

# Variation in the verb in the Segrià: the pronunciation of the third-person morpheme in different contexts of use

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## Abstract

This article is based on a study of morphological variation in the third person verb endings in the Lleida dialect (*Lleidata*) of north western Catalan. The study analyses different registers of the spoken language used in the municipal district of Alguaire and in programmes on TeleLleida, the Lleida local television service. The study shows that the morphological variation traditionally associated with *lleidata* speech is tending to be lost in formal situations.<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of distinguishing linguistic behaviour conditioned by space, time, sociocultural aspects and communicative situation, is a constant in the linguistics literature of the 20th century together with recognition that these variables give rise to both constant and variable phenomena.

The study presented here sets out to analyse patterns of realisation of the third person verb endings in samples of *Lleidata* speakers, based on the Labovian segmentation into different speech registers or styles and predicated on the need to approach dialectal studies from a functional angle (Biber, 1994).

The work comprises the following sections:

- a) a linguistic and social description of the linguistic phenomena;
- b) an overview of the methodology used;
- c) a presentation of the results obtained in terms of a range of social and functional factors.

Some observations of a general nature on morphological variation in the third person in the dialect of Lleida (*Lleidata*) will provide a lynch pin for the study.

## 2. The phenomenon in question

In north-western Catalan, the development of the verb inflections of the third person singular imperfect indicative, conditional and present indicative of the first conjugation was as follows: IMPERFECT: -ABAT> [aje], [ae], [aβe]; -IBAT> [ie], -EBAT> [ie], [je] // CONDITIONAL: -IAT> [ie] // PRESENT: -AT> [e].

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However, in the Lleida dialect of north-western Catalan (*Lleidatà*), variation in the verb endings of the imperfect indicative of the first conjugation has not followed quite the same path. Thus: 1) [ajɛ] this has become sharply recessive, now relegated to the speech of the very elderly, as Solans (1990) and Creus (2002) have pointed out; 2) [aɛ] may be beginning to lose ground among the youngest speakers and is used basically in informal situations (see Solans, 1990; Creus, 2002); 3) lastly, [aβɛ], and sometimes [aβɛ], are the forms that dominate in the most formal contexts, and are furthermore the forms that come closest to the written standard.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, these sets of verb endings were kept apart from other verb endings thanks to the open-close distinction in the vowel (vowel height distinction). Thus, we find: *jo cantava* [ajɛ], [aɛ], [aβɛ] alongside *ell/a cantava* [ajɛ], [aɛ], [aβɛ], *jo corria* [iɛ] opposing *ell/a corria* [ie], and *ell/a treballa* [ɛ] v. *Treballa!* [ɛ]. (Gili i Gaya, 1931; Badia i Margarit, 1950; Martí, 1970; Pueyo, 1976; DeCesaris, 1986; Veny, 1982, Solans, 1990; Turull, 1990; Viaplana, 1996; Lloret and Viaplana, 1997). This contrast [ɛ/e] distinguished each of the persons of the verb and their endings, something which does not happen in the eastern dialects.<sup>3</sup>

At the present time, however, the endings of the first and third person of the conditional, of the imperfect indicative and the present indicative –in first conjugation verbs– are beginning to lose their distinctiveness: the resulting merger going to [ɛ]. The impact of this change in progress is still quite slight and is not acknowledged systematically in descriptions of *Lleidatà*.<sup>4</sup>

The causes for this change need to be sought in the written language. Note that in north-eastern Catalan, unstressed *a* in word-final position is pronounced [ɛ]<sup>5</sup> (See Gili i Gaya, 1931; Pueyo, 1976; Veny, 1982; Turull, 1990), the only exceptions being firstly nouns ending in *-ista* (the phonological distinctions make it possible to distinguish gender: fem. *artist*[ɛ], masc. *artist*[e])<sup>6</sup> and secondly, the endings of the third person of the imperfect indicative, the conditional and the present indicative of the first conjugation (the so-called *-ar* verbs). Consequently, there is an analogy between the latter verb endings and the noun endings in [ɛ]. The result of this analogy in the case of the verb forms is the initiating of a sound change now in progress, which tends to level phonetically all graphemes of unstressed *a* in word final position to the sound [ɛ].

