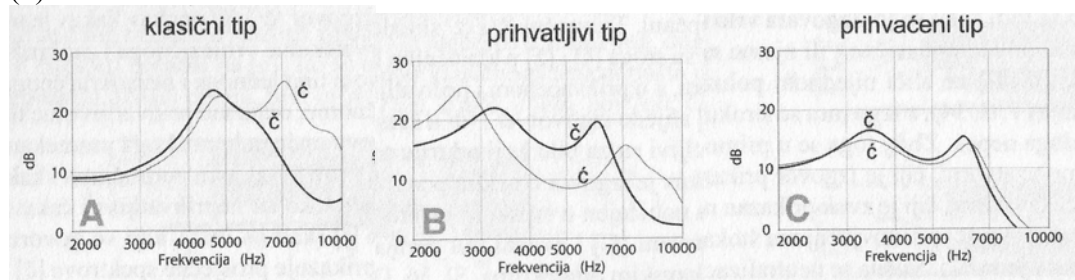
Phoneticians and phonologists commonly use the same IPA symbols for sounds that can differ in their articulatory and acoustic characteristics. Thus, for example, Polish posterior non-palatalized sounds were in the past generally transcribed as palatoalveolars [ʃ, ʒ, ʧ, ʤ], where, phonetically they are rather more similar to retroflexes, and, in fact, phonologically, they also behave more like retroflexes (Hamann 2003). The use of the same symbol for sounds which are phonetically slightly different seems to simplify the comparison of sounds across languages, however, in the end it might also obscure certain generalizations. In this presentation I want to discuss exactly show the impact the small phonetic detail might have on the development of the phonological system of a language.

Standard Croatian is often described in phonological literature to have the following system of sibilant phonemes:

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|-----------|
| (1) | alveolar | s z ts |
| | post-alveolar | š ž tš dž |
| | alveopalatal (prepalatal) | tc dz |

However, it is clear that the standard Croatian system is not stable any more, the contrast between soft prepalatals and their hard counterparts being more and more often not realized or realized inconsistently. Škarić (2009) analyzes acoustically the realization of the contrasts and states that even the realizations by specially trained speakers (such as actors) indicate that the contrast is being neutralized, the graphs in (2) representing the “classical” pronunciation in A, and the actual realization by actors in B, and by average speakers in C.

(3)



One explanation for the process of neutralization is structural and refers to the high perceptual density of the inventory of sibilants in Croatian. However, this account alone cannot be satisfactory. Polish sibilant system is actually even more dense, see (3), yet there is no tendency to neutralize the contrast between prepalatals and hard post-alveolars in Polish.

(3) The system of Polish sibilants

- | | |
|---------------|-----------|
| dental | s z ts dz |
| prepalatal | ɕ ʑ tɕ dʑ |
| post-alveolar | ʃ ʒ tʃ dʒ |

In my talk I propose a solution referring to the perception of categories by the speakers of the language. It is often overlooked that the dialectal variation in the realization of the hard-soft contrast is very salient in Croatian, and that the sounds of the target standard system are most often articulated the way they are realized by any given speaker as in their original dialect. In the study by Hamann and Cavar (in progress) twenty students of the University of Zadar were recorded and a wide range of realizations for both post-alveolar and prepalatal series has been observed. I argue that the speakers of Croatian had to develop a huge tolerance for the identification of sounds as members of each one particular known to them category, which might be interpreted as perceptual constraints not strictly ranked but with constraints as if partly overlapping (cf Boersma 1995). As a result, the categories are bound to mix up and overlap.

Literature

- Boersma, Paul. 1995. *Functional Phonology*. Utrecht: LOT.
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- Škarić, Ivo. 2009. *Hrvatski izgovor*. Zagreb: Globus.