

"Auliva" or "oliva"? Describing variation in the Segrià

by Josefina Carrera-Sabaté and Elisabet Freixenet-Esteve

Abstract

This article looks at processes involved in a sound change in progress in the Segrià (western Catalonia) by exploring the productive and perceptive competence of 30 speakers in the village of Sunyer.¹

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1. Introduction

Ever since the contribution made by Labov (1966), the analysis of sociophonological material has been approached, often, via two differentiated but complementary dimensions: 1) linguistic production and 2) linguistic evaluation (Moosmüller, 1988). In linguistic production, the incorporation of social and situational aspects to explain the elements of a grammar constitutes one of the most notable developments in variationism. This approach allows a more dynamic, less static view of linguistic systems than found elsewhere (in structuralism and generativism). Furthermore, linguistic perception has been considered essential to round out the explanation of any process of linguistic change since "The people taking part in the change do not just speak: they also listen. Thus one must assume that variation and change occur not only in production but also in perception" (Janson, 1983: 24). Nevertheless, methodological difficulties involved in observing and analysing the behaviour of receptors, compared with the behaviour of producers, have meant there has been comparatively little interest in including a study of subjective perception of speakers in studies of linguistic change.

From a global perspective, elements such as prestige, attitudes or beliefs of speakers associated with individual learning capacity take on great importance. Similarly, aspects like the influence of the written language can become fundamentally important in explaining certain processes involved in change. Indeed, in Catalan, a definite tendency to adjust pronunciation to fit the spelling has been observed. This in turn results from a preconceived

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ideology which associates knowledge of spelling with knowledge of the Catalan language and love of one's country (Segarra, 1985). Such an ideology, moreover, has been further encouraged by the schools, since one of the prime objectives in primary, secondary and adult education has been acquisition of skill in the written language, to the apparent detriment of oral dialectal forms not reflected in writing (Siguán, 1990).

2. Objectives and methodology

The purpose of writing this article was to think about use and perception of the solutions [aw], [o] and [u] in pre-stress word-initial position in items like *oliva*, (olive) *ofegar* (drown) or *humit* (damp) in speakers aged 19 to 85 years in Sunyer.² The intention is to present an up-to-the-minute assessment of this process of phonological variation in generations born between 1917 and 1983, and observe how the language habits of the speakers have modified while bearing in mind divergences in knowledge of written Catalan and the education received by each generation.

The 30 subjects we selected constitute 9.8 % of Sunyer's population, which has 300 inhabitants all of them Catalan-speaking. Selection of subjects was done at random, but proportional to distribution of the population to ensure representativeness. Variables considered were, education, knowledge of written Catalan, sex, occupation and social class.

The sample was divided into the following age groups:

- a) 66 to 85 years (born between 1918 and 1937);
- b) 40 to 65 years (born between 1938 and 1963); and
- c) 19 to 39 years (born between 1964 and 1984). Each group contains 10 individuals who vary in terms of the above-mentioned social variables.

The productive and perceptive competences of these speakers were calculated using the Goldvarb 2001 programme³ as detailed below:

- a) The study of linguistic perception was based on a questionnaire containing closed questions on 14 words that could be realised with either [aw] or [o] or, in two words, [u]; these words feature formal differences determined by the immediate environment, the stressed vowel, the etymology and the placing of the accent. These were: *orella* (ear), *oculista* (occulist), *olor* (odour, smell (n.)), *operar* (operate), *orinal* (chamber pot) *ofega* (drown, choke), *oreneta* (swallow, (n.)), *ocell* (bird), *ovella* (sheep), *oliva* (olive), *oració* (prayer) *otorinolaringòleg* (ear nose & throat specialist) (pronounced [o t o " r i n o]), *humitat* (humidity, damp (n.)) *ufanosa* (luxuriant). Owing to the low lexical incidence of the variation we analyse here⁴, we decided to obtain realisations of the variable in question by elicitation⁵, and to disguise the true purpose of the study, we included in the questionnaire a number of questions on words that were unrelated to the object of our study, but connected in that they belong to the same semantic field.

2 Sunyer, situated in the county of Segrià, and bordering on les Garrigues county, on the left bank of the river Set. The site of the village above the flood plain of the river Set and the landscape with its abrupt hills means the villagers are connected with their neighbours by country lanes. For that reason they are more isolated than other inhabitants of the county, and thus more conservative. Part of the population of Sunyer makes a living out of agriculture and stock raising, although the services sector has been gaining in importance among the younger inhabitants.

3 For a detailed account of the functioning of the programme, see Rand and Sankoff (1991) and Robinson, Lawrence and Tagliamonte (2001).

4 We do not include a study of variation in connected speech for the extremely low productivity involved. In fact, we analysed 22 hours of programmes put out by Lleida television stations between 19th May and 7 th June 2001, and were not able to find more than 30 words which were sites for this variation.

