Linguistic variation of the pretonic mid-vowels in Brazilian São Paulo Portuguese

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This work focuses on the phonological behaviour of the pretonic mid-vowels in a dialect of Brazilian Portuguese spoken in São Paulo state. These vowels are subject to the variable phenomenon vowel raising, through which the pretonic mid-vowels /e/ and /o/ are pronounced, respectively, as the high vowels [i] and [u], e.g. "p[i]queno” (“small”/“little”) and “c[u]sturando” (“sewing”). Two processes can result in the application of vowel raising: (i) vowel harmony, with the influence of a high vowel in the subsequent syllable, e.g. ”an[i]mia” (“anemia”) and ”gas[u]lina” (“gasoline”); and (ii) vowel reduction, generally related to the place of articulation of the adjacent consonant(s), e.g. ”s[i]nhora” (“lady”) and ”c[u]meçamos” (“we start/started”). Our corpus consists of spontaneous speech samples of thirty-eight interviews taken from the IBORUNA database (ALIP Project –IBILCE/UNESP – FAPESP 03/08058-6). This work follows the Theory of Linguistic Variation and Change (Labov, 1991 [1972]) and utilises the statistical package Goldvarb X for the analysis of the data. In general, given the absence of vowel lowering in the context of pretonic mid-vowels, this variety can be grouped within the dialects spoken in southern Brazil. The results demonstrate that word-initial – e.g. ”[i]special” (“special”) and ”[o]portunidade” (“opportunity”) – and word-medial – e.g. ”pr[i]cisa” (“he/she/it needs”) and ”b[u]né” (“cap”) – pretonic vowels present different behaviours in relation to vowel raising, which confirms the claim of Bisol (1981) that these vowels must be analysed separately. Concerning the initial position, we observe the categorical application of vowel raising for /e/ and the non-application of this phenomenon for /o/. With respect to the word-medial pretonic vowels, the results highlight the relevance of vowel harmony, as indicated by the selection of the “height of the subsequent vowel” as the most important variable for the vowel raising of both mid-vowels, regardless of grammatical class (founded by CAPES – 10895-13-2).

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