

Argentine Spanish

Germán Coloma

CEMA University, Buenos Aires, Argentina

gcoloma@cema.edu.ar

Although Spanish is a relatively unified language, in the sense that people from very distant locations manage to understand each other well, there are several phonetic phenomena that distinguish geographically separated varieties. The total number of native speakers of Spanish is above 400 million, and roughly 10% of them live in Argentina (Instituto Cervantes 2014). The accent described below corresponds to formal Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires, and the main allophones are indicated by parentheses in the Consonant Table. The recordings are from a 49-year-old college-educated male speaker, who has lived all his life in either the city of Buenos Aires or the province of Buenos Aires.

In general, it can be considered that the accent described here is close to the one used by roughly 70% of the Argentine population, who lives in the city of Buenos Aires, and in the provinces of Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Neuquén, Río Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz, Tierra del Fuego and the southern part of Córdoba. This accent is also similar to the one used in the Republic of Uruguay, and because of that it can be generically referred to as ‘River Plate Spanish’ (Hualde 2005: 23–31).

Consonants

	Labial	Dental/ Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b	t d		k g	
Affricate			tʃ		
Nasal	m	n	ɲ	(ŋ)	
Tap		r			
Trill		r			
Fricative	f (β)	s (ð)	ʃ	x (χ)	(h)
Lateral		l			

PHONEMES			ALLOPHONES		
p	/'pala/	<i>pala</i>	'spade'		
b	/'bala/	<i>bala</i>	'bullet'	β	['paβa] <i>pava</i> 'kettle'
m	/'mapa/	<i>mapa</i>	'map'		
f	/'fama/	<i>fama</i>	'fame'		
t	/'tapa/	<i>tapa</i>	'lid'		
d	/'dama/	<i>dama</i>	'lady'	ð	['naða] <i>nada</i> 'nothing'
n	/'napa/	<i>napa</i>	'water table'	ŋ	['maŋga] <i>manga</i> 'sleeve'
r	/'para/	<i>parra</i>	'grapevine'		
r	/'para/	<i>para</i>	'for'		
s	/'sala/	<i>sala</i>	'room'	h	['pahta] <i>pasta</i> 'paste'
l	/'lata/	<i>lata</i>	'tin/can'		
tʃ	/'tʃapa/	<i>chapa</i>	'sheet metal'		
ʃ	/'ʃama/	<i>llama</i>	'flame'		
ɲ	/'ɲata/	<i>ñata</i>	'small nose'		
k	/'kama/	<i>cama</i>	'bed'		
g	/'gara/	<i>garra</i>	'claw'	ɣ	['maɣa] <i>maga</i> 'magician'
x	/'xara/	<i>jarra</i>	'jug'		

The consonant phoneme inventory of the variety of Argentine Spanish described in the consonant table above differs from the one reported by Martínez, Fernández & Carrera (2003) for Castilian Spanish in two respects: the absence of /θ/, and the merger of /jʝ/ and /ʎ/ into a single phoneme (which is here represented as /ʃ/). This merger is a version of what the Spanish phonetics literature calls *YEÍSMO*, while the absence of /θ/ (and its merger with /s/) is generally referred to as *SESEO* (Penny 2004: 118–121).

In Spanish, all plosives are unaspirated, and some authors prefer to use the word 'occlusive' instead of 'plosive' for them (Monroy & Hernández 2105). /p/, /b/ and /m/ are generally bilabial, while /f/ is labiodental. Correspondingly, /t/, /d/ and /s/ are generally alveodental, while /n/, /l/, /r/ and /r/ are typically alveolar. /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ are postalveolar, while /ɲ/ is properly palatal. The oppositions between /r/ and /r/, and between /m/ and /n/ are neutralized in pre-consonantal positions, and [ŋ] is an allophone of /n/ (before velar consonants).

The phonemes /b/, /d/ and /g/ are pronounced as [β], [ð] and [ɣ], respectively, when they appear between vowels (and also after some consonants). These sounds are here classified as voiced fricatives, but in fact they are generally pronounced as approximants (Hualde 2005: 138–143), i.e. as continuant consonants without friction. From a functional or phonological point of view, however, they are always obstruents rather than sonorants (Real Academia Española 2011: 142–162).

The characteristics mentioned in the two previous paragraphs are shared with almost all the Spanish varieties spoken around the world, but Argentine Spanish also possesses some features that are typical of Latin American accents, as opposed to European accents. Two of them are the already mentioned /s/–/θ/ merger, and the pronunciation of [s] as a laminal fricative (instead of an apical or apico-dorsal fricative, which are the most common Castilian pronunciations). The phoneme /s/ is regularly pronounced as [h] before other consonants. On the other hand, in Argentine Spanish, [h] is never an allophone of /x/ (as is the case in other accents such as Central American, Colombian and Caribbean Spanish).

