

Uses and Variations of Word-initial Pretonic *e*- in Alguaire

Josefina Carrera

Universitat de Lleida

Western and eastern Catalan are two widely spoken dialects that are gradually becoming alike. A phonetic feature they have both had for years has been the similar pronunciation of word-initial pretonic *e*- (eastern [ə] and western [a]). Nevertheless, in some zones of the western dialect a new vowel is taking its place in the pretonic position: [e]. We have attempted to describe this ongoing linguistic change in a western speech community: Alguaire, situated about 15 km. from Lleida, the county seat. It begins with a two-tier analysis of 36 informants: on a productive level (a statistical study of phonetic realizations) and on a perceptive level (evaluation of the acceptance and tolerance of word-initial pretonic sounds). We intend to show the gradual substitution of the autochthonous variant [a] for the written and normative vowel [e], and to determine, at the same time, the linguistic, social and psychological factors that favour this substitution.

Nowadays, it seems that languages are going through a standardization process which makes them converge. This is helped by the mass media. The phenomenon we are studying located in the north-western dialect, is an exception to this tendency and it marks a new and distinctive separation from other varieties of eastern dialects. Following Weinreich's, Labov's and Herzog's (1968) theory of the stages of linguistic change, our intention is to analyze the different parts of this change taking 36 informants divided into three generational groups (from 65 to 95, from 25 to 45 and from 8 to 10) which we have complemented with two different variables: sex and socio-cultural status. At the same time, the orientation of this study is twofold. First, the article seeks to present the frequency of both word-initial pretonics in 100

words starting with *e-* with a statistical study of phonetic realizations. Second, it analyzes the acceptance and tolerance of the two vowels by the informants after having listened to sentences and words which contain one or two of the word-initial pretonic vowels.

1. The speech community

Alguaire is a village located in the western part of Catalunya, 15 km. from Lleida, the county seat, and about a two-hour drive from Barcelona, the largest nucleus of population in Catalonia, a centre of cultural production and administration and the urban nucleus most likely to influence standard Catalan. Alguaire's economy is based on farming and livestock. However, in the XIX century there was a textile factory that boosted the economy and also the population of the village. Unfortunately, in 1979 this big source of income disappeared. At present, Alguaire has a population of 2,800, some (14.3%) are Spanish-speaking immigrants¹ who came to Alguaire to work in the textile factory and now have other jobs. Nevertheless, the great majority of Alguaire's inhabitants are Catalan speakers.

Among other differences between the western and eastern dialects of Catalan we point out the unstressed vocalic system: eastern Catalan has a more reduced unstressed system /iəu/ than the western one /ieəaou/ which therefore means western Catalan has more variation in the word initial pretonic *e-* sound:

e-

in eastern Catalan-it basically is [ə]

in western Catalan-it can be [a], [e]

¹ We are talking about people who came mostly from Andalucia. They are a 63.8% of the immigrants.



2. Data analysis

The [a] emission of initial *e*- tendency is a north-western dialectal feature that has been noted by many linguists including Gili i Gaya (1931), Veny (1982), Badia (1984), Palmada (1991), Recasens (1991), Solans (1991). This phenomenon had different explanations: a phonosyntactic link, (that is, the resolution [a] of the contraction of the vowel of the article and the *e*- in initial word position *la* + *escala* [las'kaɫe] 'stairs'); a vocalic assimilation to the nuclear syllable (*elàstics* 'braces'), the vocalic quality of the vowel [a] in the north-western variety, etc. Apart from that, we must say that some researches (Colomina (1985), Recasens (1991) Solans (1991)) have also pointed out the detection of a different sound in the word-initial pretonic place: [e] instead of [a], which is the one we have explored.

We based the study on a few points which we can summarize as follows:

1) We selected a corpus of words adapted to the characteristics of the analysis, where we put aside the evaluation of spontaneous continuous speech because of the problems involved in finding the word-initial pretonic vowel in an initial position and without elisions or vocalic

alterations due to preceding sounds. The corpus of analysis has been formed by one hundred words taken from a basic vocabulary which have different consonant and vocalic adjacent contexts. In order to find connections between the words' origin and the present pronunciation of the word-initial pretonic sounds, we have classified these words according to their etymology.

2) Another important aspect was the choice of generational groups. They consist of children from 8 to 10 years old (III),² adults between 25 to 45 (II) and also from 65 to 95 years old (I). Despite the fact that informants do not follow correlated areas of population, we intended to make a global analysis of three different stages of the speech community. In order to define the boundaries of all the samples we concentrated on native Alguaire speakers³ who have at least one parent from Alguaire. We have also taken into account the sex and socio-cultural status, which has been differently analyzed in each subgroup taking into account socio-economic and cultural background (that is, level of schooling, hobbies and personal activities). Children have been classified with a more subjective criterion which is the analysis of cultural activities of each family.

