

Phonetic Variability in Eastern Corbières Occitan

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ABSTRACT

Approximately 150 words were recorded from each of 20 Occitan speakers representing 9 different communities within an area encompassed in roughly a 10 mile radius. The high quality recordings, made with a close-talking noise-canceling headset microphone onto a Tascam DAT recorder, were sampled on a computer and subjected to various acoustic analyses appropriate to the segments in question. The findings include speaker-specific variations in the phonetic vowel space, notably in the number of mid vowel distinctions and the placement of the so-called “front” rounded vowel. Also of interest are the realizations of single and geminate lateral, rhotic and nasal consonants.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Occitan dialect still spoken by the older generations in the northeastern foothills of the Pyrenees in France differs in many ways from the standard language now taught in schools throughout the southern half of the country. In particular, due to lack of standardization and the fact that most of the speakers do not read the language in any form, the amount of phonetic variation permitted from one speaker to another, even in the same village, is quite extensive. The data discussed are part of a larger descriptive study of this rapidly disappearing dialect.

2. SPEAKERS AND REGION

The Corbières are the northern foothills of the Pyrénées next to the Mediterranean coast, in an area roughly bounded by Carcassonne and Narbonne in the north and Quillan and Perpignan in the south. Perpignan, however, is already across the linguistic border into a Catalan-speaking area. The most southern village of the present study is only about 10km away from linguistic Catalonia, but the speakers feel very separate and identify with the Occitan language and culture to the point where “Catalan” is often used as a pejorative term. The villages are not very far from each other, as the crow flies, but the area is very hilly and roads are winding, a fact that has served to insulate the region and preserve the language.

The speakers, 14 men and 6 women, range in age from 40 to 84 years, with most of them being over the age of 60. The ages of the speakers are representative. Older men and women all speak Occitan more or less fluently, but they are all bilingual in French as well. Their parents (of whom I met several in their 90’s and even one 100

years old) were monolingual Occitan speakers as children and learned French in school. The younger speakers are all men in their 40’s who have chosen to stay in the area and follow traditional occupations. They identify strongly with their village as wine growers and hunters of local game. Younger women do not usually speak any Occitan, although they all understand some from listening to their parents and grandparents.

3. METHOD

High quality tape recordings were made of each speaker using a Tascam DAT recorder and a close-talking, noise-cancelling microphone mounted on a headset. The focus of the session was a word list of some 150 items, chosen to illustrate all the sounds in various environments. The list was adapted somewhat each time according to the speaker’s knowledge of lexical items. Speakers were encouraged to say each word at least three times and most offered several other synonymous terms, expanding the database yet further. In addition, most speakers offered samples of running speech, from short phrases giving context, to off-color jokes using words from the wordlist, or sometimes long discourses about events in the past. Although the interviews were conducted in French, the researcher understood enough Occitan to follow the speakers’ conversations and the result was usually a bilingual exchange, the speakers using Occitan and the researcher answering in French.

The target utterances were sampled at 11,025Hz. onto a computer using Scicon R&D’s Macquirer software. From these files various analyses were made appropriate to each segment as will be specified in the sections below.

4. RESULTS

4.1 VOWEL SPACE

The vowels of Central Languedocien, in which linguistic area the Corbières are located, are as given in the charts below.

i	y	u		i	y	u
e				e		o/ɔ
ɛ		o/ɔ				
	a				a	

Historically, Latin /u/ became [y], /o/ became [u] and /a/ becomes sometimes [o] and in other places remains [a]. Stressed /ɛ/ becomes [e] when unstressed and stressed /o/ becomes [u]. The unstressed /o/ in the chart has its

origin in the feminine ending /a/, that becomes [o] or [ɔ] in this region. Thus, most vowels are raised in unstressed positions. In addition to these vowels, there are many diphthongs and triphthongs resulting from the deletion of various consonants.

Figures 1-3 below are plots of F1 (on the ordinate) vs. F2-F1 (on the abscissa) for three speakers, showing some of the variation encountered. Each ellipse is calculated (using UCLA's Plot Formants program) from approximately 15 data points for each particular vowel and centered on the mean, indicated by the larger symbol. The vowel tokens were chosen to represent a variety of consonant environments.