Distinctive characteristics

The main distinctive characteristic of Buenos Aires Spanish is the assibilation of the phoneme /ʃ/, which in most Spanish varieties is pronounced as a voiced non-assibilated palatal fricative [j], plosive [tʃ] or affricate [tʃj], or even as a palatal glide [j]. In the variety described here, the sound for this phoneme is the voiceless postalveolar fricative [ʃ]. Many variations of this exist, influenced by age, sex and social class (Colantoni 2006). Those variations go

from the use of [ʃ] to the use of the voiced postalveolar fricative [ʒ], but they all share the common feature of possessing a strong and strident assibilation (Kochetov & Colantoni 2011).

Fontanella (1987: 144–150) described a variety of Buenos Aires Spanish in which /z/ and /ʃ/ were different phonemes, the former being used for most words written with ‘y’ or ‘ll’ (such as *lluvia* [ˈʒuβja] ‘rain’ or *yuyo* [ˈʒuʒo] ‘weed’), and the latter being used in borrowed foreign words (such as *shampoo* [ʃamˈpu]). That distinction has almost disappeared for the current generations of speakers, who either use [ʃ] or [ʒ] in all cases (Rohena-Madrazo 2013).

Due to its use as a realization of the phoneme /ʃ/, in Argentine Spanish [ʃ] is never an allophone of the phoneme /tʃ/ (as occurs in other accents such as Andalusian, Chilean or Caribbean Spanish). This characteristic also implies that there is a strong distinction between [ʃ] and [j], which is always an allophone of the vowel phoneme /i/ (Harris & Kaisse 1999). Consequently, in Buenos Aires Spanish, speakers make a clear phonemic difference between *hierro* [ˈjero] ‘iron’ and *yerro* [ˈjero] ‘mistake’ (which is something that does not occur in other Spanish accents).

Another variation under way in Argentine Spanish is the disappearance of /ɲ/ as a separate phoneme, and its merger with the combination /ni/. Consequently, many young Argentinians do not distinguish between *huraño* [uˈraɲo] ‘unsociable’ and *uranio* [uˈranjo] ‘uranium’, and treat them as homophones (Colantoni & Hualde 2013). It is also relatively common to hear the voiced labiodental fricative sound [v] as an allophone of /b/. Some speakers use it in emphatic pronunciation, especially for words written with ‘v’ (e.g. *vida* [ˈviða] ‘life’).

Regional variation

Although Buenos Aires exercises a strong influence over the Spanish spoken in Argentina, several regional variations exist. Apart from the region whose accent is described here (which corresponds to the South-Eastern part of Argentina), the rest of the country can be divided into three main dialect areas, which are the North West, the North East, and the West (Coloma 2013; see Figure 1). The first of them encompasses the provinces of La Rioja, Catamarca, Tucumán, Santiago del Estero, Salta, Jujuy and the northern part of Córdoba, while the second one includes the provinces of Corrientes, Chaco, Misiones and Formosa (which are in the frontier with Paraguay). The Western region, finally, encompasses the provinces of Mendoza, San Juan and San Luis (which are close to Chile).

The main phonetic difference between the accents of the two above-mentioned Northern regions and the accent described here is the assibilation and fricativization of the phoneme /r/ (Colantoni 2006). In those areas, that phoneme is typically pronounced as a voiced alveolo-palatal fricative [ʒ]. Northern Argentinians also use the [h] allophone of /s/ more frequently, especially in cases where /s/ appears at the end of a word (and the next word begins with a vowel).

In the Northeastern region, moreover, many people use the lateral palatal sound [ʎ] as an additional phoneme, as most speakers of Paraguayan Spanish do (Real Academia Española 2011: 226–227). Those people typically pronounce the phoneme /ʃ/ as a voiced postalveolar affricate [dʒ], and distinguish between words such as *haya* [ˈadʒa] ‘there is’ and *halla* [ˈaʎa] ‘he finds’.