### 3. Methodology

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<sup>2</sup> “In the Catalan Countries (Països Catalans) the question of orthography takes on special dimensions, as you know, owing to the traditional illiteracy of speakers in their own language that the inhabitants of these lands suffered. Learning to spell has become synonymous with knowing the Catalan language, and, for good measure, love of one’s country.” (Segarra, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> In *Proposta per a un estàndard oral de morfologia* (IEC, [1992]1994:26) we read: “Characteristic of this defined area (north-western dialect area) is the pronunciation of the third person forms *cantav*[ɛ], *perdí*[ɛ], *serví*[ɛ]. [...] “Characteristic of this defined area (north-western dialect area) is the pronunciation of the third person forms *cantari*[ɛ], *perdrí*[ɛ], *servirí*[ɛ].”

<sup>4</sup> Creus (1997) offers a systematic analysis of the verb morphology at Bell-lloc d’Urgell and examines, among other things, variation in the third person morpheme. Additionally, the description provided by Casanovas and Creus (1999) of this variation, is succinct and to the point.

<sup>5</sup> Phonologically speaking, the emergence of [ɛ] has been explained by reference to the eastern dialects of Catalan: “The [ɛ] realisation (rather than [e]) is properly speaking characteristic of the midland counties of the north-western dialect area. That is, the Segrià, Noguera, Urgell and Garrigues (counties) especially, excluding places bordering on the areas where /a/ is the low variant (north-west Noguera) and scattered areas [...]; it is also found in other counties that border on those we have just mentioned [...]; as well as the southern section of the Alt Urgell [...]. This phenomenon of raising of an originally open vowel may have to do with the fronting of this variant in the central region of the north-western dialect area. It would seem more likely, however, that the change represents an attempt to shift the open variant /a/ towards the prestigious realisation [ə] typical of the central Catalan dialect(s); the new pronunciation would have diffused out from the city of Lleida and/or from areas and county towns in the north-western Catalan dialect area but close to the linguistic border with central Catalan [...]. The absence of a mid-height central vowel [ə] in the unstressed vowel system of north-western dialects justifies the shift from [a],[ɑ] to [ɛ], since [ɛ] is precisely mid-way between the original low vowel and the prestigious mid-height central vowel” (Recasens, [1991]1996:96-97).

<sup>6</sup> Casanovas and Creus (1999: 87) state that “the pronunciation that preserves the distinction [...] is in process of recession, since young people as a whole are increasingly neutralising both forms in favour of [ɛ]”.

When it comes to analysing language production, it is of fundamental importance to observe: 1) the elements that are systematically held constant in the speech of individuals; 2) the differences between different speech events and their outcomes. In the project which concerns us here, we base ourselves, on the one hand, on the Labovian concept of speech styles (see Labov, 1972)<sup>7</sup> and, on the other, on the traditional classification of factors that characterise and delimit registers<sup>8</sup> (see Halliday, 1976; Gregory and Carrol ([1978]1986); Spillner, 1987; Biber, 1994, etc.). With these methodological postulates, we proceed to analyse variation in the third person morpheme in: a) 30 Catalan speakers from the town of Alguaire born between 1932 and 1998<sup>9</sup>; b) broadcasts in north-western Catalan put out by Lleida television, at two levels of formality.

