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THE RELAXING OF THE CONSONANTS /b, d, g, k, h, c, y, f, s/  
IN CUBAN SPANISH

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Lubomir Bartoš once wrote: "A los rasgos más salientes del habla cubana pertenece su rapidez extraordinaria, o sea el tempo, que siendo mayor, trae consigo ciertas modificaciones que experimentan los sonidos en los grupos fónicos (Bartoš, 1965, p.147)."

One of the modifications to which Bartoš refers is the muscular relaxing in the articulation of consonants. This relaxing is perceived even more when the speech tempo is greater, but it is also perceived when the tempo is slower. Describing this phenomenon of "weak consonantism", Haden and Matluck explain that "its consonants tend to be extremely weak in muscular tension and to disappear or aspirate or neutralize with great facility (Haden & Matluck, 1974, p.21)." This phenomenon often causes confusion or lack of understanding on the part of the non-Cuban listener.

The more representative phonemes in which this phenomenon occurs are: /b, d, g, k, h, c, y, f, s/ in Cuban Spanish. Upon describing these consonants we will see that due to their relaxing, various changes and possibilities of changes occur: 1) the relaxing of the phoneme, 2) relaxing plus transformation to another sound, the latter becoming an allophone of the original and 3) relaxing plus transformation plus loss.

The changes that occur in the phonemes /b, d, g/ are similar; the relaxing reaches such an extreme that the articulation, in some cases is almost vocalic and transforms the phoneme into a vowel or it disappears.

López Morales in his article, "Fricativas y cuasifricativas no aspiradas en el español de Cuba (Notas de fonética genética)", gives el término cuasifricativas para aquellas articulaciones en que el canal queda considerablemente abierto, los órganos que forman la zona articulatoria están más distanciados que en la norma hispánica general, y, por tanto, al no producirse estrechez en el canal, la fricación disminuye y, en ocasiones, la articulación se acerca al tipo vocálico. El sonido resultante es poco fricativo y muy débil de tensión (López Morales, 1971, p.114).

López Morales notes that the phoneme /b/ has two fricative variants, the voiced bilabial fricative [β] and the voiced bilabial quasifricative [β̞]. In his article he reproduces the figures that appear in Curso de fonética y fonología española by Quilis and Fernandez (1966) and compares them with his figures of the quasifricatives. Here I reproduce both.

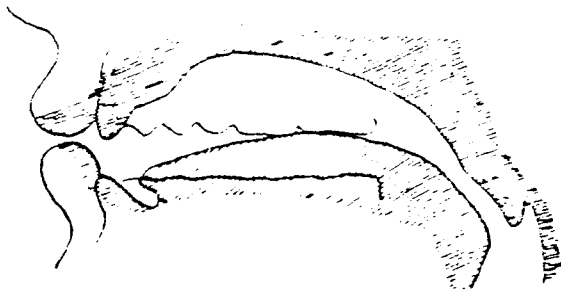


Figure 1

[β] Voiced bilabial fricative

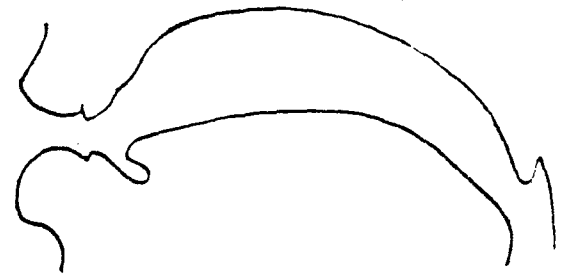


Figure 2

[b̥] Voiced bilabial quasifricative

As can be seen, the opening for the quasifricative is greater thus diminishing friction. This relaxing contributes to the sound approximating that of a vowel. López Morales concludes by saying: "En general, las dos variantes de /b/ ocurren en todos los contextos fónicos, menos tras un sonido nasal articulado; en posición absoluta y tras /l,r/ son muy poco frecuentes (López Morales, 1971, p.117)." After a nasal he always find [b], the stop.

The voiced bilabial stop [b] and the variants [b] or [β] the voiced bilabial fricative appear in complementary distribution in the Spanish speaking world as a general norm.

[b] / ##  
N

[β] / elsewhere

Cristina Isbăşescu informs us that besides the norm, in Cuban Spanish the opposite phenomenon also occurs: the fricative b appears initially after a pause and within a group in contact with an interior nasal, e.g. [b̥amoh] for 'vamos', [u<sup>n</sup>baje] for 'un valle' (Isbăşescu, 1965, p.580). She also notes that the relaxing of the fricative b̥ intervocally sometimes becomes the semiconsonant or glide [w]. This occurs more frequently when the vowel /o,u/ precede the b̥. Isbăşescu gives as examples: [la woka] for 'la boca', [Kuwa] for 'Cuba' (1965, p.580). She also reports the loss of the /b/ intervocally in some cases.