5 We put together the questions on the questionnaire, planning to present the corpus of words without any preceding or following context.

- b) The questionnaire on perception enables us to analyse, firstly the oddness factor, that is, the degree to which subjects saw the [aw] variant as odd, when realised in four words in the following sequence of sentences: *L'han operat perquè es va engolir dos olives / Aquell pis estava ple d'humitat / Quantes oracions saps?* (He was operated on because he swallowed two olives whole / That apartment was full of damp / How many prayers do you know?) We analysed responses to the question *Nota/notes alguna cosa estranya en la pronunciació d'algun mot d'aquesta frase?* (Do you (vostè) / do you (tu) notice anything odd about the pronunciation of any word in this sentence). From this we observe the capacity of the inhabitants of Sunyer to detect the diphthong [aw] in pre-stress, word initial position and determine whether maintenance of [aw] is viewed negatively or as a commonly heard sound, pleasant to the ear.

Secondly, the questionnaire on perception enables us to determine: 1) the subjects' capacity to discern phonetic differences and 2) the evaluations made by subjects on pretonic [aw] and [o] in words that behave differently in their selection of [aw] and [o] or [u] in pretonic position. The subjects heard the following words twice: *olor, ovella, orella* and *ufanosa*. The first three words were heard once with the [aw] variant and once with the [o]; the last word was heard with the variants [aw] and [u]. The aim here was, firstly, to discern the subjects' ability to discern the vocalic contrast in pretonic position in these words, and secondly, to analyse the connotations of the pronunciations in terms of speaker-characteristics and the maintenance evinced by each of the variants in the linguistic community. The questions we used to obtain data on evaluations of the different pretonic variants were: 1) *which is the vowel that you think is the good one⁶?*; 2) *which is the vowel that you use*; 3) *which is the vowel that is generally used in Sunyer?*

3. The phenomenon under study

In Lleidatà –the dialect of Lleida province– the vowel *o* of vulgar Latin deriving from classical Latin *O, O, U* and the diphthong *AU*, when in a free syllable and in pretonic (pre-stress) word initial position, have gone to [aw]⁷ (Badia, [1951]1984: 164). We find a few examples in words like *ovella* < *OVICULA*, *oració* < *ORARE* or indeed *orella* < *AURICULA*. At the same time, classical Latin *U* maintained the vowel: *UFANA* > *ufanós*.

Utilisation of the [aw] diphthong in word initial pretonic position in Catalan has also been explained in terms of vowel agglutination: *l[ao]vella* (*def.art. + sheep*) > *l[au]vella* > *l[aw]vella* or *l[o o]fici* (*def. art. + trade*) > *l[ou]fici* > *l[ow]fici* > *l[aw]fici*. This second analysis finds support in Pueyo (1976), Veny (1982), Recasens ([1991]1996) and Solans (1996). Pueyo (1976) argues that the diphthongisation, which does not arise in all cases, is an outcome of the etymology, since, in general terms, [aw] derives from *O* and *U* of classical Latin, although we find a few exceptions in words like *ofrena* (offering) or *humitat* (humidity, damp (*n.9*)). What is more, he observes that the diphthongisation works more efficiently when the word in question is feminine, and less systematically when the word is masculine or higher register.

Recasens ([1991] 1996: 139) explains that the raising or closing of [o] “may be motivated by the particularly close realisation of /o/ in north-western Catalan, and by coarticulatory effects upon the vowel owing to the following labial or back consonant.” Recasens adds that the lack of prestige accorded the diphthongal variant explains why it is declining in favour of the monothong alternative, and why educated or higher register words least likely to have the [aw] variant.

Lastly, Solans (1996) detects dwindling use of the diphthong among young speakers, who tend to use the standard variants. Note that the Institut d'Estudis Catalans ([1990]1992: 17) explicitly states: “Use of the diphthong *au* instead of *o* in cases like *aufegar* for *ofegar*, *aulor* for *olor*, etc, is not recommended”.

⁶ We've taken the word “good” (*bona*) as a synonym for correct and also meaning normal according to the Corseriu's concept of norm, being the means by which the habitual and acceptable aspects of language are defined (Coseriu [1952]1973).

⁷ Badia (1951[1984]: 158) specifies that, in general terms, the *AU* diphthong from Latin sources passed into old Catalan, but has become a monophthong in modern Catalan, with the exception of a few cases: *AUCELLU* > *ocell*.

4. Results

4.1 Production

Calculating probability values for the linguistic and social variables gives a probability of the maintenance of [aw] in the village of Sunyer of 0.518. The most significant conditioning factors favouring the maintenance of the traditional realisation [aw] are, on the one hand, the syllabic and accentual configuration of the words in question and, on the other, the interviewees' age, education and knowledge of Catalan (see tables 1, 2 and 3). [Log. similitude: -215.993 / Max. log. similitude: -176.714 / X² total: 64.0594 / p: 0.0000].