#### a) Alguaire<sup>10</sup>

The 30 speakers analysed were chosen based on the census data for Alguaire and constitute 1.146% of the population born in the municipality or in the surrounding county.<sup>11</sup> As the phenomenon in question affects Catalan speakers, I have only selected speakers who have Catalan as their first language and who were born locally. The social variables that I consider in this stratified sample are: age, schooling, knowledge of Catalan, socio-economic status and sex. Segmentation by age of the Alguaire sample gives us eight age groups, as follows: (1) 61 to 70 years -born between 1933 and 1942; (2) 51 to 60 years -born between 1943 and 1952; (3) 41 to 50 years -born between 1953 and 1962; (4) 31 to 40 years -born between 1963 and 1972; (5) 21 to 30 years -born between 1973 and 1982; (6) 12 to 20 years -born between 1983 and 1990; (7) 6 to 11 years -born between 1991 and 1997- and (8) from 4 to 5 years -born between 1998 and 1999.<sup>12</sup> Even though the number of interviewees was the same in each group, the generational groups are not evenly segmented nor are they sized in proportion to the segment of the population they represent. Thus, with regard to the younger groups (those from 4 to 31 years), the criterion for dividing up the population has to do with educational level and the fact that these are the first generations to receive schooling in Catalan. While I am aware that the division or *cut-up* by ages is quite different to those applied to the middle aged and older age groups, I think this is necessary if we want to observe the effect of Catalan-medium education and how different states of language development are related to the adopting of new linguistic habits and practices.

On the question of data collection, given that the variable under analysis here does not occur at a high rate of frequency, we analysed firstly the responses elicited by a corpus of questions on a variety of variable phenomena in the Lleida dialect. These included 12 verbs representing all conjugations different tenses of which are elicited: the present, imperfect indicative and the conditional. The exact verb forms in question were: *canta*, (she/he/it sings); *canviaria* (I/she etc would change); *comença* (she etc begins); *dormia*, (I/she etc was sleeping); *estudiava* (I/she etc was studying); *fregava* (I/she etc was scrubbing); *jugava* (I/she etc was playing); *naixia* (I/she etc was being born); *perdria* (I/she etc would lose); *presumiria* (I/she etc would presume); *sortia* (I/she etc was going out) and *temia* (I/she etc feared (*impf.*))

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique of Labovian speech styles see, among others, Hymes (1974), Brown and Levinson (1979), Bell (1984) or Biber (1994).

<sup>8</sup> There are 3 of these factors, which can be broken down into four: field (topic), mode (channel by which message is transmitted: oral, written), tenor (purpose of communication: informative, persuasive...) and tone (degree of formality: formal and informal).

<sup>9</sup> At the time of the interview, age of interviewees ranged from 4 to 70.

<sup>10</sup> Alguaire is a municipality of 2,825 inhabitants in the county of Segrià, with a total of 50 km<sup>2</sup> of urban and rural area, some 15 km from the city of Lleida. Traditionally Alguaire's economy was based on arable farming, like all villages in the Segrià, complemented with some stock-raising and a small amount of industry, mostly processing of fruit and vegetable produce. At the present time, however, many villagers are employed professionally in the services sector. Alguaire has precious little cultural activity compared to the big city, Lleida. As a result Lleida is the focal centre radiating influence outward as the cultural and linguistic model for the Segrià.

<sup>11</sup> Labov (1966) argued that 0.025% of the population was sufficient, where samples were well stratified.

<sup>12</sup> "An understanding of sociolinguistic development requires an understanding of how children come to recognize and produce socially meaningful patterns of variation, and ultimately to alter the rates of their variability over the life course" (Eckert, 2000: 9).

We collected a total of 15 hours of less formal speech from two protocols: a semi-structured Labovian-style interview, plus the conversation generated during the meeting with each informant, following proposals by Briggs (1986) and Hazen (2000).

*b) Lleida television broadcasts*

The language we analysed from Lleida television exhibits two levels of formality: one where the material is read (news broadcasts) and another consisting of spontaneous debate where neither the degree of preparation nor the news-reader type of formality is evident (televised debates). As a result, the corpus for the present study is divided into two parts:

- 1) Phonological realisations occurring during the news broadcasts. The oral discourse is in the prepared speech mode (written to be read), with an informative tenor and a formal tone.
- 2) Broadcast debates, more specifically the programme *El despertador*. In this programme, four discussants and a moderator comment on the news from day to day. In this case the oral discourse is in the unprepared oral mode, with an interactive tenor and a formal tone.