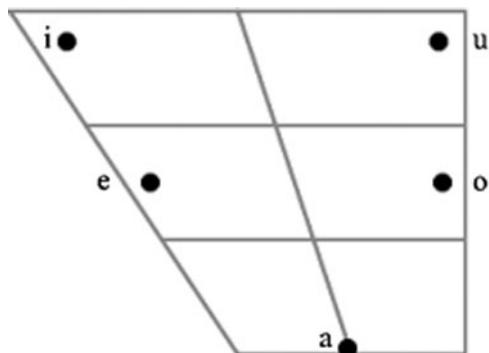
Another regional variation that has been reported (Gurlekian, Colantoni & Torres 2001) belongs to the Western region, and it is the use of a palatal voiceless fricative sound [ç] as an allophone of /x/, when that phoneme appears before /e/ or /i/. This feature is typical of Chilean Spanish (Sadowsky & Salamanca 2011).

The Western region of Argentina is also noticeable for the widespread presence of non-assibilated realizations of the phoneme /ʃ/, which is generally pronounced as a voiced palatal fricative [j].



Figure 1 Argentine Spanish dialect regions. The accent described corresponds to Buenos Aires, the cultural centre of the South East region.

Vowels



PHONEMES			ALLOPHONES			
a	/ʼaso/	<i>aso</i>			‘I roast’	
e	/ʼeso/	<i>eso</i>	ɛ	[ʼeseɣaβjon]	<i>ese avión</i>	‘that plane’
i	/ʼiso/	<i>hizo</i>	j	[ʼjelo]	<i>hielo</i>	‘ice’
o	/ʼoso/	<i>oso</i>	ɔ	[ʼlayɔaʼsul]	<i>lago azul</i>	‘blue lake’
u	/ʼuso/	<i>uso</i>	w	[ʼweβo]	<i>huevo</i>	‘egg’

Like most Spanish accents, Argentine Spanish has five vowel phonemes (/a/, /e/, /i/, /o/ and /u/) that may occur in both stressed and unstressed syllables. The five vowels can be partially nasalized when they are in contact with nasal consonants, but there is no phonemic contrast between oral and nasal vowels. Besides, Argentine Spanish does not make any relevant distinction between open and closed variants of the five vowel phonemes, though such a distinction occurs in some accents spoken in Southern Spain (Monroy & Hernández 2015).

The most relevant allophones for the Argentine Spanish vowels are the palatal glide [j] (for the phoneme /i/) and the labiovelar glide [w] (for the phoneme /u/). These glides can also be written as [i̠] and [u̠] (Hualde 2005: 54–55). Some authors (e.g. Martínez et al. 2003; Monroy & Hernández 2015) use [j] and [w] when these sounds appear before a syllabic nucleus, and [i̠] and [u̠] when they appear after a syllabic nucleus. The phonemes /e/ and /o/ also admit the use of the glides [ɛ] and [ɔ] as allophones, especially in synalepha (i.e. when the last syllable of a word and the first syllable of the following word are pronounced as if they were a single syllable).

Spanish allows for the existence of many diphthongs, both rising ([ja], [je], [jo], [ju], [wa], [we], [wi], [wo]) and falling ([aj], [aw], [ej], [ew], [oj], [ow], [uj]). They consist of a syllabic vowel plus a glide, and they can always be analyzed as formed by two different phonemes. Examples of words with diphthongs are *piano* [ˈpjano] ‘piano’, *quieto* [ˈkjetto] ‘quiet’, *piojo* [ˈpjoxo] ‘louse’, *viuda* [ˈbjuða] ‘widow’, *cuatro* [ˈkwatro] ‘four’, *cuero* [ˈkwero] ‘leather’, *fuiimos* [ˈfwimos] ‘we went’, *cuota* [ˈkwota] ‘share’, *baile* [ˈbajle] ‘dance’, *jaula* [ˈxawla] ‘cage’, *peine* [ˈpejne] ‘comb’, *neumático* [newˈmatiko] ‘tyre’, *boina* [ˈbojna] ‘beret’, *estadounidense* [ehtadowniˈðense] ‘U.S. American’ and *muy* [muɣ] ‘very’.

Triphthongs are also possible (e.g. [joj], [waw], [wej], etc.) and they are always formed by a glide, a syllabic vowel and another glide. Examples of words with triphthongs are *hioides* [ˈjojðes] ‘hyoid bone’, *guau* [gwaw] ‘dog’s sound’ and *buey* [bweɣ] ‘ox’.

Prosody

Stress

Lexical stress is distinctive in Spanish, and it is common to find two-way contrasts (e.g. *revolver* [reβolˈβer] ‘to stir’ vs. *revólver* [reˈβolβer] ‘gun’) and even three-way contrasts (e.g. *médico* [ˈmeðiko] ‘physician’ vs. *medico* [meˈðiko] ‘I prescribe (a medicine)’ vs. *medicó* [meðiˈko] ‘he prescribed (a medicine)’).

