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# **Discourse Genre, Type of Situation and Topic of Conversation in Relation to Phonological Variables in Puerto Rican Spanish<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Introduction**

This study examines stylistic variation in relation to phonological variables in Puerto Rican Spanish. The methodology for this study has been designed so as to obtain possible stylistic variation in ways of speaking which may occur naturally in daily conversation. No written styles will be taken into consideration for this study. Style will be analyzed in terms of topic of conversation, individual (one-on-one) conversation versus a group situation (more than two people in the conversation), and the type of discourse genre.

Stylistic variation is defined as phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical differences in language use which exist in different situations for the same speaker, i.e. what is called intraspeaker variation. Stylistic variation implies that no one speaks in the same way everywhere, and that the speaker is able to select which linguistic form is going to be used in a specific situation.

Puerto Rican Spanish has been chosen as the focus of study. In general, sociolinguistic studies of Puerto Rican Spanish do not take stylistic variation into consideration. Some exceptions are Poplack (1980) who opposes informal to formal style, and López-Morales (1983) who includes styles such as reading a text and reading a list of words. Data for this study consist of individual and group conversations recorded among the urban population of Caguas, Puerto Rico during Fall of 1992 and Winter 1993. Caguas is a city about 20 miles south of the San Juan Metropolitan Area. It is the fifth largest city on the island with 133,447 inhabitants from a total population of 3,522,037. Mostly urbanized and industrialized, Caguas has a growing commercial base.

For this paper, I will show the results for four speakers, two males and two females, obtained from one conversation with the researcher (60-90 minutes of conversation for each speaker) and one conversation including

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Carmen Silva-Corvalán and my classmates at USC for their comments and support on this paper, and Nancy Antrim for corrections on my English.

other people in a different situation. The recording with the researcher consists of a mostly guided conversation with the following sections: work and school, family, friends, activities, personal experiences, and controversial topics. The group situation consists of a non guided conversation with other friends or relatives.

The phonological variables selected for this study are: multiple vibrant (rr) in syllable initial position (e.g. carro, rosa), and single vibrant (r) in syllable final position (e.g. parte, mar). The multiple vibrant variants include an alveolar variant (rosa) and a velar variant (Rosa), while the single vibrant variant includes five different variants: alveolar, lateralized, fricative, aspirated and deletion. Both alveolar variants are considered to be standard variants. The fricative (r) in syllable final position is also considered to be standard since there is a general tendency (not only in Puerto Rican Spanish) to produce a fricative (r) in syllable final position (Quilis & Fernández 1982).

Sociolinguistics generally addresses the interrelation of social and linguistic variables, in order to show tendencies and explain language variation. Style has generally not been used to explain language variation, and when it has, it has been limited to differences between 'formal' and 'informal' speech. There are three basic models which include stylistic variation as one of the dimensions of sociolinguistic investigation, together with the linguistic and the social dimensions. These three models are: attention paid to speech (Labov 1972), style as audience design (Bell 1984), and primacy of register variation (Finegan & Biber 1994).

For Labov (1972), style is motivated by the context and by the attention paid to speech. He distinguishes different contextual styles such as casual speech, careful speech and reading styles. Labov's model for analyzing style as attention paid to speech has been criticized for being an impoverished view of style (Bell 1984). It does not take into consideration the relations/roles among the speakers participating in the conversation. The distinctions between careful and casual speech/more formal and less formal are not always obvious or even clear. However, the observation that speakers pay more or less attention to their speech is still valid, and that may have phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical consequences.

Bell's study (1984) is a critical analysis encompassing two decades of research of the different sociolinguistic investigations which incorporate stylistic variation. For Bell, any model which implies style shift should take into account the relation within both the social dimension and the style dimension. Bell's model is style as audience design, and it intends to be a simple and adequate explanation for differences in style, assuming that speakers respond mainly according to the people around them and then take everyone around them into consideration. That means that the speakers design their style for their audience. In general, Bell's model is good in

presenting many parameters to analyze stylistic variation, such as addressee and other roles, setting, and topic. Some of those parameters, however, are still a challenge for sociolinguists, due to the difficulties in measuring them.