In all, 22 hours of the programme were recorded between 9th May and 7th June 2001. Out of the total of 22 hours, 12 were from different news broadcasts (morning, midday and night) and 10 were from daily debates in the programme *El despertador*. The total number of verb forms collected was 318. The variables that were controlled were situation, social class, and one other social variable: the sex of the interviewees. The statistical processing of data was carried out using the Goldvarb 2001 programme.<sup>13</sup> In the case of this data from the Lleida television broadcasts the SPSS programme was also used to obtain an ANOVA of the results in general.

## 4. Results obtained

### 4.1 *Alguaire data*

#### 4.1.1 *Elicited responses*

The responses obtained from all interviewees responding to the questionnaire show variation in the word-final vowel in the forms of the third person. In the case of the imperfect indicative of first conjugation verbs this is almost always reduced to the forms [aβe] and [aβε].<sup>14</sup>

Taking the range of data from the statistic analysis as a whole, we see a high probability of general maintenance of the third person [e] (0.819). This overall observation points to the fact that the variation we have detected is in its beginning stages and as such appears in the most formal language and then only to a very cautious extent.

The results of this analysis have shown that in terms of the words included in the study, neither the tense of the verb, the conjugation, number of syllables in the verb nor the environment following the final vowel are significant when seeking explanations for the incoming variation in the third person morpheme.

In terms of social factors, three variables emerge as significant: age, educational level and knowledge of written Catalan. (See table 1). Contrary to what might be expected from the well-established variationist tradition, neither sex nor social status provide us with relevant explanatory data to explain the variation in the final vowel.

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<sup>13</sup> The basis and the working methods for the programmes analysing linguistic variation are to be found in Sankoff (1974), Young and Bayley (1996) and Bayley (2002). For a detailed explanation of the operationalisation of the programme see Rand and Sankoff (1991) Robinson, Lawrence and Tagliamonte (2001). For an application, go to Carrera-Sabaté (2002a).

<sup>14</sup> I recorded [aje] from a speaker of 61 to 70 years with no knowledge of written Catalan and primary education.

**Table 1. (Logarithm of similarity: -151,691 [Logarithm of maximum similarity: -125,727]; X<sup>2</sup> total = 51,927; p= 0.0000).**

AGE	Probability of maintenance of [e]	SCHOOLING	Probability of maintenance of [e]
4 to 5 years (9) Born between 1998 and 1999	0.72	No schooling (1)	0.84
to 11 years (8) Born between 1991 and 1997	0.28	Primary school (2)	0.95
12 to 20 years (7) Born between 1983 and 1990	0.47	Secondary school (3)	0.54
21 to 30 years (6) Born between 1973 and 1982	0.82	Higher education (4)	0.77
31 to 40 years (5) Born between 1963 and 1972	0.85		
41 to 50 years (4) Born between 1953 and 1962	0.99	KNOWLEDGE OF WRITTEN CATALAN	Probability of maintenance of [e]
51 to 60 years (3) Born between 1943 and 1952	0.59	No (1)	0.94
61 to 70 years (2) Born between 1933 and 1942	0.78	Yes(2)	0.60