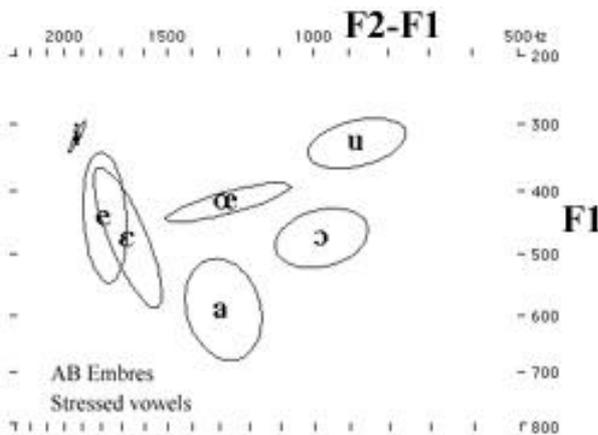


Figure 1: Stressed vowel placement for a younger speaker.

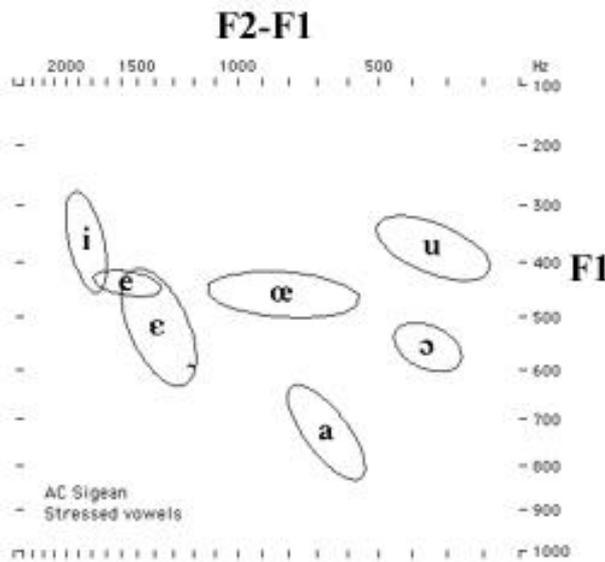


Figure 2: Stressed vowel placement for a speaker from the eastern edge of the study area.

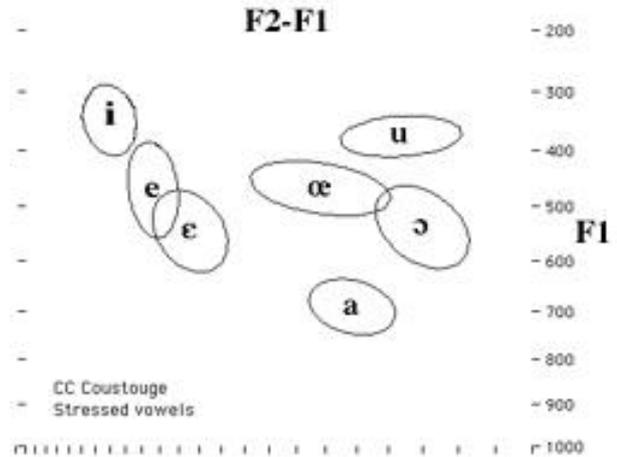


Figure 3: Stressed vowel placement for a speaker from the western edge of the study area.

Most speakers in the present study made it clear that the front rounded vowel was not the French-sounding [y], but was a much lower [œ] and this can be seen clearly in the vowel charts. The actual position of this “front” rounded vowel varied by speaker from front to central to back and from low to high mid.

The considerable overlap in the front mid vowels deserves some explanation. The /e/-/ɛ/ distinction is maintained by most speakers in at least one near-minimal pair (usually the verbal pairs such as *diren* [diren] ‘we will say’ - *disèn* [dizen] ‘we said’), but not in others, such as *sèt* /set/ ‘7’ vs. *set* /set/ ‘thirst’, which were sometimes both pronounced as [set]. For other speakers, however, the second member of this pair was pronounced very high indeed, somewhere closer to [ɪ] or even [i] or diphthongized into [ɪə]. Similarly, the pair *pèl* ‘skin’-*pel* ‘hair’ was normally distinguished only by the fact that the first is feminine and the second is masculine, but they are both pronounced [pel]. Alternatively, some of the speakers made a difference between the two /l/’s in these words, the first being palatal and the second alveolar with or without a vowel quality difference.