Rickford & McNair-Knox (1994) examine and confirm some of the parameters presented in Bell. They pay more attention to the addressee as a crucial factor for stylistic variation, concluding that the race of the addressee has a major effect on style shifting; however, the results of their study seem to be more adequately explained in terms of relation or familiarity of speaker and addressee as well as differences in age.

The final model to consider is Finegan & Biber's primacy of register variation. Finegan & Biber use the term register both to describe language varieties that are associated with differences in communicative situation, and to refer to stylistic variation. Their basic hypothesis is 'that register variation exhibits its systematic patterns because the distribution of many linguistic features across situations of use is functionally motivated' (1994: 319). Finegan & Biber include a variety of both oral and written registers such as: conversation, interview, public speech, personal letters, general fiction, press reportage and academic prose. This is a broad vision of stylistic variation, that is not limited to speech. The basic problem with this model is the idea of comparing oral registers with written registers, which are obviously different, even when they can be neatly arranged in a register continuum.

As an extension to the Finegan & Biber model, and following some of the ideas presented in Labov (1972), Bell (1984), and De Oliveira e Silva & Tavares de Macedo (1992), I am including discourse genre as a way to examine differences in language use, and as an additional parameter for studying stylistic variation. In Finegan & Biber "conversation" is one of the registers included in their analysis (as mentioned above). In the present investigation I am taking "conversational register" as a set of separated registers or discourse genres. Five conversational genres will be included: argumentative, descriptive, expository, narrative, and dialogue. Figure (1) shows the parameters I am including in my analysis: addressee, type of situation, topic of conversation and discourse genre:

**Figure 1**  
**Stylistic Variation**

Addressee	Situation	Topic of Conversation	Discourse genre
Known by the speaker	Individual		Argumentative
Not Known	Group		Descriptive
	Oral Presentation		Dialogue
			Expository
			Narrative

For this paper, I will not include addressee and non read oral presentation as variables to analyze stylistic variation. Instead, I will concentrate on the effects of topic of conversation and the conversation situation, leaving issues of the relation between the speaker and interviewer for future research.

## 2. Results

In the following I will present an analysis of the results including variables, such as phonological environment and stress, as well as, the stylistic variables such as situation of recording, type of discourse and topic of conversation.

### 2.1. Multiple vibrant /rr/

For the examination of multiple vibrant (rr) a total of 502 tokens were analyzed for four speakers using VARBRUL 2s: speaker J (female, 23 year old, dental hygienist), speaker E (female, 27, medical technologist), speaker M (male, 27, PE teacher), and speaker N (male, 28, graduate student-social psychology). All the speakers are classified as known by the interviewer. Speaker M only shows one velar token throughout his two conversations, for that reason I am not including him for the statistical analysis.<sup>2</sup> Even though velarization of (rr) is spread around the island, there are still some speakers who probably never acquired that variant.

Speakers J, N and E have the velar variant in their speech: 13% for N, 12% for J and 9% for E. Tables 1 through 4 show the distribution for some of the linguistic factors included for this study. The application value for all the tables is the alveolar variant. Phonological environment and situation of recording were the two factors selected as significant by VARBRUL stepup and down, all the other factors were throw out.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the alveolar variant in each of the

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<sup>2</sup> I do not think the recording environment affected M's speech. In fact, the only velar (rr) that appeared in the individual conversation, was where M could see the recorder all the time, and where the conversation was lead by the interviewer. For the group situation he was not looking at the recorder, and there was a lot of laughter and jokes throughout the conversation. The other speaker participating in the group conversation produced the velar variant many times, but that did not induce M to assimilate the sound through the conversation. In terms of social class, speaker M belongs to the lowest one, living in one of Caguas' government projects, a marginal area, characterized by drug and criminal activity. Slang use is very common in his speech; nevertheless, velar (rr) is not part of his repertoire.

phonological environments included for the study:<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Multiple Vibrant /rr/**  
**Phonological environment**