a) Effect of age factor

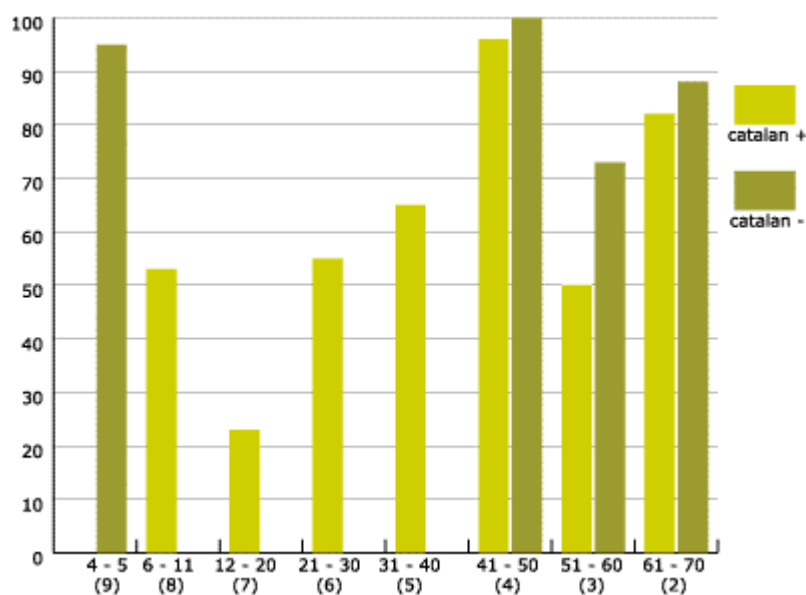
Analysis of the results in table 1 shows that almost all interviewees have a high probability factor when it comes to maintaining the traditional form of the third person morpheme, which is clearly not dropping out of use. At the same time, it can be seen that the interviewees aged 6 to 11 are the only ones who show a low probability factor for maintenance of the [e] (0.28). These results can be explained, as I have already observed in other studies of the Lleida dialect (see Creus, 1997; Carrera-Sabaté, 2002b), by the influence exerted by the schools' speech model on the speech of their students. This influence becomes less strong when the speakers move on to higher or further education, as can be seen in the studies by Aniansson (1979) and Portz (1979), on Swedish and English respectively, and this is evident too, in the results from the respondents aged 21 to 30 in our Alguaire study, who have had schooling in Catalan.

b) The influence of schooling and knowledge of written Catalan

Taking these two variables overall, neither alters the probability of maintenance of the traditional [e] variant to any significant extent. It should be noted, nonetheless, that there is a group of speakers with a greater probability of alternating between [e] and [ɛ]: they are the respondents with secondary school education (0.54) and those with knowledge of written Catalan (0.60).

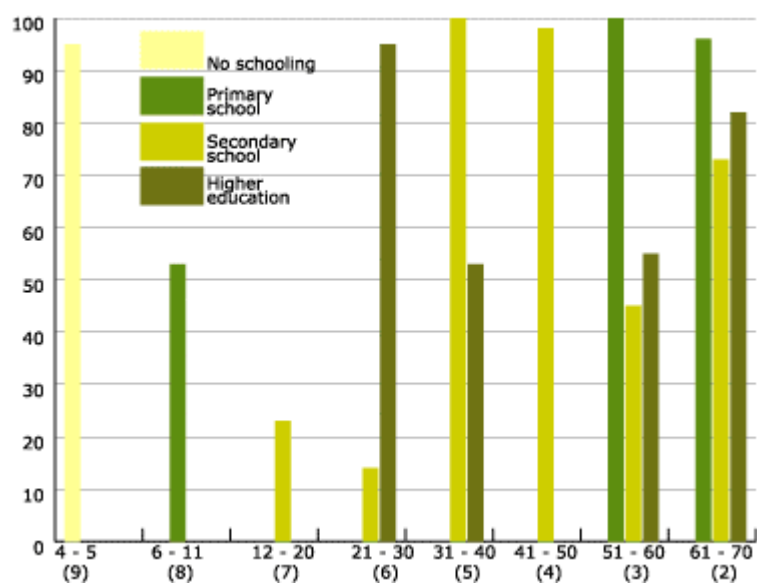
If we cross the data from the variables age, knowledge of written Catalan and schooling, we observe straightaway that all interviewees with knowledge of the written language maintain the [e] less consistently than those who have none. Having said that, if we analyse the behaviour of speakers aged from 41 to 70, some with knowledge of written Catalan and others not, we see little divergence and only in the 51 to 60 age group do the differences in maintenance of the [e] approach 20 %:

**Figure 1. Percentage maintenance of the [e] realisation**



Apart from this, the combination of educational level with age group brings the following to light: 1) In the 51 to 70 age group, and more especially in the 51 to 60 age group, the interviewees with secondary education produce least [e], followed closely by those with higher education. 2) In the 31 to 40 age group, interviewees with higher education use significantly less [e] than those with only secondary education. 3) Among speakers aged from 21 to 30 years, who were the first to be actually educated in Catalan (so older speakers obtained knowledge of written Catalan outside school, if at all), these show a maintenance of the [e] variant at a different level of frequency from the other age groups (see figure 2): speakers with higher education maintain the [e] more than 90 % of the time, and in contrast, those with secondary education, do so at rather more than 10 %. Clearly then, on this showing, speakers with higher education are more conscious than others about the issue of conserving native dialect features. 4) The interviewees aged from 12 to 20 are the ones that least use the [e] variant, although analysis of the probability indices do not show them to be the most innovative speakers.