There is similar confusion in the mid-back vowels. Some dialects are reported to have both /o/ and /ɔ/ and I originally thought that the words written /ò/ were clearly [ɔ] and those with /a/ (as a feminine ending and always unstressed) were closer to [o]. When plotting the actual formant frequencies, however, there is considerable overlap, which has led me to reconsider both of these as belonging to one mid-back category.

4.2 CONSONANT VARIATION

There is considerable variation in the realization of certain consonants, notably the nasals, laterals and rhotics. Some of this variation appears to be specific to the speaker’s village, other differences vary from speaker to speaker even in the same household. The schematic

Table 2: Mean length (rounded to the nearest millisecond) of short and long intervocalic laterals for each speaker.

Occitan also has a length contrast in rhotic consonants, written with a single and a double /r/. Fourteen of the 20 speakers produced a tongue tip articulation, usually a tap or a trill, but sometimes also a kind of approximant in that position. All but one of these speakers made a clear difference between the phonologically short and long /r/'s. For most this was a contrast between a tap /r/ and a trill /r:/ as illustrated in Figure 6.

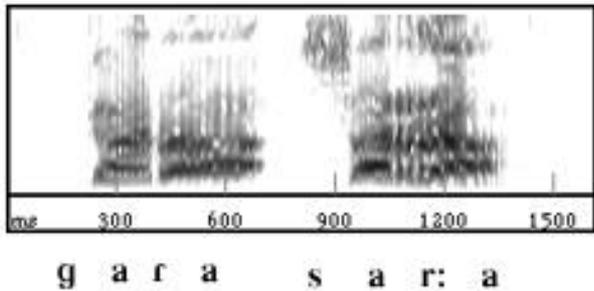


Figure 6: Long and short medial rhotics produced with an apical articulation in the words /garar/ ‘to put away’ and /sarrar/ ‘to squeeze’.

Four speakers made a uvular consonant, either approximant or fricative. In some cases this was possibly under influence from French, although in other cases it was simply that these speakers could not make a tongue-tip trill. None of these speakers made a difference between short and long rhotics (see Figure 7). One speaker wavered between the two pronunciations, depending on whether her husband (a uvular /r/ speaker) was in the room or not. She often began with a tongue-tip tap, then switched to a uvular approximant in the next few repetitions.

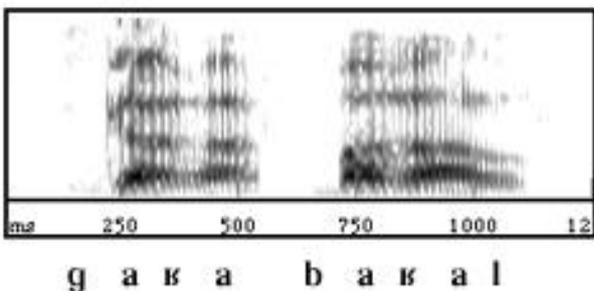


Figure 7: Realization of short and long medial rhotics by a speaker with a uvular articulation. The length contrast has been lost.

The last speaker was especially interesting. He freely admitted that he could not make a tongue-tip trill, so he substituted a uvular trill. This was so well done that he sounded like he was making a uvular tap for the

short /r/ and a uvular trill for the long /r/ and his pronunciation was almost indistinguishable from the standard tongue-tip articulation (see Figure 8).

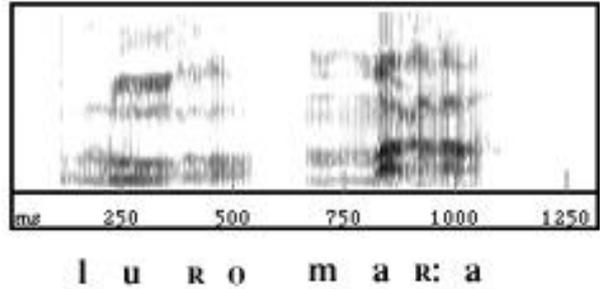


Figure 8: A short and long rhotic contrast maintained by a speaker with a uvular articulation.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings presented here are only a sampling of the data collected, exemplifying some of the features of the Occitan spoken in the Eastern Corbières and showing a small selection of the variation found.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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