As has been mentioned, the variants [b] and [β] of the phoneme /b/ are found in complementary distribution in the general norm, due to its relaxing, "en Cuba dichas realizaciones pierden su valor de variantes combinatorias, convirtiéndose en variantes libres. Las encontramos indistintamente, en cualquier posición y en cualquier contorno fónico (Isbăşescu, 1970, p.476)."

López Morales disagrees saying that after a nasal [b] is always found. However I agree with Isbăşescu, that the variants of the phoneme /b/ are free variants and appear even after a nasal, because when I speak, as a native Cuban speaker, I constantly articulate [b] and [β] after a nasal. With López Morales' description of the quasifricative I am in agreement.

López Morales describes the phoneme /d/ with two fricative variants, the voiced linguointerdental fricative [ð] and the voiced linguointerdental quasifricative [ð̥]. Again this quasifricative is articulated with a

greater opening. We can see the contrast between the fricative [ð] from Quilis and the quasifricative [ð̥] from López Morales.

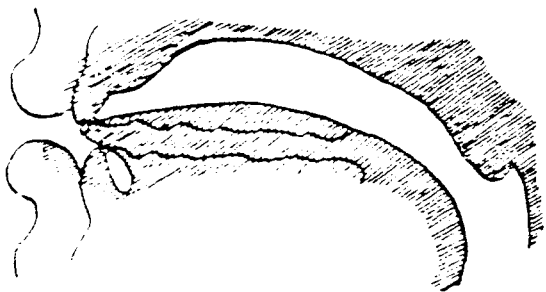


Figure 3

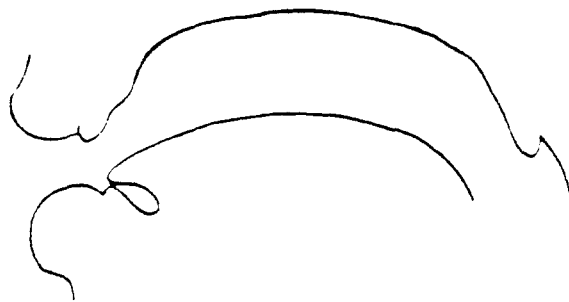


Figure 4

[ð] Voiced linguodental fricative

[ð̥] Voiced linguodental quasifricative

López Morales indicates that,

Las variantes fricativas de /d/ ocurren en todos contextos fónicos, menos en posición inicial absoluta, tras /n,l/ y con frecuencia tras /r/, cuando su articulación es vibrante... Entre las variantes fricativas la distribución se da en posición intervocálica ... y en posición postnuclear (López Morales, 1971, p.119).

The relaxing of the variants of /d/ reaches such an extreme that final /d/ disappears such as in verdá and paré (Haden & Matluck, 1974, p.22) it also disappears with great frequency in the past participles ending; in -ado, -ada, [kaminao, kasaa] instead of 'caminado' and 'casada' and least frequently in the past participles ending in -ido, -ida. The /d/ also disappears intervocally as in [sjudae] for 'ciudades' and [poemo] for 'podemos' (Isbășescu, 1965, pp.581-82).

The same as /b/ and /d/, the phoneme /g/ also has two fricative variants; the voiced linguovelar fricative [ɣ] and the voiced linguoalveolar quasifricative [ɣ̥]. As we can see from the figures that I reproduce from López Morales (1972, p.118) the quasifricative is more open.

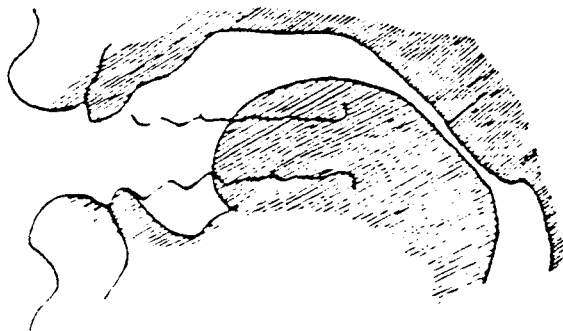


Figure 5

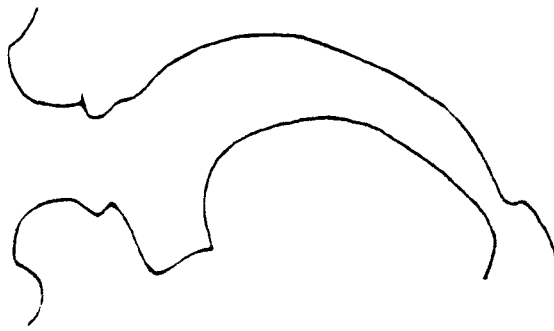


Figure 6

[ɣ] Voiced linguovelar fricative

[ɣ̥] Voiced linguovelar quasifricative

The fricative allophones of /g/ are free variants, except for after a nasal in which the stop [g] occurs. It should be noted that the quasifricative allophone [ɣ] "a veces llega a vocalizarse y a fundirse con la vocal que le sigue, si ésta es posterior alta o media, y con mucha frecuencia si es [w] (López Morales, 1971, p.127)", for example [awa] for 'agua' and [watemala] for 'Guatemala.'