The stress must fall in the last syllable, the penultimate syllable or the antepenultimate syllable, except in cases in which a word has enclitic pronouns, which admit other positions (e.g. *cantándomelo* [kanˈtandomelo] ‘singing it to me’). In those cases, however, it is relatively common that Argentine Spanish speakers shift the position of the stress to the last syllable of the word (Colantoni & Cuervo 2013).

Some long words may even have two stressed syllables (e.g. *inmediatamente* [inmeˈðjataˈmente] ‘immediately’), when they are pronounced as if they were a sequence of two separate words. In those cases, the first of those stresses can be perceived as a secondary stress, and the last one as a primary stress.

Intonation

Like almost all the other Indo-European languages, Spanish is not tonal. Tone, therefore, is only used to express pragmatic meanings such as commands, questions, statements, etc. In

general, the nuclear tone in Spanish is close to the end of each intonation group, and the final boundary tone is low (Martínez & Fernández 2007: 199–204).

The main distinctive characteristic of Argentine Spanish intonation is the presence of a ‘long fall’ (Kaisse 2001), which implies the existence of early peak alignments in the realization of pre-nuclear pitch accents and in the final fall in broad focus declarative utterances. Colantoni & Gurlekian (2004) claim that this is due to a combination of direct and indirect transfers from Italian, which took place in the early 20th century (when Buenos Aires experienced a large inflow of Italian immigration).

Another peculiarity of Argentine Spanish intonation appears in yes–no questions. These utterances, which in most Spanish varieties are characterized by a high rise tone, are frequently pronounced in Buenos Aires Spanish with a falling bitonal boundary tone (Gabriel et al. 2010).

Transcription of the recorded passage

The version of ‘The North Wind and the Sun’ transcribed in this Illustration is essentially the same as that in Martínez et al. (2003) and Monroy & Hernández (2015), except for a few expressions that are not common in Argentina and have therefore been replaced. I have also included an additional word (*extraño* [eks'traño] ‘strange’), as an example for the pronunciation of the phoneme /ɲ/ (which does not appear in the original Spanish text).

In the phonemic transcription, words are kept separated according to their meaning. In the narrower (allophonic) transcription, some resyllabification is introduced when there is synalepha, and when the consonants in the coda of the last syllable of a word are pronounced as if they were in the onset of the first syllable of the following word.

Broad (phonemic) transcription

el 'biento 'norte i el 'sol disku'tian sobre 'kual de 'eʃos 'era el 'mas 'fuerte
| kuando pa'so un eks'traño bia'xero em'buelto en 'una 'antʃa 'kapa || el
'biento i el 'sol kombi'nieron en ke kien 'antes lo'grara obli'gar al bia'xero a
ki'tarse la 'kapa se'ria konside'rado 'mas pode'roso || el 'biento 'norte so'plo
kon 'gran 'furia | pero 'kuanto 'mas so'plaba 'mas se aga'raba el bia'xero de
su 'kapa || por 'fin el 'biento 'norte abando'no la em'presa || en'tonses bri'ʃo
el 'sol kon ar'dor | e inne'diata'mente el bia'xero se despo'xo de su 'kapa |
por lo ke el 'biento 'norte 'tubo ke rekono'ser la superiori'dad del 'sol ||

Semi-narrow (allophonic) transcription

el 'βjen.to 'nor.te jel 'sol dih.ku.'ti.an so.βre 'kwal 'de.ʃos 'e.raɐl 'mah
'fwer.te | kwan.do pa.'sow neks.'tra.ɲo βja.'xe.rɔem 'bwel.tɔe 'nu.na 'aɲ.tʃa
'ka.pa || el 'βjen.to jel 'sol kom.bi.'nje.ron eɲ ke kje 'nan.teh lo.'ɣra.raɔ
βli.'ɣa.ral βja.'xe.rɔa ki.'tar.se la 'ka.pa se.'ri.a kon.si.ðe.'ra.ðo 'mah
po.ðe.'ro.so || el 'βjen.to 'nor.te so'plo koɲ 'gram 'fu.rja | pe.ro 'kwan.to
'ma.so 'pla.βa 'ma.sɛa ɣa.'ra.βaɐl βja.'xe.ro ðe su 'ka.pa || por 'fin el 'βjen.to
'nor.tɛa βan.do.'no laɐm.'pre.sa || en.'ton.seh βri.'ʃɔel 'sol ko nar.'ðor |
eɲn.me.'ðja.ta.'men.tel βja.'xe.ro se ðeh.po.'xo ðe su 'ka.pa | por lo kel
'βjen.to 'nor.te 'tu.βo ke re.ko.no.'ser la su.pe.rjo.ri.'ða.ðel 'sol ||

Orthographic version

El viento norte y el sol discutían sobre cuál de ellos era el más fuerte, cuando pasó un extraño viajero envuelto en una ancha capa. El viento y el sol convinieron en que quien antes lograra obligar al viajero a quitarse la capa sería considerado más poderoso. El viento norte sopló con gran furia, pero cuanto más soplaba, más se agarraba el viajero de su capa. Por fin el viento norte abandonó la empresa. Entonces brilló el sol con ardor, e inmediatamente el viajero se despojó de su capa, por lo que el viento norte tuvo que reconocer la superioridad del sol.