3) Each informant was interviewed twice. First, to analyze the production results, they had to answer a questionnaire of closed questions that were structured in a semantic order,⁴ and with 50 additional words without word-initial pretonic *e-* in order to hide the object of the interview. We have also taken care to avoid answers with possible vowel changes because of vocalic contact, such as in *una ermita* [unɛr'mite] ('an hermitage'), where the word-initial pretonic is elided. That is, the preceding context should be either consonant or pause.

² The Roman numerals refer to the different age groups: III (8 to 10), II (25 to 45) and I (65 to 95).

³ By this we mean people who speak the north-western Catalan variety with the distinctive traits of the Alguaire area.

⁴ That means words were classified in different semantic fields to make easier the informants answers.

After that, a second test was carried out. It was based on the acoustic perception of word-initial pretonic vowels in words with different frequencies of the word-initial pretonics. This second test had two parts: one analyzed the acceptance degree (Pons 1992) of [a] (if the informants considered a sound was usual or unusual, if they used it, etc) after the perception of the word-initial pretonic [a] in isolated words as well as in sentences recorded from a male Alguaire speaker. The other one had the purpose of evaluating and contrasting the perception of [e] and [a], recorded twice in identical isolated words and sentences for the same speaker. This perception interview had different aims that were separately evaluated by each age group. Briefly stated, are: a) acceptance of the perception of [a] in isolated words and sentences; b) individual relations between the emission of their own word-initial pretonic vowel with the connotation of the perceived one in the same words; c) possible differentiation of the word-initial pretonics [e], [a] having listened to both of them in the same words and sentences; d) particular selection and evaluation of each vowel.⁵

3. Results

As the study has two parts, the explanation of the results will be given in two sections: a) data of production analysis, b) results of perception test.

The data regarding the production interview are divided into different items. The first one presents the factors that have altered the appearance of one of the two word-initial pretonic vowels and have favoured different phonetic possibilities which show the high degree of variation in which the initial word-initial pretonic is submitted. They are: a) consonantal prothesis as in [den'tra], /en'tra/ *entrar* ('come in'), b) vocalic and syllabic aphacresis, ['kɫipsi], /e'kɫipsi/ *eclipsi* ('eclipse') or [bora'ðo], [ezβora'ðo] *esborrador* ('board wiper'), c) [a] or [e] inflexion to [i], as in [is'tiw], /es'tiw/ *estiu*, ('summer'), d) change of *e-* to [o] in

⁵ The evaluation was taken from the following questions: 'which is the pretonic vowel you use?', 'which one do you think is the proper one?', 'Can you tell me what you think about the other one?'.

[o'ruyɛ], [e'ruyɛ] *eruga* ('caterpillar'), or *e-* to [ɛ] in [ɛkstrate'restre], /ɛkstrate'restre/ *extraterrestre* ('extraterrestrial').

Apart from that, the apparition of word-initial pretonic [a] is favoured by the phonetic characteristics of adjacent sounds as [m], [n], and, to a lesser degree, [zβ], [sk], [sp], [st]. [a] also depends on the quality of the stressed vowel of each word ([a] as a stressed syllable favours the word-initial pretonic vowel opening as in *escala* 'stairs'). Another important factor is the frequency of usage of words, which is directly correlated with the use of [a], as in the word *esmorzar* ('breakfast') which is very frequently used.

After that, we present a pattern of variable and invariable word-initial pretonic vowel which points to the fact that the process of substitution of the western variant [a] for the standard [e] is not uniform but gradual and arbitrary. That is, it is not the same for each age group and neither for each word:

Invariable words. We cannot find many. The ones that always maintain [e] word-initial pretonic are: *eclipsi* ('eclipse'), *edat* ('age'), *editor* ('editor'), *etarra* ('member of ETA'). Others that keep [a] are: *efeminat* ('effeminate'), *eixuta* ('dried').

Variable words. They can change in many directions depending on the age groups as I, II and III:

3.1. Substitution of the word-initial pretonic [a] in II⁶

<i>Edifici</i> ('building')	I-[a]	II [e]
<i>Educat</i> ('well-mannered')	I-[a]	II [e]
<i>Electricista</i> ('electrician')	I-[ø]	II [e]

⁶ We consider that the vowel change is outstanding when more than half of the informants pronounce [e] pretonic.

