

/f/ > [h] in regional Italian: an acoustic-articulatory production study

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Abstract

The current study is concerned with the phonetic sound change of /f/ > [h] in regional Italian. This feature has been informally documented within several regional communities, including the province of Brescia (Lombardy), rural areas of Sardinia, and several communities across Calabria. Due to the inconsistency of this feature, it has not attracted much attention from Italian linguists in the recent past. Despite the consistent environment in which this sound change occurs, – that is, a word-initial /f/ immediately followed by a vowel – the process is not exhibited by every speaker in each of the aforementioned regions. In Sardinia, there appear to be two distinct processes equally at work: /f/ > [h], and deletion, /f/ > Ø. Whereas in Calabria, the latter process appears to coincide with a larger process of word-initial consonant deletion which occurs with stops and fricatives (Lloyd 1987; Rohlf's 1966; Wagner 1941).

The objective of this study is to analyze and document the sound change across varieties of Italian, as well as to determine acoustic and articulatory variability across regions. The investigation begins with a historical overview, tracing the origins of the shift from /f/ to [h] in Italo-Romance varieties. This will be accompanied by a review of the relevant literature on /f/ > [h] across Spanish and other Romance languages. The process is considerably documented in Spanish, suggesting the sound change in Italian may originate from a similar source.

Furthermore, this project will employ acoustic analysis techniques to examine the articulatory and acoustic properties associated with the production of /f/ and /h/ in different regional varieties. Data will be collected in informal conversations with Italians from various regions. By exploring spectrographic data and their acoustic correlates on Praat software, this study will reveal the various acoustic cues and articulatory gestures involved in the production of /f/ and /h/ across regions and social factors. Demographic information from each participant will be collected in the form of a questionnaire. The data from this questionnaire is collected to better understand the role of sociolinguistic variables – such as age, gender, and social class – in the production of either segment. The data collected here will undergo statistical analyses to determine the distribution of the sound change and its acoustic properties across regions and sociolinguistic variables.

The results of this study will contribute to a perception experiment to be conducted in the future. The findings from the production study will also provide insight into the complex interaction between historical sound change, acoustic/articulatory phonetics, sociolinguistic variables, and identity. Moreover, this study emphasizes the importance of collecting and analyzing data from language varieties generally neglected from the literature. Due to language ideologies and official language policy, properties of non-standard and local Italian varieties are largely undocumented. This research contributes to the documentation of non-standard Italian, and in turn, potentially helps to valorize the ethnolinguistic and cultural identities of speakers.