

The Role of Cocoliche in the Development of Buenos Aires Spanish Intonation

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Abstract

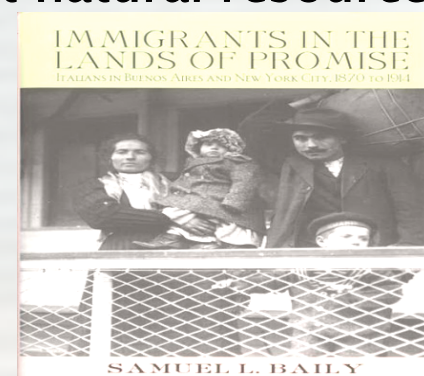
An oft-cited peculiarity of *bonaerense* Spanish is its Italian-like intonation, a property acquired through 19th and 20th century contact between *bonaerense* Spanish and the speech of Italian immigrants. Nineteenth century accounts of this variety's intonation point to a variety that "did not differ substantially from Peninsular Spanish." (Colantoni & Gurlekian 2004: 108) By the middle of the 20th century, however, Vidal de Battini (1964) reports that "ya es común que los extranjeros comentan que Buenos Aires habla con entonación italiana." (143-144) How was contact with Italian able to revolutionize *bonaerense* intonation in less than a century?

This poster will posit that "cocoliche", the language variety spoken by Italian immigrants "en su paso de una a otra lengua hicieron uso de formas intermedias," initiated a process that eventually transformed *bonaerense* Spanish intonation. (de Weinberg 1987: 138) Initially, *cocoliche* was a highly stigmatized variety, but the overwhelming need to integrate successive generations of Italians into the Buenos Aires community made the mastery of *cocoliche* AND *bonaerense* Spanish highly valorized. This change was initiated when non-*cocoliche* speakers began to imitate the immigrants' speech, style-shifting into a "mock *cocoliche*", "the mock language used to impersonate or caricature Italians in Argentina." (Cara-Walker 1987: 50) Ultimately this process covertly led to the desired outcome, a social and linguistic integration of Italian immigrants and their descendents.

A description of the unique socio-historical context of Buenos Aires at the turn of the century, spectrogram depictions of the intonational patterns that might have existed in *cocoliche* and an analysis of the impressionistic descriptions of *bonaerense* Spanish at this time will support this analysis. It will be concluded that an exceptional socio-historical context, one in which Italian immigration "... virtualmente disolvió las viejas formas culturales e incluso los hábitos de la sociedad receptora," ultimately induced the transformation of *bonaerense* intonation. (Muscio 1994: 71)

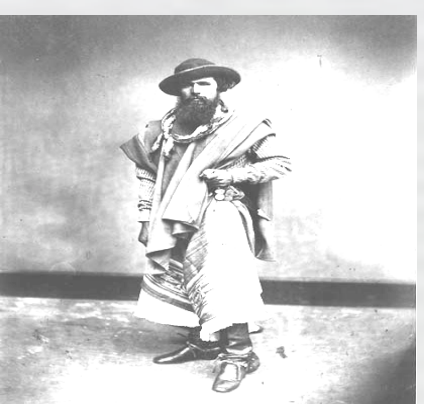
Why would a Spanish speaker adopt Italian-like intonation?

Early 19th century Argentina was a vast, virtually uninhabited territory, despite its abundant natural resources. Politicians like Alberdi saw immigration as a means to settle the frontier and proclaimed "Gobernar es poblar". In response, 8.2 million immigrants arrived from 1830-1950, drawn by the idea of "Hacer la América". (Misuriello 1993) By 1914, nearly 3/4 of Buenos Aires' adults were foreign-born, 55% of which was Italian. (Scobie 1971)



Such massive immigration represented competition for work and social status to the native *criollos*. (Mafud 1973) Most immigrants stayed and a tenuous relationship developed between themselves and *criollos*. Progress necessitated cooperation and "the common ground for all lay in a tolerant Argentina that accepted most European customs or habits as its own... the result was a culture that by the early twentieth century appeared to be 'Italianized Hispanic' but that increasingly asserted its 'Argentinism'." (Scobie 1971: 192)

Around 1900, this "Argentinism" acquired a new model when the *gaucho* came to be romanticized as a symbol of "the vanishing Argentine traditions being lost in the flood of immigration." (Cara-Walker 1987: 41) In the mythic *gaucho*, *criollos* and foreign *gringos* alike saw a legend they could aspire to and an ideal in which they could create a new, blended national identity. A literary genre, *literatura gauchesca*, tapped into this idealization and theater houses capitalized on its popularity by staging performances.



