

REGAN, Brendan (2022). The social meaning of a merger: The evaluation of an Andalusian Spanish consonant merger (ceceo). *Language in Society*, 51(3), 481-510.

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Amalia Ovín Rodríguez
Universidad de La Rioja
amalia.ovin@alum.unirioja.es

In his 2022 paper, Regan utilises Lambert *et al.*'s (1960) matched-guise technique to evaluate social perceptions towards dialectal variations in the Andalusian Spanish consonant merger known as *ceceo*. Regan describes *ceceo* as consisting in the realisation of the coronal fricative as a voiceless dental fricative, either in the form [ʃθ], [θs] or [θ] (2022, p. 484); this is in opposition to its split (*distinción*), which instead shows a direct grapheme-morpheme correspondence of /θ/ for <z, ci, ce> and /s/ for <s> (*ibid.*). This study centres on the use of the merger and the split in the province of Huelva, in southwestern Spain, particularly in the capital of the province (Huelva) and a nearby town (Lepe). Regan explicitly states his research questions (p. 486), namely the social evaluations of *ceceo* and *distinción*, how they vary depending on speaker and listener features and what differences can be found between localities.

These hypotheses were tested in a matched-guise experiment in which the stimuli corresponded to 2-to-6-second clips from digitally-manipulated recordings of spontaneous elicited from sociolinguistic interviews with twelve speakers. They were balanced by gender and origin (both localities mentioned above: Lepe and Huelva) and had obtained at least secondary education. The clips were carefully selected on a series of criteria detailed in page 487 and balanced by gender and grapheme.

The test was administered online using a Qualtrics survey where participants were randomly assigned to a version of the test, each containing twelve guises balanced by variant (*ceceo* or *distinción*), gender and origin. Each speaker was heard only once and twelve pseudo-randomised distractors which did not contain the initial coronal fricatives were included. Participants could hear each guise however many times they wanted and had to answer nine different questions after each of them, concerning the speaker's perceived socioeconomic status, education, how feminine or masculine their voices sounds, their friendliness, rural- or urbanness, formality, occupation, age and origin. Open-ended questions were added for each guise, and, at the end of the test,

participants had to fill out a demographic questionnaire about themselves.

The results mirrored previous literature on production throughout Andalucía. Namely, *ceceo* was associated with lower socioeconomic status and rural areas (i.e., Lepe, a town, as opposed to Huelva, a city). In addition to this, Huelva and Lepe listeners associate “*distinción* with more overt prestige than *ceceo*” (Regan, 2022, p. 499), and speakers with this split were considered more urban, more formal and of higher status than speakers with *ceceo*. Nevertheless, the author notes that these perceptions were influenced by both listener and speaker characteristics.

Looking more closely at the paper, it is worth noting a few points. Firstly, the review of previous research in sociophonetics (particularly mergers, splits and their social evaluations; pp. 482-483), dialectal variations (pp. 483-484) and *ceceo* and *distinción* in Peninsular Spanish (pp. 484-485) and the social changes that have occurred in the two localities in which the study is framed (pp. 485-486) was carried out remarkably well. Not only does such a thorough contextualisation frame the paper within the literature, but it also explains and helps predict possible outcomes of the study. It must nevertheless be mentioned that these predictions are in no way clearly stated as hypotheses, and only the guiding research questions are explicitly given.

Another strength of the paper is the thorough account of the methodology employed to design the experiment and, specifically, to create the guises. In addition, to promote transparency and replicability, the author clearly enumerates which recording devices and sampling rates were used for creating the guises, as well as how exactly they were manipulated digitally. For clarity, an appendix includes examples of the stimuli phrases.

In addition to these points, the study is well balanced for gender and age of the participants, ranging from 18 to 67, and is very thorough in the inclusion of people from different educational backgrounds, from primary education to graduate degrees, with 46% of them having an undergraduate university degree (p. 489). Additionally, the participants are also well balanced for origin, so as not to skew the results in any which direction (p. 489). Regan’s (2022) experiment showed a thorough design that avoided assumption-making when analysing the results, as it included both a questionnaire of traits that participants had to respond concerning their perceptions of the voices they listened to and multiple-choice questions regarding perceived occupation, perceived age and perceived origin. The addition of demographic questions about the participants, optional open-comment questions and optional final comments provide a fuller picture of both the participants themselves and their perceptions of each guise.

The author is able to justify the results for his experiment by linking them to previous dialectology findings, in which “linguistic forms lacking institutional prestige are valued higher in solidarity and lower in status” (Regan, 2022, p. 493). This argument is made in reference to the open-comment question in which male

and female guises received drastically different judgements, but it refers to the general evaluation of the *ceceo* guise as more easy-going or pleasant. Moreover, female guises elicited more extreme reactions than male ones: *distinción* guises were rated as more urban and formal than males, and *ceceo* guises were perceived as more rural and informal. Regan (p. 500) argues that women adopt *distinción* as a reaction to being regarded more negatively than their male counterparts when using highly localised or less overtly prestigious features. This is taken as insight into why women have led the split of the voiceless dental fricative throughout Andalucía and why women adopt prestige forms at a higher rate than men (p. 500). Regan nevertheless indicates that these findings should be investigated further, since other social factors may interact with gender. Voice features may have an impact in the social evaluations of the guises and cannot be separated from the results obtained in studies of this nature.

Lastly, concerning non-textual depictions of data, this paper chose to use both tables and graphs, which helps to clearly visualise the data. Additionally, the use of participant's actual responses to the test allows for a closer look at the actual experiment. Further research on the topic of evaluational attitudes towards languages could contribute to improving language policies and language education in multiple countries.

Bibliography

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