Environment	Examples	#Alveolar/Total	% Alveolar	Varbrul Probabilities <sup>4</sup>
/n___	con razón	(37/39)	95%	.68
/r___	ser raro	(18/19)	95%	.65
/s___	es rojo	(68/74)	92%	.54
/v__v	la rosa	(287/318)	90%	.51
/##__	rojo	(31/41)	76%	.24
/l___	el ríp	(8/11)	73%	.19

The alveolar variant is more likely to occur when it is preceded by /n/ (con razón) or by /r/ (ser raro). On the other hand, initial position before a pause and /rr/ preceded by a lateral consonant favor the production of the velar more than all the other environments. Initial position generally involves more energy and perhaps more 'emphasis' in the moment one is initiating speech. The velar variant seems to be more prominent than the alveolar variant. In fact, velarization of (rr) is one of the characteristics of Puerto Rican Spanish that any Spanish speaker from another country will remember after being in contact with Puerto Ricans who velarized. In the case of (rr) preceded by a lateral, there is too much confusion due to lateralization. Velarization helps to differentiate between the lateral and the vibrant, in this case. In terms of phonological features, the lateral and the vibrant share the features [anterior] and articulation by the tongue blade. The velar variant on the other hand is [back] and articulated by the tongue root. To avoid confusion and as result of linguistic insecurity the speaker may prefer to

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<sup>3</sup> For all the tables showing the results of the multiple vibrant (rr), the alveolar variant is the application value for the VARBRUL analysis. For all the tables showing the results of syllable final (r), the lateralized variant is the application value.

<sup>4</sup> This number is not a frequency, it is a number given by the Multiple Variant Analysis, and it represents the probability of occurrence.

differentiate these two sounds by favoring velarization.

Table 2 shows the distribution of /rr/ according to the situation of the recording:

**Table 2**  
**Multiple Vibrant /rr/**  
**Situation of Recording**

Recording Situation	#Alveolar/Total	%Alveolar	Varbrul Probability
Individual	(357/392)	91%	.54
Group	(92/110)	84%	.35

It is significant that the velar variant occurs more frequently in a group situation than in one-on-one conversations, 16% vs 9% respectively. In the individual situation the conversation was semi-guided by the interviewer and there was control of the topics. On the other hand, for the group situation there was no guide or control over the situation, and the speakers were completely spontaneous. Since the velar variant is stigmatized it is more likely to occur in a situation which is less formal.

While type of discourse and topic of conversation were not taken as significant factors by VARBRUL's stepup and down, it is important to mention that narrative and dialogue showed the highest frequencies of the velar variant, 15% and 18% respectively vs. 8% and 7% for the other discourse genres. For topic of conversation I can mention that the velar variant is more likely to occur when the speaker is talking about hobbies, experiences of childhood, a moment of embarrassment, and studies; while the alveolar variant is more likely to occur when the speakers talk about Puerto Rico's political status, and about topics related to the Catholic Church.

Table 3 shows a crosstabulation of speaker vs. situation:

**Table 3**  
**Multiple Vibrant /rr/**  
**Crosstab: Speaker vs. Situation**

Speaker	Individual		Group	
	#Alveolar/Total	%Alveolar	#Alveolar/Total	%Alveolar
J	(101/116)	87%	(28/30)	93%
N	(107/121)	88%	(46/55)	84%
E	(149/155)	96%	(18/25)	72%

sig. = .000

Speakers N and E increase the production of the velar variant for the group situation, but that tendency is not observed in speaker J. It is general knowledge that not all speakers follow the same linguistic tendencies. In this study there is a tendency to velarize more in a group situation, however speaker J does not follow that pattern. After analyzing the speech of other speakers, perhaps I will be able to determine the characteristics of those speakers who do not follow this specific pattern. However in speech production there are many other external and internal factors such as mood at the moment of the recording of both the speaker and the other participants, the characteristics of all speakers in the conversation, etc. that may affect the communicative process.

Table 4 shows the crosstabulation of speaker vs. discourse genre.

