

Assibilated [ř] in Ecuador: Exploring Sociolinguistic Factors among Young Quiteños

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Abstract

It is extraordinary how extra information such as age, birthplace, education, and social strata is displayed when people talk. Sometimes, it is enough to hear a person to know where that person is from. For instance, the juxtaposition placed on intelligence regarding the southern English dialects in the US:

Gov. Clinton, you attended Oxford University in England and Yale Law School in the Ivy League, two of the finest institutions of learning in the world. So how come you still talk like a hillbilly? (as quoted in Lippi-Green, 1997: 211)

Indeed, language aspects such as prosody, syntax, lexis, and/or pronunciation reveal certain characteristics such as birthplace, age, ethnicity, and social strata, to mention some. In Ecuador, one just needs to hear the interlocutor to know where the person is from or is not from. One peculiar characteristic of the speech of Quiteños in Ecuador is the usage of the Spanish trill [r] and/or the assibilated [ř]; that is, the intervocalic phone in the Spanish word 'arroz' can be realized with a trill [r] or an assibilated [ř] sound. This variation is allophonic and might make people rank individuals on a social scale, judge them as educated or uneducated, and/or link them to a particular speech community.

This paper explores some possible extra-linguistic factors such as education, social class, and language domains that may be associated with this allophonic variation in the speech of young Quiteños. Data for this paper was collected through a questionnaire at one relatively large university in Quito-Ecuador and mainly reflects participants' perception on the usage of these two sounds.

Keywords: Assibilated, Strident fricative, Rhoticism, Assibilated 'r' in Quito-Ecuador

1. The Trill [r] and the Assibilated [r̄]

Ladefoged (2006: 170-172) said that an alveolar trill is realized while the tip of the tongue, in contact with the alveolar ridge, is set in motion by the current of air. In Spanish, an alveolar trill is realized in the word *perro* [pero]. The sound can be heard at:

<http://www.wordreference.com/es/en/translation.asp?spen=perro>

On the other hand, the assibilated [r̄], as Argüello (1978) described it, is an articulation similar to /z/ except for the tip of tongue curved towards the palate. This is a sound produced by the air passing through the center of the tongue while the borders of the tongue pressed against the molars and the tip of the tongue almost touching the alveolar ridge. (In Gomez 2003, p. 68).

Regarding assibilation in Ecuadorian Spanish, Bradley (1998) mentioned that assibilation is a process in which the trill [r] is phonetically realized as a strident fricative [r̄]. (p. 57). It may occur that the assibilated [r̄] and the strident fricative [r̄] could be treated as synonyms; however, they are different in the sense that the term sibilant implies an articulatory definition and the term strident refers to the perceptual qualities that deal with the physical characteristics of sound. In this respect, this short paper will be better situated within an articulatory definition which means that perhaps the term assibilated [r̄] is more appropriate.

Following along, Bradley (1999: 58) provided some examples of the realizations of the standard trill [r] and the Ecuadorian assibilated [r̄].

- | | | | | |
|----|---------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| a. | Rosa | [r̄]osa | [r]osa | ‘rose’ |
| a. | Enrique | En[r̄]ique | En[r]ique | ‘Enrique’ |
| b. | Carro | ca[r̄]o | ca[r]o | ‘car’ |

2. The Assibilated [r̄] in Ecuador

The Ecuadorian assibilated [r̄] often surfaces in the speech of Quiteños and it is normally associated with the alphabetical letter ‘erre’ <rr>; this is found in word medial positions as in *carro*, *perro*, and *arroz*. So, it may be that people associate the double <rr> with the assibilated sound; however, the assibilated [r̄] is also realized in words like ‘*rico*’, ‘*gordo*’, and ‘*comer*’. A more detailed observation was outlined by Toscano-Mateus (1953: 96-97) in this regard:

- Generally, the assibilated [r̄] is realized in word-final position as it occurs with infinitive verbs: *amar*, *coser*, *tener*.
- The preposition *por* is not usually assibilated by the educated class, but strongly assibilated by the uneducated class.
- In syllable-final position, when preceded by /n, l, s, t, d/, the assibilated [r̄] is realized:

- | | |
|--------|----------|
| Pierna | [pjeřna] |
| Perla | [peřla] |
| Cárcel | [kařsel] |

Puerto [pweřto]

Tarde [tař ðe]

d. Before other sounds /b, tʃ, k, φ, x, g, p, m/, the standard Spanish [r] is realized:

Corbata [korβata]

Corcho [kortʃo]

Puerco [puerko]

Porf á [porφia]

Urgir [urxiř]

Hurgar [uryař]

Carpa [karpa]

Muermo [muęermo]

This assibilation has usually been attributed to the influence of the Quichua language, but as pointed out by Gomez (2003), this is not the case:

Contrary to popular substratum theories which attributed assibilation of the rhotics in Andean Spanish to Quechua influence, its presence in both linguistic systems along the same territory from the province of Azuay to Imbabura in North, indicates that either Andean Spanish influenced Quechua, or they had parallel developments (p. 66).

