Diachronic Analysis of Ibero-Romance Nasal Vowels

INTRODUCTION

Nasal vowels are quite rare phonemes, being found in less than a quarter of world languages, and usually occur after the assimilation of a nasal consonant adjacent to the vowel. This is the case for romance languages such as French and Portuguese, which can be presented as it follows: **VN > ṼN > Ṽ > V**

To fully comprehend the origin of this phenomenon in Ibero-Romance languages we first resorted to Latin. Subsequently we conducted a comparative analysis of vowel nasalization in Portuguese and Spanish, incorporating Galician due to its geographical and linguistic proximity to both languages.

Why Ibero-Romance languages? In Indo-European and Romance linguistics studies French has been the primary example for both diachronic and synchronic analyses on vowel nasality. Although these phonemes also appear in Ibero-Romance languages, their phonemic status is still debated, resulting in these languages being left out of research on nasalization. This study seeks to further investigate the presence and development of nasal vowels in Ibero-Romance languages, with a particular focus on Portuguese and Spanish, as these are the most widely spoken languages within this subgroup.

GALICIAN

To better understand vowel nasality in Portuguese and Spanish, Galician was also examined. Up until the 12th century A.D., Galician and Portuguese were a single language, known as Galician-Portuguese, which shows the earliest written evidence of nasal vowels in the 9th century A.D. Nasalization initially occurred when an alveolar nasal consonant in intervocalic position was elided after nasalizing the preceding vowel. Subsequently, word-final nasal consonants underwent a similar process, with an intermediate shift from alveolar to velar nasal before being elided: $VN^{alveolar} > ṼN^{velar} > ṼN^{bilabial} > Ṽ$

After the separation of Galician-Portuguese into Portuguese and Galician, Portuguese completed this process, while Galician halted at the velarization stage, eventually undergoing denasalization of all nasal vowels often restoring the nasal consonant. Although most Galician dialects follow this pattern, the Ancares dialect appears to have preserved nasal vowels to this day.

References

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NASAL VOWELS IN LATIN

The hypothesis of Latin nasal vowels emerges from the study of variation at both diachronic and sociolinguistic levels, leading to the identification of two primary contexts in which a nasal consonant may have elided, leaving the preceding vowel longer and nasalized:

When a vowel is followed by [n] and a fricative;

When the vowel is followed by [m] at the end of a word.

Both contexts are exemplified in the word *mensem* (acc. sg. of *mensis*, "month"), which could have been realized as [ˈmẽːsẽː], subsequently undergoing denasalization. Although the final [m] was graphically restored, it was likely not phonetically realized. Nevertheless, these instances of nasalization underwent denasalization long before the fragmentation of Latin into the modern Romance languages, thereby excluding the possibility that Ibero-Romance languages inherited nasal vowels directly from Latin.

PORTUGUESE AND SPANISH VOWEL NASALITY

The Portuguese vowel system presents 5 to 4 nasal vowels, depending on the dialect. The phonemic status of these vowels remains a topic of scholarly debate. The distinction between phonemic, allophonic, and coarticulatory nasalization can be observed through the behavior of the velum: phonemic and allophonic nasalization is characterized by a consistently lower velum position compared to coarticulatory nasalization, which itself is lower than in the production of oral vowels. Standard Spanish primarily exhibits coarticulatory nasalization. However, in certain diatopic variations, such as Mexican and Caribbean Spanish, nasalization is widespread and is often accompanied by velarization of the nasal consonant. In extreme cases, such as Puerto Rican and Dominican Spanish, nasal consonants are frequently elided after nasalizing the preceding vowel.

CONCLUSION

Although no genetic relationship has been identified to account for the development of nasal vowels in Ibero-Romance languages, this research has provided greater clarity on the development of regressive assimilation in the evolution of Ibero-Romance nasal vowels: $VN > ṼN > ṼN^{velar} > (ṼN^{bilabial}) > Ṽ > V(N)$

This framework allows for a more precise placement of the analyzed languages within this progression. Portuguese occupies the stage of $ṼN^{bilabial} > Ṽ$, as the phonemic status of vowel nasality remains debated, and it is unclear whether a nasal glide follows the vowel. Spanish coarticulatory nasalization can be situated at the $ṼN > ṼN^{velar}$ stage, with some of its American dialects having already progressed to the elision of nasal consonants. Finally, Galician has reached the last stage, where vowel nasality is either entirely lost or reinterpreted as the presence of a nasal consonant following the vowel, which Galician has restored as a velar nasal.

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