<i>Epidèmia</i> ('epidemic')	I-[ø]	II [e]
<i>Evangelis</i> ('Gospel')	I-[a]	II [e]
<i>Exagerant</i> ('exaggerated')	I-[a]	II [e]
<i>Exigent</i> ('demanding')	I-[a]	II [e]
<i>Explosió</i> ('explosion')	I-[a]	II [e]

3.2. Gradual reduction of the [a] as a word-initial pretonic: I [a], II [e], [a]⁷, III [e]

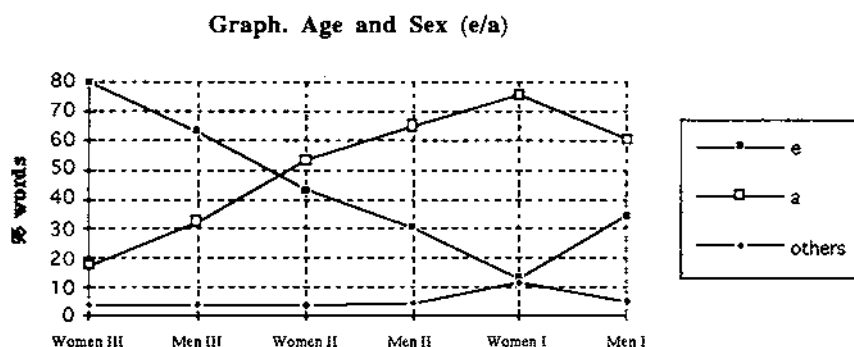
<i>Elàstics</i> ('braces')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Equivocar-se</i> ('to mistake')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Eriçó</i> ('hedgehog')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Esclops</i> ('clog')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Escola</i> ('school')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Esquirol</i> ('squirrel')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Estrelles</i> ('stars')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Examen</i> ('exam')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]
<i>Excursió</i> ('trip')	I-[a]	II-[e], [a]	III-[e]

Furthermore, *age* is crucial for the substitution of the word-initial pretonic [a], and we can say that speakers with ages ranging from 8 to 10 show a lower rate of use of [a] than the second generation, and this use of [a] is greatest in the third group. Socio-cultural background is a decisive factor for the replacement of [a] to [e], because, in general, the most well educated people tend to pronounce [e] instead of [a]. The *sex* variable reveals that women use [e] more frequently with an overall difference of 15% (for groups III and II). Women's tendency toward linguistic innovation is commonplace in sociolinguistic studies, and is replicated here.⁸ Despite this, we have to be aware that the group of older women shows the most conservative

⁷ Here the emission of both pretonics takes a similar percentage: about 50% of the speakers each one.

⁸ Labov (1990), Alturo and Turell (1990), Montoya (1992).

pronunciations. Sociohistorical reasons can account for this difference: they have grown up in a restrictive social world: the home. At the same time, men had more varied lifestyles because of their jobs, the Civil War, the military service, etc. (See the graphic.)



The perception part is based on the study by Lúdia Pons⁹ where she points out that in a substitution process, the existence of two controls¹⁰ in the linguistic mechanisms of the speakers shows an imbalance in the evolution and this leads people to believe that the phonetic changes in a language do not entail a conscious presence in the passive linguistic knowledge of the speaker.

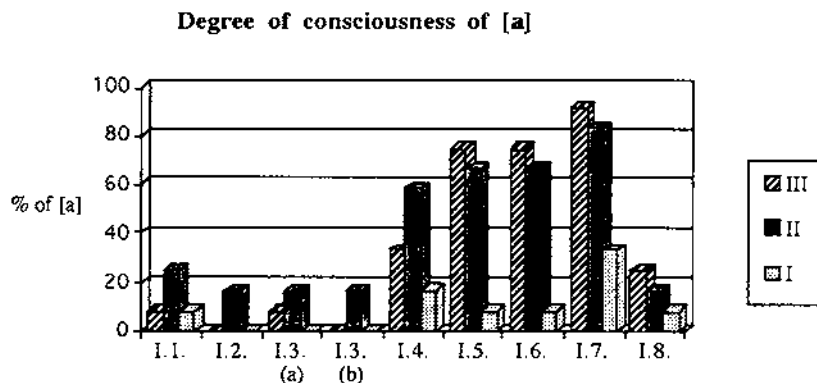
We can summarize the most relevant observations of this section in the following points:

1) The presence of word-initial pretonic [a] as strange or unusual in isolated words and in sentences appears to be inversely correlated with the degree of [a] productions in children and older people. Informants between 25 and 45, nevertheless, do not follow the pattern and are

⁹ Pons, L (1992) *l'odització i apitxament al Vallès. Interpretació sociolingüística i psicolingüística dels canvis fonètics*, IEC, Barcelona.

¹⁰ The two controls are the linguistic production (active) and the linguistic perception (passive).

more aware of the presence of this vowel. (The following graphic shows the percentage of [a] perceived as an unusual sound in each age group).