It is actually very curious because Quichua speakers from Loja, the border province in the south of Ecuador, do not assibilate in either language. Toscano-Mateus (1953) argued that the assibilated [ř] does not come from Quichua as this assibilation is observed in other Spanish dialects where Quichua is not spoken. He mentioned that the assibilated [ř] has developed paralleled in both Spanish and Quichua (p. 95). This was latter supported by Orr (1962) who mentioned that there is neither a trill nor an assibilated [ř] in the phonemic inventory of Quichua, but only an alveolar flap.

Addressing the linguistic variation in the speech of Ecuadorians, Toscano-Mateus (1953), made interesting observation regarding the assibilated [ř] and standard Spanish trill [r]. He said that the assibilated [ř], present mostly in the highlands, is not socially prestigious in Ecuador as it is seen as an imperfect pronunciation by Ecuadorians living in the coast region; and even by highlanders, the assibilated [ř] is not well accepted in public speeches (pp. 95-96).

Also, Gomez (2003) found that while the upper class consistently produced the trill [r], the lower class strongly disfavored the use of the trill [r]; the middle class disfavored the trill [r] slightly. In terms of formality and free speech, the production of the trill [r] is expected in formal speech while the assibilated [ř] in free speech; however, as she says, the upper class use the trill [r] in both formal and free speech (pp. 155-156).

In the same line, Haboud & De la Vega (2008) mentioned that assibilation depends on: a) the linguistic environment where the sound appears, b) whether the discourse situation is formal or informal, and c) the social identity of the interlocutors. Additionally, they mentioned that the assibilated [ř] has low prestige among the young; and, the older the person, the more

assibilation occurs (pp. 165-167).

3. The Data and the Questionnaire

Data for this paper was gathered at a relatively large university in Quito-Ecuador. The instrument used to elicit the information was a questionnaire and it was administered in five intact classes.

The questionnaire had 7 questions; three closed-ended and four open-ended questions. The first three closed-ended questions asked the participants to choose between two answers: the assibilated pronunciation or the trill pronunciation. These closed-ended questions differed in terms of social strata; that is, 1) how do people from upper social class pronounce the following words? 2) How do people from medium social class pronounce the following words? 3) How do people from lower social class pronounce the following words? Below each of these questions there were ten words. These ten words were the same for the three questions. The words were chosen because they consistently appeared in previous studies¹.

The other four questions were open-ended and asked: 1) Who and why avoids the pronunciation of the double <rr> sound? 2) In what social contexts, is it more common to hear people talk with the double <rr> sound? 3) Without knowing the person, how would you define him or her if he or she would frequently speak with the double <rr> sound? And, 4) what is relationship between the level of education and usage of the double <rr> sound? ²

At the moment of eliciting the data, the participants were told what they needed to do in terms of filling in the information. They were also exposed to what the two sounds, the assibilated <rr> and the trill <r>, sounded like; the participants were read the first 3 words in the questionnaire to make sure they understood the two sounds in question.

Also, at the beginning of the questionnaire, the participants had to complete some background information such as age, gender, nationality, and how long they've lived in Quito. In this section, there was a very specific question about social class: What social class are the people you normally interact with? a) Low, b) Medium-Low, c) Medium, d) medium-high, or e) high. Regarding this question, the 5 class instructors were also asked: if you were asked to say what social class your students are, what would you say? These two pieces of information were used to determine social class.

4. The Results

Of the 58 questionnaires administered in 5 different classes at a large university in Quito-Ecuador, only 24 were considered valid. The data from the other questionnaires were systematically eliminated because: 1) many of the participants were not from Quito, and 2) some of the questionnaires had missing data. The average age of the participants was 22.95 and there were 12 women and 12 men.

Sixteen participants reported to usually interact with people of medium social class and six with medium-high social class; the other two participants reported to usually interact with

¹ These words are included in table 1 below which summarizes the results for these questions.

² The double <rr> is normally associated with the assibilated [r̃].

low and medium-low social class. Also, the five class instructors consistently reported that participants are mostly working-middle class university students.

4.1 Closed-Ended Questions

Table 1. Percentages regarding the usage of the trill [r] sound across social strata.

	Word Initial		Word Medial			Intervocalic		Word final		
Words	Rosa	Reloj	Verde	Carne	Carlos	Perro	Carro	Flor	Da ñar	Comer
High class	91.7	91.7	95.8	91.7	91.7	29	29	92	95.8	95.8
Medium class	75	79	91.7	87.5	95.8	20.8	20.8	88	95.8	87.5
Low Class	37.5	25	66.7	50	54	4	8	63	79	50

This table summarizes the answers on the first tree questions.