As with /g/, the phoneme /k/ when relaxed sonorizes and a transformation from voiceless velar stop [k] to [g] voiced velar stop occurs, as in [paragá] for 'para acá'. This relaxing does not always occur. [k] and [g] are free variants in initial position and after a nasal. [k], [g] and [ɣ] are free variants intervocalically. This phenomenon also occurs in my speech.

The voiceless velar fricative [x] as found in the Spanish world is replaced in Cuba by [h] the voiceless glottal fricative. According to Haden and Matluck, the "occurrences of velar [x] are extremely rare and obey no predictable pattern (1974, p.22)." The appearance of [h] voiceless glottal fricative is the norm, as in [lahente] for 'la gente', [huando] for 'jugando' and [elhwisjo] for 'el juicio'. Since speakers of Cuban Spanish tend to relax their pronunciation, we also find that besides [h] the voiceless glottal fricative there is another allophone, [h̄] a relaxed voiceless glottal fricative, as in [inhenjería] for 'ingeniería' and [elihodel] for 'el hijo de él'. The subsequent result of even more relaxing is the disappearance of the sound as in [imainarte] for 'imaginarte' and [eẽmplo] for 'ejemplo' (Isbășescu, 1965, p.583).

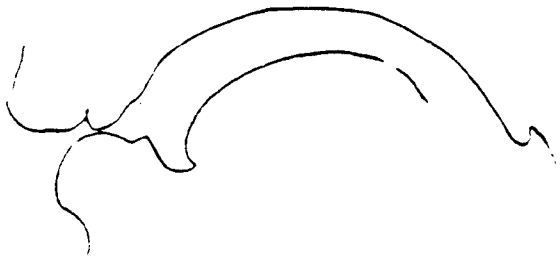
The same as with /b,d,g/ having quasifricative allophones that do not appear in the general norm, the voiceless palatal affricate [c] has as a variant [ç] the voiceless prepalatal fricative. This variant occurs intervocalically as in [koše] for 'coche'. It also occurs in the initial position of a syllable if a consonant precedes (Costa Sánchez, 1976-77, p.14). In speech we find a vacillation between the two variants as: [mučašo] for 'muchacho' or [muco,mušo] for 'mucho,mucho' (Isbășescu, 1965, p.586). These variants occur in free distribution. "Most of the speakers never use it; other do sporadically, and still others do so all the time (Haden & Matluck, 1974, p.22)."

In Spain, the phoneme /y/ has as variants the [ŷ] voiced palatal affricate and [y] voiced palatal fricative. The affricate occurs in phrase initial position and after /n,l/, and the fricative appears elsewhere. Isbășescu (1965, p.586) maintains that the same occurs in Cuban Spanish plus that the affricate also appears intervocalically. I disagree. Haden and Matluck report that

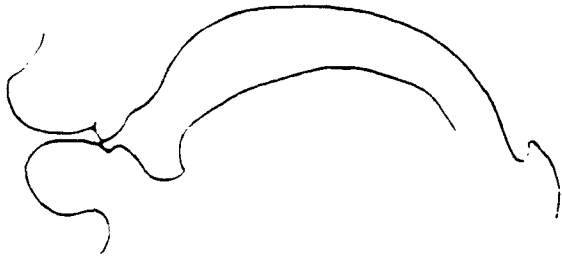
The voiced palatal fricative [y] is regularly maintained with relatively strong muscular tension in intervocalic position and never becomes affricate in this environment (voy a ir, hasta allá, etc.). Affricate [ŷ] occurs in phrase-initial position and after /n,l/ regularly with some speakers and not at all with others ([y]o no se, con [y]ave, etc.). 'Assibiliated' [ʒ,ʒ̂] etc. never occur (Haden & Matluck, 1974, p. 22).

I agree with Haden and Matluck. In my research<sup>1</sup> this has been the case, but I have also found that the voiced palatal glide [j] is another variant occurring only intervocalically as in [mejamo] for 'me llamo', [lakaje] for 'la calle' and [porẽmbujo] for 'por embullo'. It appears generally in faster speech. Thus we see again the weakening process from [y̞] to [y] to [j].