Cocoliche and mock cocoliche

It was during such a performance that a character was created whose speech was based on that of Antonio Cocoliche, a Calabrese handyman. Played by a *criollo* imitating an Italian *gringo* dressed as a *gaucho*, this character's famous *gaucho*-like refrain struck a cord with audiences: "Ma quiame Franchisque Cocoliche, e song cregollo gasta lo güese de la taba e la canilla de lo caracuse, amique!" (Podestá 1930: 62-63) The character became wildly popular amongst native *criollos* who imitated his dress and speech during costumed carnival celebrations. Such popularity "eventually transcended carnival and stage settings, [mock *cocoliche*] filled the repertoires of street vendors or anyone wanting to display verbal cleverness..." (Cara-Walker 1987: 49)

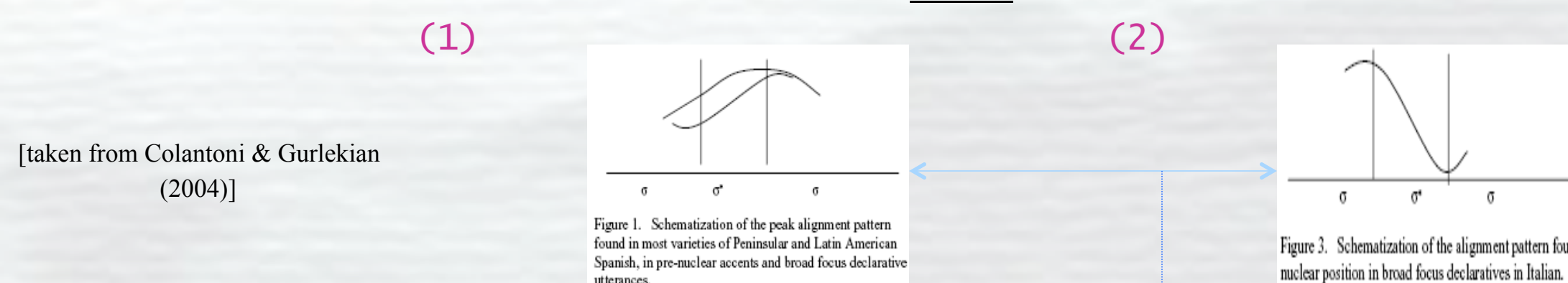


Cocoliche was then imitated by other speakers using a "mock language used to impersonate or caricature Italians in Argentina which flourished..." (Cara-Walker 1987: 50) The use of "mock *cocoliche*" constituted a "style" in as much as stylistic practice involves "adapting linguistic variables available out in the larger world to the construction of social meaning on a local level." (Eckert 2003: 44) That such a style was in-style speaks to why L1 Spanish speakers may have adopted an Italian-like way of speaking. What part would intonation have played in this "mock *cocoliche* style" and its subsequent influence on Buenos Aires Spanish intonation?

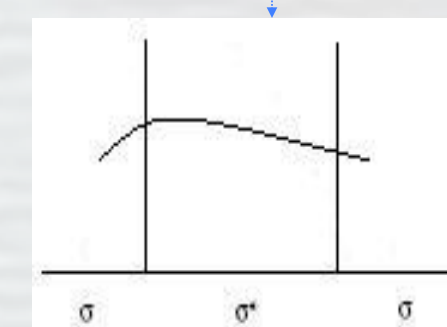
Cocoliche and "mock cocoliche style" intonation

An analysis of the effect of *cocoliche* and, more directly, the use of "mock *cocoliche* style" on Buenos Aires Spanish necessitates a description of the intonational patterns of *cocoliche*. Unfortunately, "*cocoliche* was completely 'unstable' in given individuals" and "nothing approaching an ethnography of speaking for *cocoliche*." (Whinnom 1971: 98 ; Cara-Walker 1987: 51)

Logically, however, it might be expected that a *cocoliche* speaker's intonation would hybridize Spanish and Italian patterns. The following two schematizations show peak alignment patterns in declaratives for (1) Peninsular and Latin America Spanish, which would have been similar to *bonaerense* Spanish PRIOR to large-scale immigration and (2) most Italian varieties.