**Figure 2. Percentage maintenance of the [e] realisation**



#### 4.1.2 The interview and the conversations

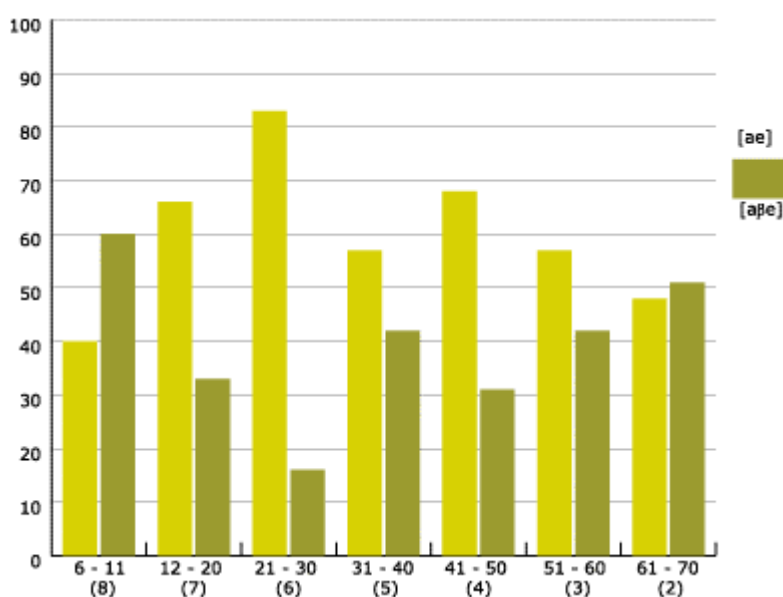
Analysis of less formal speech from the 30 inhabitants of Alguaire point to very different conclusions from those to be drawn from the questionnaire with its closed questions. In general, the final vowel of the third person of the imperfect, the conditional and the present indicative in verbs of the first conjugation, practically always gets realised as [e]. Only in the case of two interviewees (a young girl and a young boy) in the 6-11 years age group did we note the variant [ɛ]. The variants recorded from these two youngsters were as follows: 1) [e] was used in 19 verb sites by the girl and in 23 by the boy; 2) [ɛ] was used twice by the girl and twice by the boy.

Apart from this observation, the analysis of the verb inflection for the 3rd person of the imperfect indicative of the verbs of the first conjugation show great variability among the interviewees, in parallel with the development of this morpheme in *Lleidatà*: 1) [aje], the least commonly used form, noted in only two interviewees: 2 realisations in a man in the 61 to 70 age group and 1 realisation in a woman in the 51 to 60 age bracket, both with primary education and no knowledge of the written language. 2) [ae] occurring at quite a high level of frequency, in contrast to what was observed in the questionnaire and its closed questions, where it did not occur at all. 3) [aβe] alternating with the previous variant ([ae]) with approximately similar rates of occurrence. Lastly, [aβɛ], belonging rather to a more formal style of speaking, did not occur either in the interview or in the conversations.

We have seen that linguistic factors themselves are not relevant when it comes to explaining or characterising variation in the 3rd person ending. If we analyse the incidence of social factors we see once again how the data can be ordered in terms of age, education and knowledge of Catalan. It should be noted, however, that the results did not all reach significance.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of the age factor, we note a higher incidence of [ae] than [aβe] in all age groups except among speakers aged 61 to 70, who use both forms at an approximately equal rates, and those aged 6 to 11, who produce [aβe] some 20 % more than they do [ae]. Speakers aged from 21 to 30 show the highest percentage of [ae]: at 83 % (see figure 3). Detailed analysis of the results show once again that they tie in with the predictions made earlier and concur with the studies by Aniansson (1979) and Portz (1979): the school influences children's speech, but subsequently, speakers adapt to the forms of their own native dialect, especially when the formality of the communicative act is not very great.