It can be observed that upper social class use consistently the trill across all word environments except for the intervocalic word environment. Also, the middle class, a bit lower in terms of frequency of usage, use mostly the trill in all environments except for the intervocalic. On the other hand, the frequency of using the trill is reduced by about half for the low class: a) word initially, it appears that the usage of the trill is not very often displayed; b) word medial and word final, although not quite frequent as upper and medium social class, the trill does appear in a 50 to 79 percent of the time; however, c) intervocalically, the trill is not really employed. Additionally, in intervocalic positions, although the frequency of the trill goes down from 29% to approximate 6%, it seems that assibilation prevails across social strata.

4.2 Open-Ended Questions

4.1.1 Who and Why Avoids the Pronunciation of the Double <Rr> Sound?

In general, these participants agree that people from high social class as well as educated people avoid using the assibilated [ř]. They mentioned that assibilation is disrespectful, inadequate, inappropriate, and associated with poor people and the uneducated. Additionally, the participants mentioned that assibilation is associated with geographic location.

Some responses were not very consistent, but they are still important: 1) the high social class avoid using the assibilated [ř] to distinguish themselves from the inferior, 2) uneducated indigenous people assibilate, 3) people do not assibilate because they do not want to be mocked or laughed at, and 4) important people should be addressed properly without assibilation.

4.1.2 In What Social Contexts, Is It More Common to Hear People Talk with the Double <Rr> Sound?

The participants consistently reported that the assibilated [ř] is more commonly used where low and middle-low social interaction take place such as market places and non-urban places where indigenous people and the illiterate go. Another consistently reported answer was related to the birthplace of the interlocutors. The participants agreed that the assibilated [ř] is associated with the geographic location where the speakers grew up. Also, they mentioned

that the assibilated [ř] is used in casual conversations with friends and acquaintances.

4.1.3 Without Knowing the Person, How Would You Define Him or Her If He or She Would Frequently Speak with the Double <Rr> Sound?

There were two kinds of responses consistently reported. One referring to social class and education, and the other addressing the place of residence. That is, participants consistently reported that without knowing the person, they would describe the person as 1) low or medium social class, not well educated, with low standards, coming from a low or medium income family, little academic preparation, and 2) a person who comes from a different city/province such as Latacunga, Sumbagua, Cuenca, Ibarra, Riobamba, or one who is not from Quito.

Some other less consistent answers were: a) indigenous people, b) most of us speak with the assibilated [ř], and c) a person whose self-esteem is high and one who does not care if others mock or laugh at him.

4.1.4 What Relationship Exists Between the Level of Education and Usage of the Double <Rr> Sound?

Many participants agree that assibilation is associated with lack of schooling or bad formal education. However, several participants, on the other hand, believe that assibilation is better linked to the geographic location and birthplace. In general terms, the participants agree that there is a connection between lack of formal education and assibilation, but also believe that assibilation depends on where in Ecuador the person is from.

Some other not quite consistent responses were: a) assibilation is a bad habit, b) assibilation is cultural and learned in the family, and c) in Quito, assibilation is associated with low class.

5. General Comments

There seems to exist an association between medium and upper strata and the trill [r]. The table of percentages above shows these tendencies very consistently across all the words except for the intervocalic group. That is, people from upper and medium social strata are more likely to produce the trill [r] as opposed to the assibilated [ř]. On the other hand, as reported by these participants, lower strata appear not to use the trill [r] as often as the other social groups; however, in word medial and final, the frequencies do not exactly show a big difference. Only in word initial, it seems that lower strata assibilate much more than the other social groups.

In intervocalic position, the three social groups do not quite use the trill [r]; even the upper social group seems to assibilate very often. This may be due to double letter 'r' that exists in these words; however, this is something difficult to tell based on this data and the instrument used to collect it. A much more rigorous and careful study will certainly show why this is happening; this study was set to explore the production of either sound in relation to social strata, education, and attitudes.

There is one salient tendency that pops up in the data from the table above though. There

seems that the usage of the trill sound declines as social strata declines. That is, the lower the social class, the more assibilation happens. Also, going over the answers on the open-ended questions, the association between lower strata and assibilation becomes more evident. These participants do believe that the upper strata do not assibilate and strongly associate poor people with the assibilated [ʀ].

They also believe that educated people do not assibilate. So, the more educated a person is, the less assibilation surfaces. Although there is a connection between education and assibilation, the participants are aware and acknowledge that assibilation is also associated with the geographic location. That is, people from other cities, regardless of their education and social class, assibilate.

Attitudes toward assibilation is generally negative. They believe that assibilation is inappropriate and disrespectful. They associate it with the indigenous people, the illiterate, and those with low standards.

To summarize, these middle class participants consider that the assibilated [ʀ] is associated with low social strata, the illiterate, the uneducated, and the indigenous people. Although there is awareness that assibilation is also associated with geographical location, regardless of education and social class, there is still a negative attitude towards assibilation among these Quiteños. Answers such as “important people should be addressed properly without assibilation” and assibilation comes from “a person whose self-esteem is high and one who does not care if others mock or laugh...” provide more evidence of the negative attitudes towards assibilation.

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