

Models of Phonological Variation for Multi-dialectal Communities: the case of L'Aquila

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Patterns of variation that have become familiar over 40 years of sociolinguistic research may be affected by other factors in multidialectal speech communities. The city of L'Aquila, recently in the news for the earthquakes that wrought so much damage there, has long been such a community. During its 800 year history, L'Aquila has been repeatedly depopulated and repopulated due to natural disaster, war, poverty, migration and annexation. Today, L'Aquila sits near a dialect boundary (Giammarco 1979) and acts as a local center of attraction. Speakers are commonly diglossic, controlling both local dialect and Regional Italian.

Studies of Italian and its dialects frequently account for observed variation as performance error, free variation, the result of dialect mixing and only occasionally as an inherent property of language. Here we will examine the validity of these models in accounting for the variation present in the L'Aquila speech community based on more than 8000 data points including impressionistic judgments of consonantal variants such as v-vocalization and s-palatalization and vowel formant measurements especially of the front and back mid vowels /e/, /E/, /o/ and / .

The data come from sociolinguistic interviews of 75 Aquilani which were transcribed, time aligned and sampled to ensure that tokens were balanced across linguistic and social environments. Formant measurements are taken at positions in the word-stressed vowel that captured their central tendency. The measurements and categorizations are analyzed statistically and correlated with linguistic and extralinguistic factors including several peculiar to this community, for example the effect of domicile within or outside the city walls.

The results suggest a model in which inherent variation plays a key role but in which the affect of multiple dialects is still evident.

Reference

Giammarco, Ernesto. 1979. Abruzzo, Pisa: Pacini Editore.