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Prosodic change and language contact

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Using evidence from first-hand experimental work and existing studies, Colantoni and Gurlekian take a tentative but encouraging step towards exploring the role of contact in explaining intonational change. Their central question is whether Buenos Aires Spanish intonation is distinctive relative to other varieties of Spanish; and if so, whether that distinctiveness is due to contact with Italian.

This study is timely, since the scope of contact-induced change is currently provoking lively interest among variationists, sociolinguists and historical linguists. Perhaps the strongest and clearest recent statement on the capacities of contact-induced change is Thomason's (2001, p. 11) observation that "[I]t is not just words that get borrowed: all aspects of language structure are subject to transfer from one language to another, given the right mix of social and linguistic circumstances". Although this area is still under active investigation and debate, gradual accumulation of evidence strongly supports borrowing at all levels of the grammar; but the major gap in our current knowledge involves prosodic phonology. As Colantoni and Gurlekian (p. 108) themselves note, "very few comments on intonational changes are included" even in Thomason and Kaufman's (1988) comprehensive treatment of contact-induced change. This is perhaps understandable when we are working at extended time-depths: it is hard enough to draw sensible conclusions about sound change in the segmental phonology from back-spellings, dubious scribal errors and gnomic utterances by contemporary grammarians, but orders of magnitude harder for prosody. Even length, the prosodic feature closest to segmental phonology, is not consistently marked orthographically in many systems, let alone stress and intonation. This limit of knowability about distant prosodic change makes work like the present paper, on change in progress or at least relatively recent developments, all the more important: while research on change in progress in segmental phonology complements what we feel we know from the historical record, in prosodic phonology it will very commonly be all we have.

Colantoni and Gurlekian point out very early in their paper the difficulties of working on even relatively recent intonational change. As they remark, intonation is an intrinsically difficult area, not made easier by the multiplicity of competing theoretical frameworks and transcription systems. Although research on prosodic change is therefore challenging, it is also urgently required, not least because the available evidence on the role of contact in phonological change is based virtually uniquely on segmental changes. It is possible that conclusions based on segmental developments will generalise straightforwardly to prosodic change, but it would be unwise to anticipate this without much more research.

As Colantoni and Gurlekian (p. 108) note, then, "[i]nstrumental research on intonation and language contact is just beginning". They refer to a handful of early studies hypothesizing intonational substratum effects, for example, from Guaraní into Paraguayan and Northeastern Argentine Spanish (Malmberg, 1950). A few more recent studies suggest that bilinguals may develop different intonation systems from monolinguals – thus, O'Rourke (2003) traces some features of peak alignment for Spanish-Quechua bilinguals to a Spanish source, and others to Quechua. Colantoni and Gurlekian argue that in Buenos Aires, there has been similar interaction between the prosodic systems of Spanish and Italian, such that "two intonational systems that were typologically similar before contact took place . . . became more similar after contact, in what can be interpreted as a case of convergence" (p. 109).

Clearly, any validation of this hypothesis depends on clear accounts of the intonational norms for Buenos Aires Spanish, other varieties of Spanish, and Italian, and the literature on all these systems is surveyed helpfully and thoroughly by Colantoni and Gurlekian. Most of the available material on Spanish is based on Peninsular varieties, and the consensus is that the unmarked pattern for broad focus declaratives involves a rise with the peak late in the tonic syllable or indeed in the post-tonic syllable. Buenos Aires Spanish, like varieties in contact with Quechua, seems to have earlier peak alignment, near the beginning or centre of the stressed syllable; such patterns are found in many other Spanish varieties, but typically only for contrastive focus. Utterance final patterns are more variable in Spanish, and downstep is quite common; but again, Buenos Aires Spanish is said to be distinctive in that downstep affects even the first accent in the intonation group, with a much more marked fall. In both these distinctive prosodic features, Buenos Aires Spanish shows clear affinities with what has been reported for Italian.

However, evidence on Buenos Aires Spanish to date has been based on small samples, so that conclusions

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are necessarily tentative. Colantoni and Gurlekian have therefore constructed a new corpus, involving two speakers native to Buenos Aires, reading declarative sentences with broad focus interpretation. Results were labelled manually in the ToBI system, with additional descriptions of accent shape (including the direction of slope, and extent in syllables), and a prominence level for every label. It appears from this corpus that in utterance-initial intonation groups, the peak is almost always aligned in the stressed syllable, confirming a major difference between Buenos Aires Spanish and other varieties, with the peak later. In Buenos Aires Spanish, then, early peak alignment has become the norm, losing the earlier pragmatic meaning of contrastive focus which persists in other varieties. The new data also confirm a very clear negative-slope pattern in final contours, with a final low fall. Down-stepped accents in broad focus declaratives are common in Italian, and do exist in other varieties of Spanish, though here they form part of a more complex and variable pattern.

