The paradox of /l/-vocalisation in Romance: phonetics, phonotactics, and frequency effects

Daniela Müller
Universitat de Tolosa 2 – Lo Miralh & Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
daniela.muller@univ-tlse2.fr

1. Background

The phenomenon:

\[ /V > u, \varnothing, \varnothing, \ldots \text{preconsonantally or wordfinally} \]

frequently found in, e.g., among Indo-European languages, in Germanic,
Slavic, Romance, etc.

Example:


nameula sed-stada […] ut seol, obhe […] (Cf. according to Plinius, I have three kinds of quality; […] dark [V dull] when it is in word-final or syllable-final position […] as in ‘sol’, ‘silva’, […]?”) Pisicamian (6th c. CE), Institutio grammaticarum, l. 38 (Keil 1961b: 29).

Following silence masks tongue tip contact release;

The fact that the schema /u +alveolar/ seems to be grounded in articulation
homogeneity.

But: Both historical and dialectological data suggest that /V/
vocalisation in Romance:

occurred first before alveolar consonants, often exclusively so;

some sometimes only when the preceding vowel was /u/;

Perceptual dissimilation in /ab, ad/ > /am, on/ (e.g., Recasens 1996).

Can frequency effects contribute to a better understanding of the
Romance paradox?

3. Method, materials

Token frequencies of /V/k/ and /V/wC/-sequences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V</th>
<th>token frequency (per million words)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/a</td>
<td>141,211,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/i</td>
<td>128,207,441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u</td>
<td>1,500,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o</td>
<td>1,000,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɛ</td>
<td>150,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/æ</td>
<td>150,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e</td>
<td>150,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɪ</td>
<td>150,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u</td>
<td>150,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Token frequency (words in L&S)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vw + alveolar</th>
<th>token frequency (per million words)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/V + alveolar</td>
<td>710,614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/V + labial</td>
<td>207,414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Theoretical predictions

a) /V + adveolar:

b) /V + labial:

5. Results

6. Discussion

The absence of vocalisation in /ab/-sequences (“mudurr” > “much”, “muto”) in Spanish and Portuguese may be due to this
scheme being better representable than any other /VwC/-sequences.

The fact that the schema /u +alveolar/ has a similar strength as /Vw + alveolar/ suggests that, too, would constitute an exception to /V + vocalisation – this not being the case, it seems that in favourable phonetic contexts, regular phonetic sound change may override phonotactics.

With the /V(w)labil/-sequences, the existing /V(w)labial/-schema seems too weak to allow for a strong phonotactic influence; /V + vocalisation seems to be grounded in articulation and perception only.

7. Upshot

The study of frequency effects, together with our knowledge of the
historical developments and the articulatory and acoustic-
perceptual underpinnings of the sound change can enlarge our
understanding of /V-vocalisation in the Romance languages.

References


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