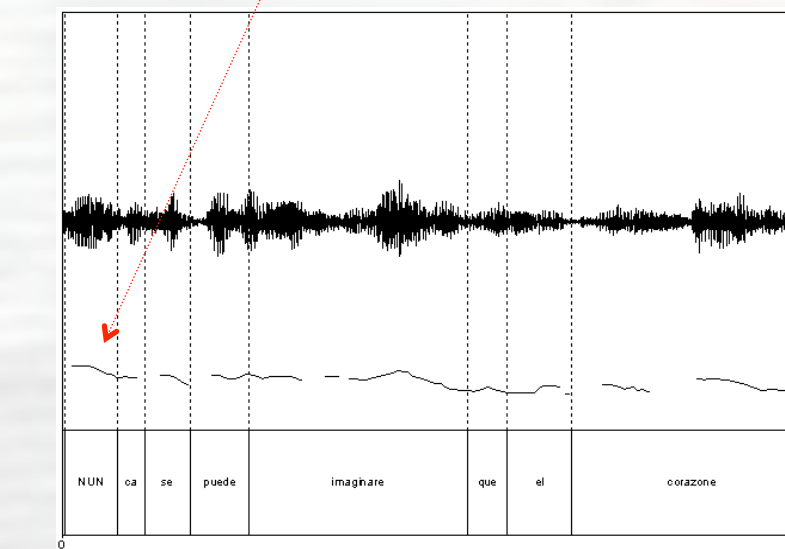
One hybrid of these two schemas contains a peak near the beginning of the tonic syllable and a slight fall throughout this syllable:



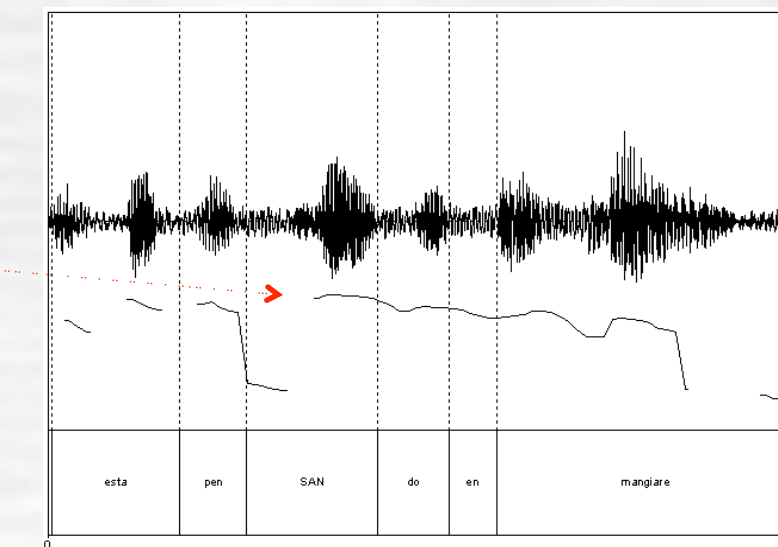
To determine the degree to which such a tonal configuration might have reflected *cocoliche*-like intonation contours, the speech of Darío Vittori, an Italian immigrant to Argentina, playing a *cocoliche*-speaking grandfather in the film "Un día de suerte" (2002) will be examined.