**Table 4**  
**Multiple Vibrant /rr/**  
**Crosstab: Speaker vs. Discourse Genre**

Speaker	Descriptive		Expository		Dialogue	
	#Alv/ Total	% Alv	#Alv/ Total	% Alv	#Alv/ Total	% Alv
J	(18/22)	82%	(43/47)	91%	(46/52)	88%
N	(28/29)	97%	(49/54)	91%	(7/11)	64%
E	(80/85)	94%	(61/65)	94%	(2/4)	50%

Speaker	Narrative		Argumentative	
	#Alveolar/ Total	% Alveolar	#Alveolar/ Total	% Alveolar
J	(14/15)	93%	(8/10)	80%
N	(58/71)	82%	(11/11)	100%
E	(10/11)	91%	(14/15)	93%

sig. = .000

Speakers N and E show a higher production of the velar variant for dialogue and narrative. As an intuitive and subjective observation, I might say that speaker E velarized more than all the other speakers in daily conversation. The differences between the frequencies she shows for the individual and the



group situation may show support for the claim that some speakers pay more attention to their speech than others in a sociolinguistic interview. They either try to show 'their best ' or want to make a good impression on the interviewer.

## 2.2. Syllable final /r/

For the analysis of (r) in syllable final position a total of 2046 tokens were examined for all four speakers. The alveolar variant shows a frequency of occurrence of 49% while the lateralized variant shows 51%. For the alveolar variant I am combining all cases of vibrant and fricative, since both variants are considered standard pronunciation. For the statistical analysis all cases of aspiration and deletion were not included, since their frequencies were very low.

Tables 5 to 10 show the frequencies for both the lateralized and the alveolar variants. The factors that were selected as significant by VARBRUL's stepup and down were phonological environment, stress, situation of recording, topic of conversation, and speaker. The application value for the analysis is the lateralized variant.

Table 5 shows the frequencies for phonological environment:

**Table 5**  
**Syllable Final /r/**  
**Phonological Environment**

Environment	Lateral Variant			Alveolar Variant	
	#Lat/Tot	%Lat	Varbrul Prob	#Alv/Tot	%Alveolar
/ ___ b,d,g	(213/335)	64%	.67	(122/335)	36%
/ ___ ##	(193/281)	69%	.65	(88/281)	31%
/ ___ -cont p,t,k	(360/622)	58%	.58	(262/622)	42%
/ ___ nasal	(117/281)	42%	.42	(164/281)	58%
/ ___ +cont s,f,h	(63/227)	28%	.29	(164/227)	72%
/ ___ v	(94/300)	31%	.26	(206/300)	69%

The lateralized variant is favored when it is followed by fricatives (b,d,g) and in final position. The alveolar variant is favored when followed by /+cont/

consonants (s,f,h) or a vowel. It is interesting that lateralization of /r/ does not occur in word internal position (eg. cara, pero); however, lateralization may occur in syllable final position followed by a vowel. From a phonological point of view this is evidence that processes may be explained using different levels of representation. First, lateralization occurs at the lexical level of representation, and then with resyllabification at a postlexical level (e.g. por amor > pol amol > po-la-mol).

Table 6 shows the distribution of the variants for stressed and unstressed syllables.

**Table 6**  
**Syllable Final /r/**  
**Stress**

	Lateral Variant			Alveolar Variant	
	#Lat/Tot	%Lat	Varbrul Prob	#Alv/Tot	%Alv
Stressed syllable	(729/1297)	56%	.54	(568/1297)	44%
Unstressed syllable	(311/749)	42%	.44	(438/749)	58%

A stressed syllable favors the production of the lateralized variant while an unstressed syllable favors the production of the alveolar variant. Many of those stressed syllables are verbal infinitival forms (cantar > cantal, beber > beberl, vivir > vivirl).

Table 7 indicates the frequencies of /L/ and /r/ according to the situation of the recording.

**Table 7**  
**Syllable Final /r/**  
**Situation**

Situation	Lateral Variant			Alveolar Variant	
	#Lat/Tot	%Lat	Varbrul Prob	#Alv/Total	%Alv
Individual	(830/1686)	49%	.47	(856/1297)	44%
Group	(210/360)	58%	.62	(150/360)	58%

The group situation favors the lateralized variant more than the individual

conversation, 58% vs. 49% respectively. This agrees with the result for the velarized variant, in which the less formal situation favors the stigmatized variant.

