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SOME INTERACTIONS BETWEEN WORD, FOOT, AND SYLLABLE STRUCTURE IN THE HISTORY OF SPANISH

Abstract. This chapter analyzes the loss of unstressed vowels in Old Spanish from an Optimality-Theoretic perspective. The conditions of vowel loss are made explicit: only posttonic vowels are affected, that is, vowels appearing after primary or secondary stress, whereas initial vowels are generally preserved. Additionally, the loss of final vowels, known as apocope, is conditioned by a morphological constraint that bans deletion of lexical material. According to this constraint, only \(-\ e\) can be deleted in final position, because of its status as a desinence without meaning. The process of vowel loss in medial position, known as syncope, already began in Latin with the goal of optimizing the prosodic format of words and it continued in Romance, West Romance being more affected by it. The increase of syncope in Old Spanish is interpreted as the result of Germanic influence, whose stress-timed characteristics made stressed syllables differ from unstressed syllables more markedly in prominence. Moreover, final vowel deletion was partly conditioned by the limitation on complex codas. Between the 11th and the 13th centuries this ban on complex codas was removed and all cases of final \(-\ e\) tended to be lost, being again restored towards the end of the 13th century. The increase of apocope is interpreted as taking place under the influence of exogenous forces, especially French. The chapter closes with a discussion of the formalization of grammatical change by constraint demotion and promotion. The conclusion is reached that constraint demotion is the normal means of endogenous sound change, whereas constraint demotion followed by promotion of the same constraint might be a clear sign of externally conditioned change.

Keywords: Apocope, competing systems, consonant clusters, constraint demotion and promotion, diachronic sound change: intrinsic vs. extrinsic; epenthesis, foot: trochee, dactyl; hierarchy or ranking of constraints, language acquisition, lexicon optimization, nominal class marker, promotion of the (un)marked, quantity-sensitivity vs. quantity-insensitivity, stress-timed vs. syllable-timed languages, syllable: coda, onset; syncope, vowels: pretonic vs. posttonic.

0. INTRODUCTION: STRESSED VS. UNSTRESSED VOWELS

In the entire Romania, beginning at the latest with Vulgar Latin, vowels evolved very differently depending on whether they were stressed or unstressed. Both, stressed as well as unstressed vowels, soon lost the quantity oppositions that had characterized Classical Latin. Whereas many stressed vowels tended to diphthongize in the Western Romania and were kept as single vowels in the East, unstressed vowels tended to merge into a three-vowel system, and many of them were deleted especially in the West. There were various factors that influenced whether vowels were deleted or maintained. One factor was geographic: as just mentioned, in Western Romania they disappeared more frequently than in Eastern Romania. Within the Western areas there were differences as well: in French and Catalan for instance, many unstressed vowels, including most final ones (except \(-/a/\)), were lost.

In Spanish many vowels were lost as well, but final ones were partly preserved, and in Portuguese there was less vowel loss than in Spanish. Some authors have argued that the phonetic context played a role, too, in the sense that vowels would only be deleted depending on the clusters that would result from deletion (see Anderson 1965, Geisler 1992). And, in fact, deletion of unstressed /i/ after a sonorant took place as soon as in Early Classical Latin, as forms such as DOMNUS (in place of DOMINUS 'lord') in Plautus' plays (244-184 B.C.) document. The position relative to stress seems to have played a role, as well, i.e. whether the vowel was in the pretonic or in the posttonic syllable. Finally the position in the word was important: in Spanish vowels contained in the initial syllable tended to be preserved more often than those in the final syllable. And in Gallo-Romance there was a tendency to preserve the vowel of the initial syllable as well (Fouche 1958).

This chapter deals with the fate of unstressed vowels in Spanish, especially with the issue of their loss or maintenance. It tries to make explicit some of the phonetic and morphological conditions for their loss. The analysis will be pursued within OT, because this theory requires explicitness and is able to treat variability in an insightful way, as will be shown later on.

In the philological tradition of Spanish, unstressed vowels have been classified in different ways. We will concentrate on two different treatments by two scholars who have offered a wealth of analyses of the diachronic phonetics and phonology of Spanish. Menéndez Pidal (1962) classified them into initial, medial and final. He distinguished /a/, which is generally maintained, from the other vowels, whose loss or preservation depend on their position in relation to stress, and on their position within the word. The initial position is, according to him, the strongest one, most similar to the stressed position, being thus more resistant to loss. Final position follows in strength, and the least resistant vowels are the medial ones. Here, a distinction is made between an internal pretonic (i.e. pretonic) and an internal posttonic vowel, depending on whether it appears before or after the main stress, respectively. Malkiel (1962) objected to this classification on the basis that it used two different criteria, stress and position in the word, which he characterized as accentual-syllabic and lexico-syllabic criteria, respectively. He preferred a purely accentual classification, by which ideally there are four degrees of strength for vowels: primarily stressed or tonic, secondarily stressed (both are always preserved), moderately weak, i.e. some initial and some final vowels (they can be preserved or lost), and very weak vowels, medial ones between two stresses (generally lost).

1. SYNCOPE IN OLD SPANISH: TRADITIONAL ANALYSES

In the following sections the fate of unstressed vowels in the transition from Latin to Spanish will be examined, according to the traditional foundational treatments of Menéndez Pidal and Malkiel.