Cocoliche and "mock cocoliche style" intonation: a case study

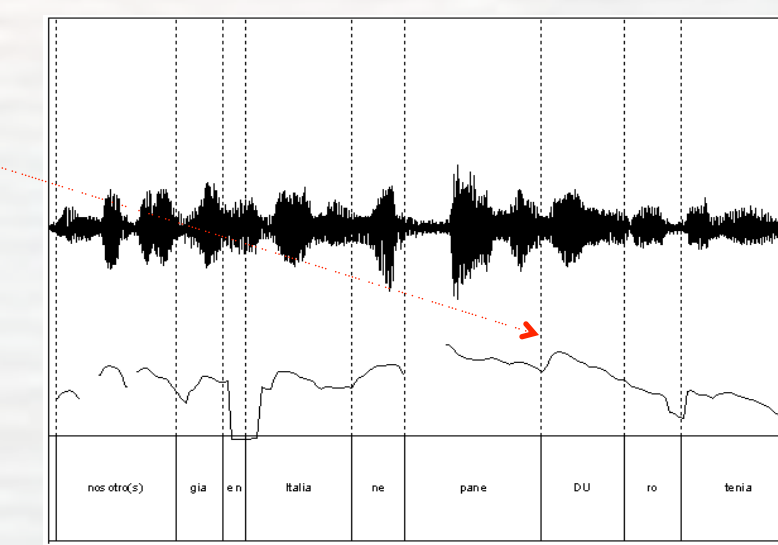
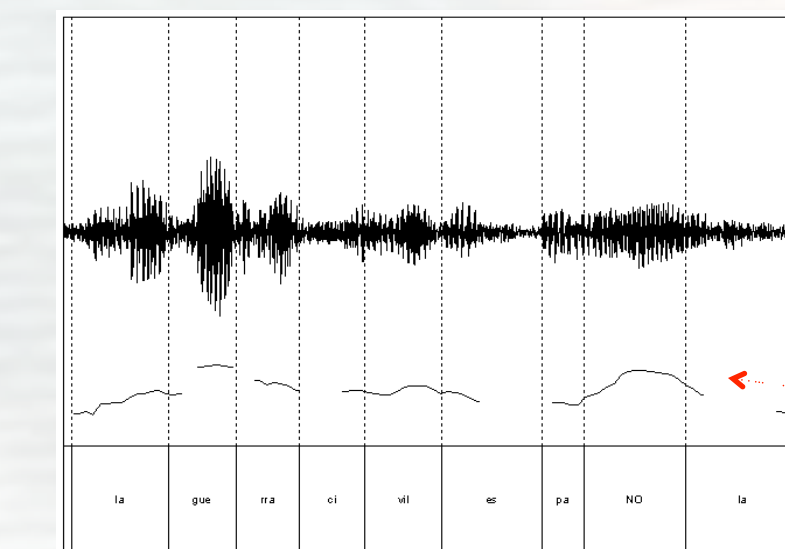
1. A shallow fall on "nun" that levels off in the following syllable.



in "san" a shallow fall extending far beyond the syllable.



3. On the tonic syllable "du", a fall that only extends into post-tonic syllables. This is emphatic speech, which could explain the slightly sharper fall on the accented syllable.



4. Here a Spanish speaker is speaking to Vittori's character. Note a similar fall on the "no". This may be similar to "mock *cocoliche* style" intonation.

Do historical accounts bear out a slight fall in the tonic syllable in cocoliche?

This pattern does indeed appear to reflect period observations on the displacement of the phrase-final fall. Vidal de Battini (1964: 144) notes a pattern in which *bonaerense* Spanish of this period "advertie su tono agudo y su final ascendente; en la frase enunciativa la vocal acentuada final, con alargamiento, mantiene su tono, con descenso imperceptible." Alonso & Ureña (1939), cited in Sanz (2001: 72), corroborate the observation of a vanishing phrase-final fall in final accented syllables: "una entonación un poco cantarina que mantiene con escaso descenso la última sílaba acentuada." Finally, Meo Zilio (1970: 136) states that "su campo de entonación parece intermedio entre el esp. y el ital."

Conclusion

This poster has sought to explain how "an Italian contour has been borrowed or adapted" in Buenos Aires Spanish. (Kaisse 2001: 160) It has been argued that the motivation behind *criollo* L1 Spanish speakers' transition to an Italianized intonation can only be explained using the socio-historical context of this period in Argentine history. Interpolating between peak alignment patterns in Peninsular Spanish and Italian, a broad fall in the tonic syllable is predicted in *cocoliche*. This prediction holds for the examples of *cocoliche*-like speech illustrated here. The modern pattern of *bonaerense* intonation is likely the result of an exaggeration of this broad fall, given that "mock *cocoliche* was a stylized portrayal of cocoliche." (Cara-Walker 1987: 54)