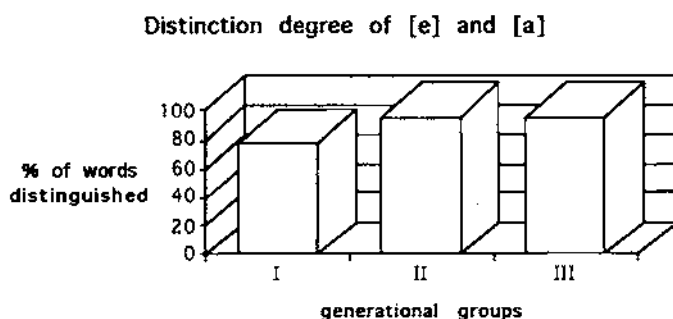


- I.1. És molt *educat*. [aðu'kat]
'He is very well-mannered.'
- I.2. Tens uns *esclops*? [as'klops]
'Do you have a pair of clogs?'
- I.3. (a) És un *exagerat*, va dir que havien guanyat i van empatar. [agʒaʒe'rat]
'He exaggerates, he said that they had won and they had drawn.'
- I.3. (b) És un *exagerat*, va dir que havien guanyat i van *empatar*. [ampa'ta]
'He exaggerates, he said that they had won and they had drawn.'
- I.4. Ensenyen. [an'sejen]
'They teach.'
- I.5. excursió [askursi'o]
'outing.'
- I.6. esponja [as'ponʒe]
'sponge.'
- I.7. equipe [a'kip]
'team.'

'effeminate.'

2) When people have to repeat the sentences having listened to words with [a] word-initial pretonic, the [a] degree of repetition in the sentences¹¹ is correlated with the degree of [a] productions for each age group. Nevertheless, we cannot find it in the children's results, which confirms the asymmetry between the production and perception processes and it also ratifies the double strengths that modify children's speech: the schooling, with the standardized language and the colloquial variety they speak at home.

3) The distinction of word-initial pretonics [a] and [e], both of them recorded twice in identical words or sentences with the only differentiation being the word-initial pretonic sound, is also correlated with the production results. Informants in the second group are an exception in that they are able to discriminate as well as children do, although they mostly use the word-initial pretonic [a]. (We can see the results in the graphic.)



4) The word-initial pretonic vowel chosen as their own fits the same characteristics of the production one and, after that, we can say that the tendency towards maintaining the

¹¹ We have only analyzed sentences because the presence of pretonic [a] is not as outstanding as in the list of words and the repetition or not of it depends, mostly, on the individual frequency of usage of each pretonic.

pronunciation according to the spelling of words written with an *e*- has cultural connotations in older people and also often, in the second age group. For the children, the use of word-initial pretonic [e] is not anymore a cultural aspect but a general feature that affects to the majority of the speakers of this group.

5) The proper vowel sound was understood in two different ways which can be explained by Coseriu's interpretation (1973) of the *norm*. He points out that the norm can be understood as what is *usual* and *proper*. Following this explanation, we can say that the word-initial pretonic vowel has two realizations: the usual word-initial pretonic and the correct one. People ranging from 65 to 95 evaluate the vowels thinking in terms of the *usual vowel*, that is, they regard as correct anything which is similar to their own pronunciation. The second group of people (the ones from 25 to 45), are influenced by their non Catalan background and sometimes evaluate the vowels by comparison to some Spanish models as happens in words that are not written with *e*- in Spanish, as *enciam* (Sp. *lechuga*) ('lettuce'), *esmorzar* (Sp. *desayuno*) ('breakfast'), *elàstics* (Sp. *tirantes*) ('braces'), which are listened to with [a] word-initial pretonic and they are considered not as bad as other words. On the other hand, children are a group with very asymmetric and unstable perception results when compared to the production because they are subjects to a learning process. However, we would like to stress that some children point out that younger speakers (meaning children from 3 to 5) pronounce [a] in many word-initial pretonic situations because they speak without thinking of the norm.

Data reported in this second section reveal different issues depending on the three variables under investigation, that is, sex, age and Socio-cultural background. For the *age* we can say that in general, older people regard [a] word-initial pretonic as a normal sound and [e] in this initial position appears to be a foreign and an artificial phoneme. Nevertheless, speakers with a degree of education introduce [e] sometimes because it seems to be more prestigious, as in the word *elefant* ('elephant'). The middle-aged informants still use the word-initial pretonic [a] but not as much as the oldest group. [e] is considered a segment which is specially characteristic of very well-educated people. In spite of this, there are some words in which [e] is the normal

II- [a] is used quite often but has a tolerance degree which decreases progressively; [e] has a greater reputation and, consequently, is more used.

III- [a] is evaluated in normative terms as an incorrect variable, like all which does not follow the Catalan standard norms.

Finally I should say that it is important to bear in mind that "it is possible to expect that the general evolution of language, apart from other external causes that separate our present generations, will also be marked in the future by the access of younger generations to a degree of proficiency in the written language" Lúdia Pons (1991:550).

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Plaça Sant Faust, 1
25125 Alguairó
Catalonia (Spain)