Does “covert prestige” entail “covert stigma”? Variable (-r) in São Paulo Portuguese

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This paper reports the results of qualitative and quantitative analyses of variable coda (-r) (e.g. porta ‘door,’ mulher ‘woman’) as a tap or a retroflex in contemporary Paulistano Portuguese, and discusses both variants’ status in the city. Although there is evidence of change in apparent time toward the retroflex (a stigmatized variant associated with the countryside – Amaral, s/d), younger speakers of different social classes are moving to opposite directions. We present results of multivariate analyses in GoldVarb, focusing on the social embedding and evaluation of the variants. We argue that, while retroflex /r/ is favored by certain groups due to its covert prestige (Trudgill, 1972), the tap also carries “covert stigma.”

The data are drawn from 102 hour-long sociolinguistic interviews with speakers stratified according to sex/gender, age group, level of education and neighborhood. From over 60,000 tokens of (-r), 50 tokens per speaker were randomly extracted with the function srsdf of the NCStats package in R to minimize possible idiosyncratic speaker effects (Wolfram, 1993). The random sample of 5,100 tokens was coded for the above mentioned social factor groups, as well as for their parents’ place of origin, geographical mobility, speech style, preceding and following phonological contexts, syllable stress, position in the word, and morphological class.

The retroflex variant, which accounts for about 30% of (-r) (in both the general and the random samples), is favored by preceding [-high] vowels, following coronal consonants and in verbs, stressed syllables and word-finally. Social factors, however, exhibit stronger correlations. The retroflex is favored by men, poorer suburban neighborhoods, lower geographical mobility and level of education, and informants whose families have migrated to the city more recently (especially those from northern states). Although apparent time analyses suggest change towards the retroflex, this general tendency is not followed by all groups of younger speakers. While those living in more suburban areas strongly favor it (.71), those living in more central areas disfavor it (.33). This difference is even more drastic in reading style (.74 vs. .20, respectively).

The opposite tendencies for younger speakers can be accounted for by a closer look at the urban identities and social values associated with the variants. Qualitative analyses of informants’ metalinguistic discourse in the interviews indicate that the retroflex is indeed associated with suburban working-class speakers (and not just countryside speakers); the tap, on the other hand, is not only associated with upper-class educated Paulistanos, but also with stereotypes of social alienation and futility. Therefore, both variants seem to enjoy a certain degree of prestige, and suffer a certain degree of stigma. The discussion of social factors suggests ways of assessing the prestige/stigma of each variant, their associated social identities, and their role in processes of language variation and change.