Colantoni and Gurlekian suggest that these distinctive patterns of Buenos Aires Spanish reflect contact – either language contact with Italian, or dialect contact with Lunfardo, "a slang that originated among criminals" (p. 114) in the second half of the nineteenth century. Tango lyrics and popular literature raised the prestige of this variety, so that it spread also to the middle and upper classes; and Colantoni and Gurlekian cite reports from the 1960s of the spread of a *tonada lunfarda*, 'Lunfardo intonation', into standard Buenos Aires Spanish, involving pronounced final lowering and copious downstep. Of course, the question is how those characteristics got into Lunfardo to start with; and Colantoni and Gurlekian suggest that this in turn could result from contact with Italian, perhaps along with an extension of the pre-existing emphatic contour from Spanish.

There were certainly many Italian immigrants to Argentina in the relevant period – 2.9 million between 1855 and 1946, from a range of different dialect areas. The impact of immigration was highest in Buenos Aires, where Italian immigrants made up about 40% of the population of some southern neighbourhoods, where Lunfardo developed. Evidence suggests a strong tradition of marriage within the community, continuous replenishment of immigrants over about a century, and therefore rather high levels of at least passive bilingualism among both the Italian and the Spanish communities. The only question with which I might take issue here is Colantoni and Gurlekian's suggestion (p. 115) that "monolingual Spanish speakers probably imitated the speech of Italian immigrants", perhaps suggesting a higher than anticipated level of active bilingualism, or a social context unexpectedly promoting influence from the arguably lower-status immigrant language into the dominant one. It is certainly interesting that earlier peak alignment is adopted into varieties of Spanish which have been in contact with Italian and with Quechua, perhaps suggesting that prosody does show different characteristics of spread in contact situations from certain other structural features, which frequently seem to be transferred from the more to the less prestigious language. If this is the case, it is intriguing, and suggests an even more pressing need for further investigation of parallel cases.

As Colantoni and Gurlekian themselves note, there is little evidence from the relevant period on the likely shape of Italian intonation. What evidence exists is tenuous, and typically open to a number of interpretations. However, evidence about current Italian seems to support Colantoni and Gurlekian's proposal of a tendency towards earlier peak alignment in Buenos Aires Italian. One of the few relevant descriptions, from the 1920s, mentions a rising or plateau contour in statements; and this is perplexing since this would be the direct opposite of usual reports on Italian. This could be an unreliable early description, or reflect a feature which has not persisted into Buenos Aires Spanish. It would, however, have been extremely interesting and relevant to see some evidence from present-day Buenos Aires Italian, to show whether this unusual feature might still be found there.

This lack of focus on Buenos Aires Italian relates to Colantoni and Gurlekian's more general claim, from the title of their paper onwards, that they are dealing with convergence. This is not uncontroversial: historical linguists would usually define convergence as taking place in stable bilingual situations, but the authors do not suggest that there is still a robust Italian speaking community in Buenos Aires. If there is such a community, then an obvious future project would involve investigating it, to provide a parallel to the present study: considering both communities in the present, along with earlier evidence on the standard languages, would give a much clearer picture of the likely history of the Buenos Aires varieties. If Italian is recessive in Buenos Aires, then it is doubtful whether the social context fits the usual definition of convergence. Furthermore, convergence by its nature involves bi-directional or multi-directional contact-induced change, and this paper discusses only proposed influence from Italian on Spanish, not the other way around. Reading the paper, I wonder if Colantoni and Gurlekian are using the term 'convergence' because 'borrowing' would suggest influence from the more prestigious, dominant language to the immigrant, community language, contradicting all indications on the development of early peak alignment. However, this may not be the best strategy, since we should not assume, without much more evidence, that prosodic borrowing necessarily follows the same routes, or shows the same social sensitivities, as borrowing of vowels

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and consonants. Calling such cases convergence may therefore sideline them, rather than underlining their importance for a more general typology and theory of contact-induced change. Indeed, Campbell (forthcoming) has recently argued that we might be best served by setting the idea of convergence aside, and focussing instead simply on different cases of contact-induced change, their similarities and differences.

Finally, Colantoni and Gurlekian note that their contact hypothesis works well for peak realignment, but is less complete for the increase in downstep and final fall. This is found in other Spanish varieties, and is almost universal for Italian. Quite what contributed to its generalisation in Buenos Aires Spanish remains unclear, though Colantoni and Gurlekian suggest some further research which might clarify the situation. This provides an appropriate conclusion for the paper and for this response: Colantoni and Gurlekian are not claiming that the last word has been spoken on any of these topics, but they have shown how we can provide accounts of intonational change, including hypotheses about the role of contact. Obviously further work is needed, on more speakers, more sentence types, and more varieties; but pilot studies of this kind are essential to show that explanations based on contact are at least plausible. It is vital, too, that we should begin to gather data on change in intonation both in contact situations and outside them. Gaining and evaluating this information will involve a confluence of experimental work and historical hypotheses of exactly the kind developed by Colantoni and Gurlekian. If their paper raises further questions, and some significant general issues, as well as providing possible answers, that is not an adverse reflection on their work, but evidence of the clear need for more of the same.

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