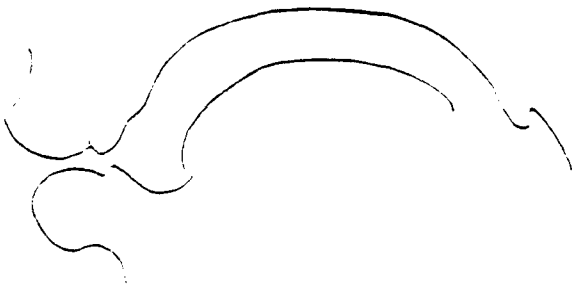
The phoneme /f/ is quite controversial. According to Isbăşescu, the voiceless labiodental fricative [f] is articulated in Cuba in the same manner as in Spain and reports it sometimes disappears on word initial position such as [la orma] for 'la forma' (1965, p.583). She also relates that P. Henríquez Ureña found the transformation of [f] into [ʰ] a relaxed voiceless glottal fricative. Haden and Matluck report the phoneme /f/"always occurs as a voiceless labiodental fricative and found no case of voiceless bilabial fricative [ɸ] (Haden & Matluck, 1974, p.22)." I disagree with both of these reports. In researching this, I came to the same conclusion as López Morales. The phoneme /f/ has three allophones: [f] voiceless bilabial fricative, [ɸ] the voiceless quasilabiodental fricative, where the point of articulation is the edge of the superior incisors and the interior wall of the lower lip, and [ɸ̥] the voiceless bilabial quasifricative with different degrees of friction (López Morales, 1971, p.122). The following are reproductions from López Morales (p.125) of these variants.



[f] Voiceless bilabial fricative  
Figure 7



[ɸ] Voiceless quasilabiodental fricative  
Figure 8



[ɸ̥] Voiceless bilabial quasifricative  
Figure 9

<sup>1</sup>I interviewed in Provo, Utah, five informants, I being included, three males and two females ranging in ages between 18 and 30.. The males had been less than two years out of Cuba, the females 12 and 20.

López Morales concludes that these three variants occur in free distribution. I disagree only in that the voiceless bilabial quasifricative [ɸ] does not occur before /l,r/.

The /s/ found in Cuban Spanish is the predorsodentoalveolar [s]. One can say that the /s/ is the phoneme with more variants and represents very well the changes that occur and can occur when a complete relaxing takes place. The possibilities of transformations are: [s] → [ʰ] → [h] → [ʰ] - Ø. Cristina Isbăşescu found various articulations in syllable final position:

- a) Se oye a veces una s muy débil y relajada, pero a pesar de esto perceptible: [eˈstudjãˈnte] por "estudiante", [iˈsla] por "isla". La misma s débil se oye varias veces en posición final absoluta: [matãˈnsaˈs] por "Matanzas", [mõˈtañaˈs] por "montañas".
  - b) Otras veces se oye una aspiración ligera: [uˈhtë] por "Usted", ... [maˈfãsil] por "más fácil" .... Esta aspiración ligera se oye también en posición final absoluta: [abeˈh] por "aves" ...
  - c) A veces la aspiración que se oye es más fuerte, constituyendo una h laríngeal propiamente dicha: [bahtãˈnte] por "bastante", [mehkla] por "mezcla" (Isbăşescu, 1965, p.585).
- .....

In his studies, Tracy D. Terrell concludes that the loss of /s/ occurs in final position and that aspiration occurs syllable final and word final (Terrell, 1976, p.74). He says:

Among the informants . . . complete deletion in word internal position is very sporadic, and sibilant retention is almost uncommon. Aspiration is clearly the preferred allophone . . . aspiration is obviously the norm for all environments (Terrell, 1979, p.601).

At phrase final position, Haden and Matluck find that /s/ and its variants occur in free distribution, and they generalize that the faster the tempo of speech, the greater the loss, Ø, will be. They conclude saying: "Apparently, the sibilant may appear at pause, accidental or incidental, at phrase-final position, and sometimes under emphasis (Haden & Matluck, 1974, p.22).

One of the characteristics of Cuban Spanish is the relaxing of consonants, as we have seen with the phonemes /b,d,g,k,h,c,y,f,s/. The possible transformations due to relaxing of the articulators are:

b	-	β	-	ʰ	-	w
d	-	ð	-	ð	-	Ø
g	-	g	-	ɣ	-	w - Ø
k	-	g	-	ɣ	-	
h	-	h	-	Ø	-	
c	-	s	-		-	
y	-	y	-	j	-	
f	-	f	-	ɸ	-	
s	-	s	-	h	-	h - Ø

As we can see, the allophones of /b,d,g,k,h,c,y,f,s/ are many. The process is of more and more relaxing until disappearance occurs. The understanding of this process opens the door for the comprehension of Cuban Spanish.

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