4.1.1 Linguistic variables

a) Syllabic and accentual make up of the words

The words most susceptible to being pronounced with the diphthong are three-syllable words and are *acute* (stressed on the last syllable, as for example *operar*. Contrariwise, the words which are most unlikely to be realised with the diphthong are four-syllable acute words, such as *oració* (prayer).⁸

Table 1. Syllabic and accentual disposition of the word

	Probability of maintenance of [aw]
v'v (a)	0,51
vv'v (b)	0,73
v'vv (c)	0,31
vv'vv (d)	0,45
vvv'v (e)	0,09

4.1.2 Social variables

a) Age of informants

Among the oldest speakers we see a high probability the [aw] variant will be maintained, among the middle aged the diphthong alternates with the [o] variant at a roughly equal rate, while among the young, the diphthong becomes more infrequent (see table 2):

Table 2. Age of subject

	Probability of maintaining [aw]
1918-1937 (66-85)	0.70
1938-1963 (40-65)	0.47
1964-1984 (19-39)	0.39

b) Education and written Catalan

Interviewees with less education and less knowledge of written Catalan are those that maintain the diphthong [aw] with the highest probability indexes, and the probability of the [aw] variant occurring falls off as speaker's schooling increases. At the same time it should be born in mind that this pattern is strong among interviewees with higher education. The fact is that, as has been observed in other studies (Ferrando and Guirau, 1983; Martí, 1985; Pueyo, 1980; Carrera-Sabaté, 2002) consultants with higher education tend to maintain the local variants of their own speech community more than those with secondary education (see table 3):

⁸ This word could also be taken to be trisyllabic.

Table 3. Interviewee's education and knowledge of Catalan

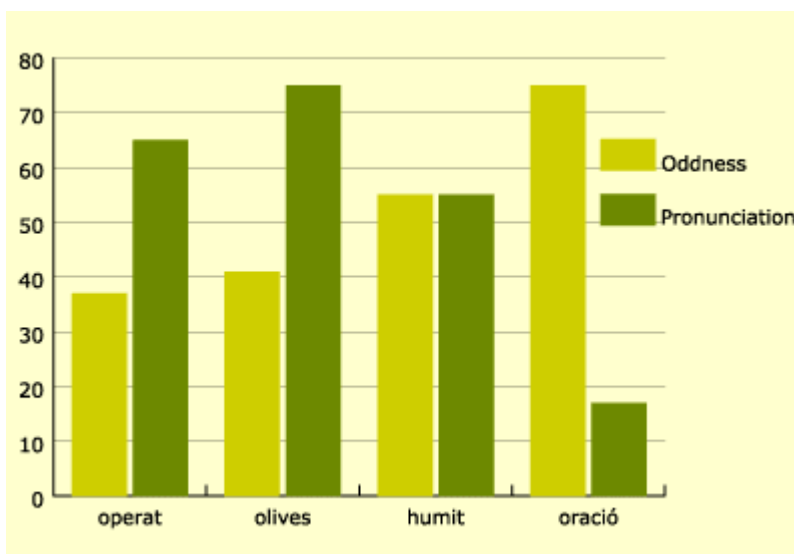
	Probability of maintaining [aw]
No education/ - Catalan (1)	0.71
Primary education / - Catalan (3)	0.58
Primary education / + Catalan (4)	0.55
Secondary education / + Catalan (6)	0.25
Higher education/ + Catalan (8)	0.48

4.2 Perception of [aw], [o] and [u]

4.2.1 [aw] as an "odd" variant

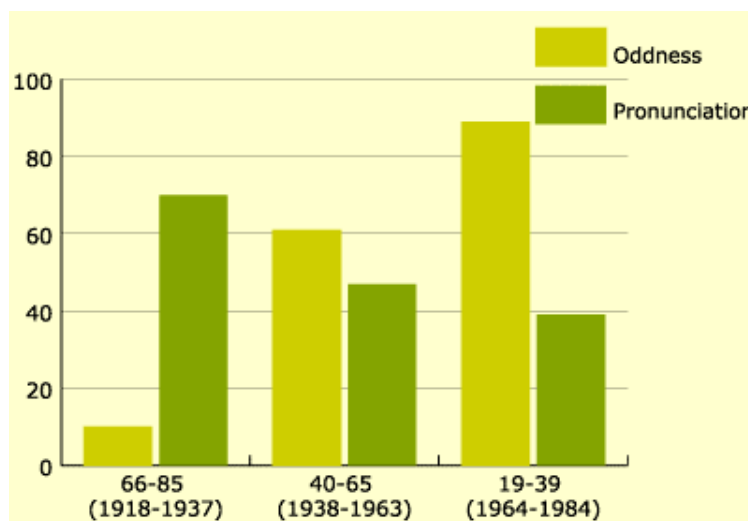
Around half of the Sunyerites see the [aw] variant as an odd pronunciation (52%), so apparently according little prestige to this variant. Having said that, the degree to which the sound is thought odd differs from word to word: [aw]ració (*oració* - prayer) is seen as the oddest instance, and [aw]perat (*operat* - operated) and [aw]lives (*olives* - olives) the most normal instances (see figure 1). These general replies have to be put alongside results from the closed question questionnaire, since the villagers of Sunyer scarcely tolerate pronunciations which they do not usually use themselves.