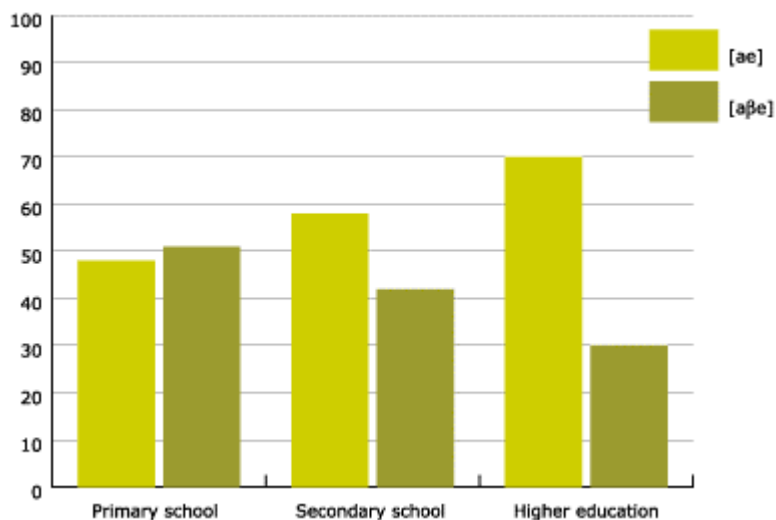
Figure 3. Realisations of the -va morpheme by age



<sup>15</sup> I omit certain data from the children aged 4 to 5 because the results obtained are not sufficient to be entered into the statistical analysis.

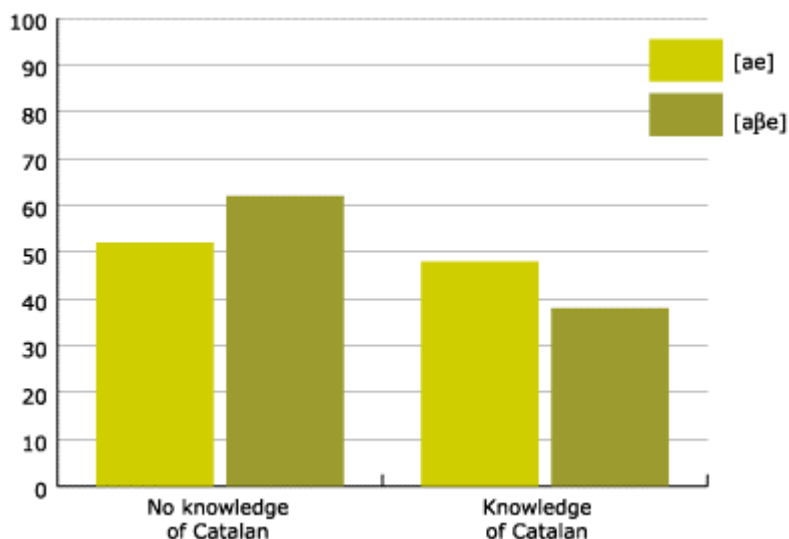
In the case of educational level, there is increasing use of the [æ] covarying with increased education:

**Figure 4. Realisations of the -va morpheme by educational level**



In terms of knowledge of (written) Catalan, the variant [æ] occurs 24 % more than [aβe] in speakers with notions of the written language:

