R Deletion in Brazilian Portuguese:
Diachronic and Synchronic Evidence for Lexical Diffusion

This paper provides diachronic and synchronic evidence that R deletion in coda position in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is being implemented through Lexical Diffusion (Wang; Chen, 1977; Oliveira, 1997). R deletion in BP can occur in both nouns and verbs, either in middle or final position: *amor > amô--* 'love', *cantar > cantá--* 'to sing', *perfume > pe—fume* 'perfume', *perseguir > pe—seguir* 'to chase'. Final R in verbs is almost categorically deleted (95,4%, according to Oliveira (1983)). The first document to provide evidence for this deletion process is the Appendix Probi, a document from the 3rd century that provides a list of words that people were pronouncing or writing incorrectly according to Classic Latin. Item number 149 from that list reads "persica non pessica" 'peach'. There is then evidence that in the 3rd century there were already words being written or pronounced without the R. Also, this document shows there was social stigma against that. Gil Vicente, a Portuguese playwright from the 15th century, also provides examples of the stigma that R deletion would carry. In his plays, when lower class people are speaking, they do not pronounce final Rs in verbs. Leite de Vasconcelos (1970) and Chaves de Mello (1971) also show examples of that. Oliveira (1997, p. 33), using data from interviews with native speakers, analyzes this process through the lenses of Lexical Diffusion and proposes that "all phonological changes are guided through Lexical Diffusion." In addition to that, he proposes that social class is a strong factor determining R deletion. Other factors such as stress, word class and informal speech also contribute to that. Our study of this process investigated final R deletion in nouns only. Our goal was to understand which social or internal factors were favoring the R deletion or retention. We also aimed at understanding if the change was proceeding through Lexical Diffusion. Interviews with 30 native speakers were conducted, and a total of 2,606 occurrences of final R in nouns was gathered. Overall, our study showed deletion rate of 12%, and factors such as stress, word class, age group, and social class were relevant to the process. The data also showed evidence for Lexical Diffusion, as the change is spreading through the lexicon according to token frequency, with frequent words changing first. This claim is supported by Bybee (1995). In sum, our paper makes a connection with Historical Linguistics as it analyzes R deletion diachronically, but it also presents results of a synchronic experiment.

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