Acknowledgements

I thank Amalia Arvaniti, Laura Colantoni, Ana Fernández Planas, Matthew Gordon, Juan Hernández Campoy, Ewa Jaworska, Adrian Simpson, and three anonymous reviewers for their useful comments. All the remaining errors are mine.

References

- Colantoni, Laura. 2006. Micro and macro sound variation and change in Argentine Spanish. *Proceedings of the IX Hispanic Linguistic Symposium*, 91–102.
- Colantoni, Laura & María Cristina Cuervo. 2013. Clíticos acentuados. In Colantoni & Rodríguez Louro (eds.), 143–157.
- Colantoni, Laura & Jorge Gurlekian. 2004. Convergence and intonation: Historical evidence from Buenos Aires Spanish. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 7(2), 107–119.
- Colantoni, Laura & José Ignacio Hualde. 2013. Variación fonológica en el español de la Argentina. In Colantoni & Rodríguez Louro (eds.), 21–36.
- Colantoni, Laura & Celeste Rodríguez Louro (eds.). 2013. *Perspectivas teóricas y experimentales sobre el español de la Argentina*. Madrid: Iberoamericana Verbuet.
- Coloma, Germán. 2013. Valoración socioeconómica de tres características fonéticas en el español de la Argentina. In Angelita Martínez & Adriana Speranza (eds.), *Rumbos sociolingüísticos*, 23–36. Mendoza: Sociedad Argentina de Lingüística.
- Fontanella, Beatriz. 1987. *El español bonaerense*. Buenos Aires: Hachette.
- Gabriel, Christoph, Ingo Feldhausen, Andrea Peskova, Laura Colantoni, Sur-Ar Lee, Valeria Arana & Leopoldo Labastía. 2010. Argentinian Spanish intonation. In Pilar Prieto & Paolo Roseano (eds.), *Transcription of intonation of the Spanish language*, 285–317. Munich: Lincom Europa.
- Gurlekian, Jorge, Laura Colantoni & Humberto Torres. 2001. El alfabeto fonético SAMPA y el diseño de corpora fonéticamente balanceados. *Fonoaudiológica* 47(3), 58–69.
- Harris, James & Ellen Kaisse. 1999. Palatal vowels, glides and obstruents in Argentinian Spanish. *Phonology* 16(2), 117–190.
- Hualde, José Ignacio. 2005. *The sounds of Spanish*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Instituto Cervantes. 2014. *El español: una lengua viva*. Madrid: Instituto Cervantes.
- Kaisse, Ellen. 2001. The long fall: An intonational melody of Argentinian Spanish. In Julia Herschenson, Enrique Mallén & Karen Zagona (eds.), *Features and interfaces in Romance*, 148–160. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kochetov, Alexei & Laura Colantoni. 2011. Coronal place contrasts in Argentine and Cuban Spanish: An electropalatographic study. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 41(3), 313–342.
- Martínez, Eugenio & Ana Fernández. 2007. *Manual de fonética española*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- Martínez, Eugenio, Ana Fernández & Josefina Carrera. 2003. Castilian Spanish. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 33(2), 255–259.
- Monroy, Rafeel & Juan Hernández. 2015. Murcian Spanish. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 45(2), 229–240.
- Penny, Ralph. 2004. *Variation and change in Spanish*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Real Academia Española. 2011. *Nueva gramática de la lengua española: fonética y fonología*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe.

- Rohena-Madrazo, Marcos. 2013. Variación y cambio de sonoridad de la fricativa postalveolar del español de Buenos Aires. In Colantoni & Rodríguez Louro (eds.), 37–58.
- Rojas, Elena. 2004. El español en el noroeste. In Beatriz Fontanella (ed.), *El español de la Argentina y sus variedades regionales*, 161–187. Bahía Blanca: Asociación Rivadavia.
- Sadowsky, Scott & Gastón Salamanca. 2011. El inventario fonético del español de Chile. *Onomázein* 24, 61–84.