

Prosodic and segmental differences between standard Serbian and the speech of young urban speakers -- Diana Stojanovic (University of Hawai'i)

In standard dialect of Serbian, lexical pitch-accent interacts with the vowel length to form four prominence types that can occur on the accented nucleus: these are traditionally called *short rising*, *short falling*, *long rising*, and *long falling* accent. The standard dialect is based on one of the dialects spoken in Serbia in the mid 19th century and has been co-existing with two older prosodic systems: *Prizrensko-Timocki* dialect which has only one type of accent – analogous to short falling, and *Kosavsko-Resavski* dialect which has two – short and long falling accents (Stevanovic 1951).

Due to historical development of rising accents, their domain spreads to the syllable following the accented one. Lehiste and Ivic (1986) provide a comprehensive description of the Serbian accent system based on acoustic and perceptual studies. They propose that the distinction between rising and falling accents can be described via two features: 1) pitch difference between the accented and post-accented syllable and 2) pitch difference between the beginning and end of the accented syllable. These have different importance for speakers of different sub-dialects.

Data for the experiments in Lehiste and Ivic 1986, however, were collected in the 1960s and a question arises as to how this system relates to Serbian spoken by current, especially younger generations. Petrovic (2001) discusses the state of Serbian phonology at the end of 20th century. He lists some of the changes observed in the contemporary speech young urban speakers – loss of quantity contrast not only in non-accented but also in accented syllables and some reduction on vowel qualities – and relates them to the situation that possibly existed in urban centers like Belgrade a century before that. Petrovic proposes that in both cases there was influence of “south-eastern elements” (speakers of non-standard dialects) as well as that Serbian that evolved through such changes sounds more alike other neighboring languages and constitutes a parallel prosodic system to that of standard Serbian.

Whether such reduced prosodic system is widespread among young speakers is an empirical question. In this paper, we examine speech of young urban speakers represented by eight young Serbian actors (4 female). These are contrasted to speech of two older actors. We are interested in particular in 1) quantity reduction and 2) reduction (centralization) of vowel qualities in both accented and non-accented positions.

Audio-samples were collected from films (acted speech) and interviews (natural speech) available on you-tube; data were analyzed in Praat and Matlab based on duration and formant structure.

We find support for the claim on shortening of long accents *only* for a subset of speakers, in particular male speakers of certain social groups. However, all speakers show vowel quality reduction to some degree. We will discuss a model in which not only geographical influence but also social factors, such as appearance of being “tough” or “cool”, affect the prosody of current young speakers of Serbian. In addition, we speculate how the changes in the accent system can be related to change of the language rhythm.

References:

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