Type of discourse was not selected as a significant factor by VARBRUL. I still can mention that the argumentative discourse shows higher frequencies for the alveolar variant; however, the probabilities of occurrence of the lateralized variant are almost the same for all the five genres, varying from .49 to .53.

Table 8 shows the occurrences of the variants for all the topics included in the conversations.

**Table 8**  
**Syllable Final /r/**  
**Topic of Conversation**

Topics	Lateral Variant			Alveolar Variant	
	#Lat/Tot	%Lat	Varbrul Prob	#Alv/Total	%Alv
Childhood	(57/90)	63%	.71	(33/90)	37%
Sad moment	(34/49)	69%	.65	(15/49)	31%
Embarrassment	(19/30)	63%	.65	(11/30)	37%
Friends	(144/219)	66%	.63	(75/219)	34%
Capital punishment	(35/56)	63%	.58	(21/56)	38%
Family	(110/202)	54%	.53	(92/202)	46%
Danger	(21/43)	49%	.51	(22/43)	51%
Food	(105/164)	64%	.51	(59/164)	36%
Work	(223/456)	49%	.50	(233/456)	51%
Pregnancy	(42/84)	50%	.47	(42/84)	50%
Studies	(149/359)	42%	.44	(210/359)	58%
Church	(32/85)	38%	.38	(53/85)	62%
Elections/Politics	(39/129)	30%	.37	(90/129)	70%
Abortion	(30/80)	38%	.26	(50/80)	63%

The topics about childhood experiences or friends and narratives about a sad or embarrassing moment favor the use of the lateralized variant. On the other hand, topics that seem to be more formal such as "church",

"elections/politics/Puerto Rico's political status", and "abortion" favor the production of the alveolar variant.

Table 9 shows that speakers M and J favor the lateralized variant more than speakers E and N:

**Table 9**  
Syllable Final /r/  
Speaker

Speaker	Lateral Variant			Alveolar Variant	
	#Lat/Tot	%Lat	Varbrul Prob.	#Alv/Tot	%Alv
M	(278/471)	59%	.65	(193/471)	41%
J	(441/756)	58%	.54	(315/756)	42%
E	(176/416)	42%	.42	(240/416)	58%
N	(145/403)	36%	.33	(258/403)	64%

In terms of education speaker N is the only one with an education beyond the bachelor's degree. He regularly makes presentations at church. He also works as a community developer requiring him to deal frequently with government personnel.

Table 10 shows the crosstabulation of speaker vs. situation. It is interesting that all the speakers increase the production of the lateralized variant in a group situation. It is also significant that speaker E again shows the greatest difference if we compare her results both for the individual and the group situation. These results range from 39% to 60%.

**Table 10**  
Syllable Final /r/  
Crosstab: Speaker vs. Situation

Speakers	Individual		Group	
	#Lat/Total	%Lateralized	#Lat/Total	%Lateralized
M	(252/434)	58%	(26/37) 70%	70%
J	(345/610)	57%	(96/146) 66%	66%
E	(134/346)	39%	(42/70) 60%	60%
N	(99/296)	33%	(46/107) 43%	43%

sig. = .000

### **3. Discussion and conclusion:**

The results from this study support and challenge different aspects of the theories of style that have been suggested by Labov, Bell, Rickford & McNair-Knox, and Finegan & Biber. The situation of the conversation proves to be significant in examining phonological variation as previously observed by Labov and Bell in their respective studies.

For example, the larger percentage of standard variants in the individual situation supports Bell's model, in that the speaker appears to accommodate to a more formal situation, as is the case of a one-on-one conversation. In the group situation, however, speakers are not subjected to a format or a conversation guide. Generally, speakers pay more attention to their speech in some specific situations as suggested by Labov. It seems that the speakers pay more attention to their speech in a one-on-one conversation, rather than in a group situation. In a one-on-one conversation the speaker is the center of attention and he/she focuses on his/her speech. In a group situation there is not a specific center of attention, people speak simultaneously and language seems to be more careless. Of course, that may vary according to the formality of the group situation. For example, a gathering of friends is very different to a lawyers meeting.

