Phonological Variations in Spanish and Korean Dialects

This paper will explore the phonological variances in specific dialects of both Spanish and Korean. By comparing the dialects of these two languages (and the perceptions of the speakers of these dialects), we hope to discover a relationship between the linguistic aspects of a dialect and the stereotypes associated with it. We chose to investigate dialects in Spanish and Korean because they are not genetically related; therefore, if there is a commonality between the phonology of these dialects and the way they are perceived, then this relationship has the possibility of being universal.

Bogotá is the capital city of Columbia, where the Bogotá dialect, Bogotano, is the dominant form of Spanish. Bogotano is considered the “standard” dialect of Spanish in Latin America. Conversely, Costeño is a large region of Columbia that ecompases several other cities. The Costeño dialect is typically looked down on by residents of Bogotá, who believe that Bogotano is the most pure form of Spanish (Orozco, 2012).

Bogotano preserves the five ‘pure’ tense vowels of the Spanish language: i, e, a, o, u. Costeño, however, adds 3 new vowels to this list: ε, ι, and ο. Costeño accents also feature a lengthening of certain consonant sounds preceding the use of one of these three lax vowel phonemes. This addition of vowel sounds and lengthening of consonants is the effect of slurring of the implosive /s/. Bogotano retains the implosive /s/ in speech except for in a few rare occasions. However, Costeño speakers are more likely to slur the implosive /s/ sound, weaken it, or in some cases, completely delete it
The phenomenon of dialectal differences in South Korea, particularly between Seoul and Gyeongsang, is a topic of interest among linguists and sociolinguists. Gyeongsang is a large region comprising the southeastern part of Korea, with a total population of approximately 13 million, making it the second largest dialectal community after the standard Seoul dialect. While Seoul is an urban metropolis, Gyeongsang is a region of rural countrysides, with a few big cities that may be well-known to Koreans but aren't particularly international. The dialect of Korean spoken in Seoul is considered to be the "standard," while the Gyeongsang dialect is perceived as the most distinguishable dialect in Korea.

A study was conducted in South Korea that investigated the way that Gyeongsang residents perceived their own dialect as compared to the Seoul standard dialect. Kang (2015) used the Preston method to measure these attitudes, which involves asking participants to draw dialect boundaries on a map and describe those dialects. Afterwards, the participants are asked open-ended questions about the language. The results of this study were surprising. While previous studies have shown that most Koreans prefer the dialect of their hometown, Gyeongsangdo residents consistently rate the Seoul dialect as most pleasant. Researchers have dubbed this phenomenon "linguistic insecurity" (Kang, 2015).

The study found that 66% of Gyeongsang residents negatively evaluated their own dialect, with 46% describing it as "boorish" (춘스러운). 63% of Gyeongsang residents described the Gyeongsang dialect as having a "strong accent", while none of
the participants described the Seoul dialect as having one. Instead, 94% of them described the Seoul dialect as having a “soft accent”. The top 3 most common adjectives Gyeongsang residents used to describe their own dialects were “bad Korean” (울바르지못한한국어이다), “angry” (화가난), and “likeable” (호감있게들리는). Excluding “likeable”, these are surprisingly negative words used to describe one’s own dialect. Conversely, the top 3 most common adjectives Gyeongsang residents used to describe the Seoul dialect were “classy” (세련된), “affable” (상냥한), and “educated” (지적인). As described in the explanation of the Preston method above, at the end of the experiment the participants were asked to answer open-ended questions about their dialect. One of these questions was about whether it was acceptable to use the Gyeongsang dialect in broadcasts and public speaking. Above 60% of the informants answered that it is better to speak the Seoul dialect in such a situation, and about 25% of them agreed that it is absolutely necessary to speak Seoul dialect. According to the conductor of this study, Kang (2015), “Gyeongsang dialect speakers value highly for Gyeongsang dialect in solidarity but they have a low regard for Gyeongsang dialect in status”. 

The phonological differences between the Seoul dialect and the Gyeongsang dialect include both vowels and consonants. In the Seoul dialect, the open-mid front unrounded vowel “ɛ” is in the process of merging with the close-mid front unrounded vowel “e”. Minimal pairs featuring these two vowel sounds are only differentiated by context for younger Seoul dialect speakers. In the Gyeongsang dialect, however, this merging has already taken place. The dialect now lacks “ɛ”, and only has “e”. Another merging that happened in the Gyeongsang dialect is the current lack of distinction
between the close central unrounded vowel “ɨ” and the open-mid back unrounded vowel “ʌ”. There is a theory that the “ɛ”-“e” merger happened in the Gyeongsang dialect to decrease articulatory effort by reducing mouth opening. Later, the “ɨ”-“ʌ” merger happened to balance the vowel system, giving the dialect two front, two central, and two back vowels. Another theory is explained by Lee & Jongman (2016):

...by lowering /e/ to /ɛ/ positioned in the middle between /i/ and /a/, younger Seoul speakers might be able to better enhance the high–mid–low contrast (/i/–/ɛ/–/a/) as well as the front–back contrast (/ɛ/–/ʌ/). This argument might explain the merged /e–ɛ/ vowel in "Kyungsang Korean which is located in a higher position than that of younger Seoul speakers and accordingly close to /e/ rather than /ɛ/. That is, Kyungsang Korean that had not had /ʌ/ would be more likely to raise /ɛ/ to /e/ to enhance the front–back contrast (/e/–/o/).

The main difference in consonants between the Seoul dialect and the Gyeongsang dialect is the lack of distinction in the Gyeongsang dialect between the fortis fricative /s*/ and the non-fortis fricative /s/. This distinction is significant in the Seoul dialect, since the fortis and non-fortis fricatives differ in their frication/aspiration duration, centroid frequency, and H1–H2 in the following vowel. In word-initial position, the frication duration is shorter for the non-fortis /s/ than for the fortis /s*/. However, the aspiration duration is shorter for the fortis /s*/ than for the non-fortis /s/. When the frication duration includes the aspiration portion, the two fricatives are not significantly different. As for centroid frequency, the fortis fricative has a higher centroid frequency

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1 "Kyungsang" is a different way of romanizing what has been referred to previously in the paper as “Gyeongsang"
than the non-fortis fricative. Also, the H1-H2 at vowel onset is higher following the non-fortis /s/ than the fortis /s*/. In the Gyeongsang dialect, the fortis /s*/ is neutralized to the non-fortis /s/. The younger generation, however, seems to be in the process of recovering this distinction, possibly due to influence from mass media that leads to more exposure to the Seoul dialect (Lee & Jongman, 2016).

Another difference in consonant sounds between the Seoul and Gyeongsang dialects is the voice-onset time for different stops. Korean has three different variations on stops: lenis, fortis, and aspirated. According to Lee & Jongman (2012), the VOT classifies Korean stops with 71.5% accuracy. Gyeongsang dialect speakers have well-separated VOT ranges, with a classification accuracy of 83%, while Seoul dialect speakers have overlap between the lenis and aspirated stop. In fact, there is evidence to show that VOT differences between the lenis and aspirated stops in Seoul Korean have been decreasing over the past 50 years. Lenis stops in the Seoul dialect have a VOT longer than in the Gyeongsang dialect, but the aspirated stops in Gyeongsang show a longer VOT than in Seoul (Lee & Jongman, 2012).

By comparing the differences between Bogotano and Costeño to the differences between the Seoul dialect and Gyeongsang dialect, we have studied the effect that phonology has on the perception of a dialect and its speakers. While the specific differences in phonology may not be the same, we can see a general relationship between the alteration of the phonetic inventory of a language and the subsequent alienation of those speakers who have altered it.
Works Cited

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