**Figure 5. Realisations of the -va morpheme by knowledge of written Catalan**

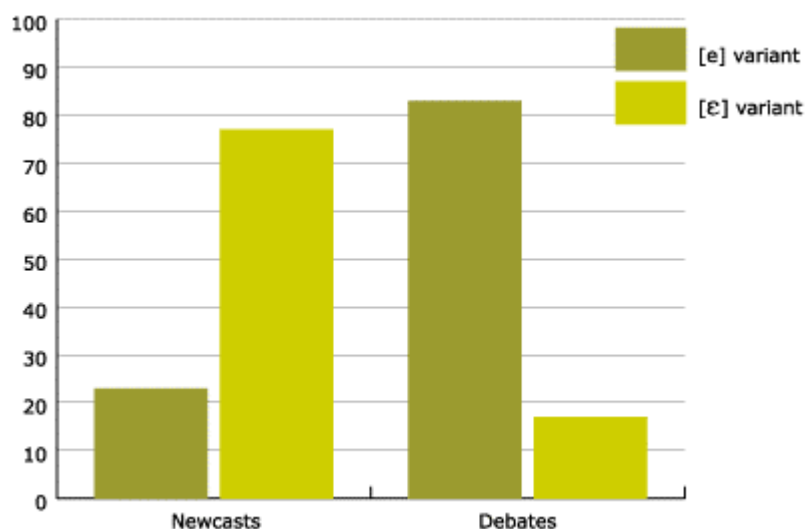


#### 4.2 Television data

In samples culled from the Lleida television broadcasts, the use of the [e] and [ɛ] variants are totally conditioned by the situation in which the speakers find themselves. Thus, in the news bulletins, the vowel that coincides with the written form, [ɛ], occurs 77 % of the time and [e] the remaining 23%. In complete contrast, in the debates the percentages are reversed: the [e] variant is used 83 % of the time as against 17 % for the formal /written [ɛ] variant. (All the results reach significant level:  $F=131469$ ,  $\text{sig}=0.000$ ):



**Figure 6. Realisations of the 3 variant on Lleida television**



Binomial analysis by the Goldvarb programme indicates that in the debates the probability of occurrence of the traditional [e] variant is very high (0.83) while in the news broadcasts this probability drops to a correspondingly low level (0.23) (Logarithm of similarity: -163041, sig=0.000, X<sup>2</sup> test = 0.0000).

Looking at gender of interviewees, we observe that both in the debates and in the news broadcasts, women are surprisingly more likely than the men to maintain the traditional [e] variant.

**Table 2. (Logarithm of similarity: -175579, sig=0.000)**

PROBABILITY THAT THE [e] VARIANT WILL BE MAINTAINED			
NEWSCASTS		DEBATES	
Women	Men	Women	Men
0.32	0.00	0.94	0.80

### 5. General observations

Comparison of results shows similar or parallel linguistic behaviour in both the inhabitants of the village of Alguaire and the speakers on Lleida television. Indeed, we observe that, in general, in predominantly formal speech events, there is a tendency to use phonological forms that coincide with the written standard and, as a consequence, to begin to lose the morphology which has traditionally characterised the *Lleidata* dialect.

Analysis of the most formal speech events shows that realisations of the verb morphemes can be classified in three well differentiated groups clustering by event: a) those occurring in the television newscasts, where the probability of maintaining [e] is a low 0.23; b) the realisations recorded during the questionnaire and responses to the same carried out with villagers of Alguaire, where the probability of maintaining [e] is a high 0.819; c) the phonological realisations culled from the debates on regional television, where the probability of maintaining [e] is again high, 0.83.

This in turn enables us to explain variable loss of the traditional form [e] in favour of [ɛ] as a result of, in the first place, the influence of the written language on the spoken language – and this is especially clear, given that the lowest incidence of the traditional variant is found in written discourse intended for oral delivery (news bulletins); and in the second place, the fact that in general, in the Lleida dialect, the unstressed vowels written <a> are pronounced [ɛ]. Among speakers in the Alguaire sample, it can be seen that length of schooling in Catalan is a crucial factor in explaining the loss of dialect features, once again corroborating the connection between the oral and written language.

In less formal speech there is absolute maintenance of the traditional [e] in the spontaneous conversation of the Alguaire interviewees, other than just sporadic occurrence of [ɛ] among speakers aged 6 to 11. Alongside this, we find quite marked alternation with the imperfect indicative endings, between [æe] and [aβe], which become reduced to [aβe] and [aβɛ] in the most formal speech events. In the conversations and the interview, the most frequent realisation of [aβe] is once again found among speakers of school age, when adapting their pronunciation to the norms of the written language.

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