All speakers selected for this study were very well known to the researcher; however, the situation seems to affect what the speaker produces in his/her speech. The speaker may have reasons to manipulate his/her speech in one or another situation. By social conventions, we interpret some situations to be more formal than others. Speaker E may be an example of that interpretation, since she shows the greatest differences in speech use when she moves from the individual to the group situation. The presence of other people in the conversation, may also affect the speech production of each speaker. This supports Bell's model, since Bell states that all speakers are important and affect language production in one way or another. Bell also suggests that the presence of more than one person in the conversation may affect the use of more or less standard variants. He says that the speaker has the ability to design his/her style to fit a community-wide range of addressees (1984: 164), and he also states that 'speakers assess the general style of their addressees' speech, and shift relative to it' (167). At the same time it presents a challenge to Rickford & McNair-Knox's interpretations, since in their study they analyze the speech of Roberta with a known addressee and in a group situation, and the speech of Roberta with an unknown addressee and in a one-on-one conversation. Not only race, as previously mentioned, should have been relevant in their study, but the familiarity and the type of situation in which Roberta was involved.

The topic of conversation was significant only for the study of syllable final /r/. In fact, Bell states that the shift to different topics is always less than the shift according to addressee. Topics such as "experiences of

childhood", and a "moment of embarrassment" favor the production of "non standard" variants, while topics such as politics and Church favor the production of the "standard" variants. In addition, these results support Rickford & McNair-Knox's analysis. In their study more vernacular forms were used when talking about "wives and slamming partners" than when talking about "school and career". Social conventions establish that some topics are more formal than others. However it is difficult to predict the extent of interest or what kind of attitude a speaker may have towards one specific topic. For example, speaker E interpreted the topic about studies as a formal one, and decided to describe very carefully her program of studies and to give a general evaluation of her experience as a student. On the other hand, speaker N developed that topic by talking about personal experiences, funny experiences, and instead of describing, he decided to talk about it, as if he were telling a story.

Discourse genre did not appear to be a significant factor for this study; nevertheless, I am going to make some comments. For the analysis of syllable initial /rr/ both narrative and dialogue favor the production of the velar and the lateralized variants more than other genres, and argumentation tends to favor the alveolar variant in both studies. Both narrative and dialogue ("sequences of short questions and answers", as defined by Oliveira e Silva & Tavares de Macedo 1992) are more dynamic and higher in tempo. The narrative is more internalized in the speaker's mind, it comes out more fluently. In a personalized narrative, the speaker may be the center of an adventure; there is action, a sequence of events that intends to keep the attention of the addressee. Argumentation, on the other hand, is "slower", the speaker is committing himself/herself to an opinion and needs to think and pay more attention to what he/she is saying. In general, discourse genre represents a challenge for the researcher, due to the complexities shown by the discourse. For example, narrative may have description, an argumentation may have a narrative that may work as an argument, description may include the point of view and the opinion of the speaker, etc.

Stylistic variables such as type of situation and topic of conversation constitute a powerful way of showing phonological differentiation. Type of situation, which is directly related to addressee shift, seems to be more significant, supporting in this sense Bell's observations about addressee vs. topic shift. Both topic and discourse genre need to be studied together in order to show how they are related and how both affect phonological variation. Finegan & Biber classify 'conversation' as one register in their model of register variation, but I have tried to show that it can include a number of different discourse genres, such as one-one-one vs. a group situation, or as a set of discourse genres. Although discourse genre was not selected as a significant factor using VARBRUL, I have shown that it has an influence. To that end I have analyzed speech in two different situations

(one-on-one conversation and group situation). Other situations such as a non-read oral presentation may be also analyzed in the future in order to show differences in oral/non read registers. Studies on stylistic variation show a broader view of sociolinguistic investigation. Social variables seem to be static: one can be either male or female, have a low or high status, etc., while stylistic variation presents different situations in which any speaker may be involved. Stylistic variation also shows that regardless of social class, everyone is capable of using more/less standard forms according to the situation, resulting in a strong theory of language accommodation.

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