

Catching sound change in progress: semi-phonemic palatalisation in Shiwiar

The difference between a phoneme and an allophone is typically thought of as a straightforward categorical distinction. Speech sounds are analysed as phonemic when their distribution in a language is not predictable and when they contrast with other speech sounds in similar phonological environments. They are analysed as allophonic when their distribution is predictable and when they do not contrast meaningfully with other allophones of the same phoneme. However, phonological categories are not always stable over time, and new categories emerge as old ones fade away. In the midst of sound change, the distinction between phonemes and allophones can become blurred. This paper will examine the semi-phonemic status of palatalised consonants in Shiwiar and conclude that phonemic categories in a given language are not always clear-cut and are thus best analysed with a gradient approach.

Shiwiar is a Chicham language spoken by 1,200 people in the lowlands of eastern Ecuador. The data presented in this talk were collected as part of an ongoing documentation project which began in 2011. Examples and observations are drawn from a 30-hour audiovisual corpus of natural speech data, with over 9 hours of dialogue and a total of 30 speakers represented. The documented communicative events include day-to-day conversations, personal anecdotes, political discussions, radio shows, traditional stories, friendly advice, love songs, among many other genres.

Shiwiar has 14 consonant phonemes. Seven of them (/p, t, k, m, n, h, w/) are produced as palatalised when they occur after a high front vowel /i/, as in *iki'am* 'forest'. Therefore, in the majority of cases, palatalisation is entirely predictable, and the palatalised consonants can be considered allophones of their non-palatalised counterparts. Nevertheless, there are instances where an unexpected allophone occurs. Some words begin with a palatalised consonant despite the fact that they are not preceded by a high front vowel, e.g. *k'aih't'uk* 'having fainted' or *n'aratin'i* 'to cook'. Occasionally, non-palatalised consonants appear in environments where palatalisation should apply, e.g. *kapiwar* 'capybara' (compared to, for example, *fi'wiar* 'Shiwiar').

This apparent puzzle can be solved by understanding that palatalisation interacts with a sound change that is currently in progress: vowels at the word boundary in Shiwiar can be optionally devoiced or entirely elided. Word-initial palatal consonants were originally triggered by a high-front vowel at the beginning of the word, which then subsequently became elided (e.g. **inaratin* > **in'aratin'i* > *n'aratin'i* 'to cook'). Conversely, many of the words where palatalisation does not occur are loanwords which were borrowed without the palatalisation in place. However, this still raises the question whether palatalised consonants should synchronically be analysed as phonemic or allophonic in Shiwiar.

If the distinction between phonemes and allophones is considered categorical, then Shiwiar palatalisation cannot be easily classed as either. If, on the other hand, the distinction is considered a gradient continuum, Shiwiar palatalisation can be analysed as a semi-phonemic process: largely predictable but occasionally contrastive. The latter approach is advantageous not only because it accurately reflects the data, but also because it acknowledges that linguistic structures are not static, but in fact change over time.