Figure 1. Degree of oddness and probability of maintaining [aw]



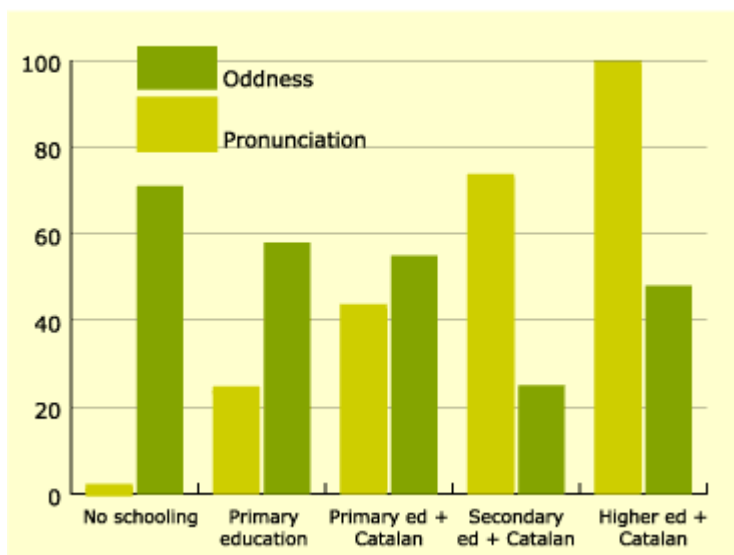
Turning to the social factors, it can be seen that, in general terms, the degree to which the pronunciation [aw] is viewed as odd is in direct (inverse) proportion to age of interviewee: the oldest group scarcely find it odd or marked, among the youngest its oddness or markedness is very great, and here again this result connects directly with the results we obtain for production. (See figure 2).

Figure 2. Degree of perceived "oddness" of [aw] and probability of maintaining



Schooling also emerged as a relevant factor related to subjective evaluation of [aw]: the interviewees with little or no knowledge of written Catalan, and either had no education or only elementary education, are the only ones to consider the [aw] variant as normal or unmarked, and this falls off proportionally as educational level rises (see figure 3). And here too, production follow in step with perception, such that interviewees with secondary education maintain the [aw] variant at lower level than other speakers.

Figure 3. Degree of perceived oddness of [aw] of maintaining



Lastly, social status of the speakers is also a modifying factor: speakers with a higher sociocultural level have a greater tendency than others to view the [aw] pronunciation as odd: consultants (informants) with greater status view this as odd in some 64% of instances, while those with lower sociocultural status, only do so in 8% of cases.

4.2.2 The contrast between [aw] / [o] and [u] and evaluations of [aw]

4.2.2.1. The contrast between [aw] / [o] and [u]

In general terms, the phonic contrast between [aw] and [o] or [u] well perceived in Sunyer, as one would expect. The speakers who see this clearest of all are speakers aged between 19 and 39 and are the most innovative in analysis of production. Apart from that, the oldest interviewees, aged from 66 to 85, are the least equipped to perceive the contrast in vowels in pretonic position and are also the most conservative. This state of affairs leads us to relate what we have just described with what in psychology is called the *restoration effect*,⁹ whereby the auditory system is capable of restoring *correctly* a sound either not uttered at all, or different from the utterance that one expects (Fowler, 1986). In the case we are concerned with here, after hearing the variants [o] and [u] in pretonic position it seems that the elderly consultants automatically replace them with the [aw] form, which they use in words of a similar nature. And, consequently, they do not note substantial qualitative differences in two words supposedly the same. This line of argument comes from the field of psychology, there are also factors of a biological nature that could be taken into consideration, such as the auditory capacity of those questioned (Valley 1988),¹⁰ when explaining these auditory mismatches.

4.2.2.2. Evaluations of [aw], [o] and [u]

What we find overall is that 67% of evaluations made by Sunyerites take [o] as the "good" variant in pretonic position in *olor* (smell) *ovella* (sheep) *orella* (ear) and [u] as the "good" one in *ufanosa* (luxuriant); nonetheless, in more than 80% of instances the interviewees state that [aw] is the variant that they themselves use and also the one generally used in the village (see figure 4):

Figure 4. Evaluation of pre-tonic realisations [aw] and [o]

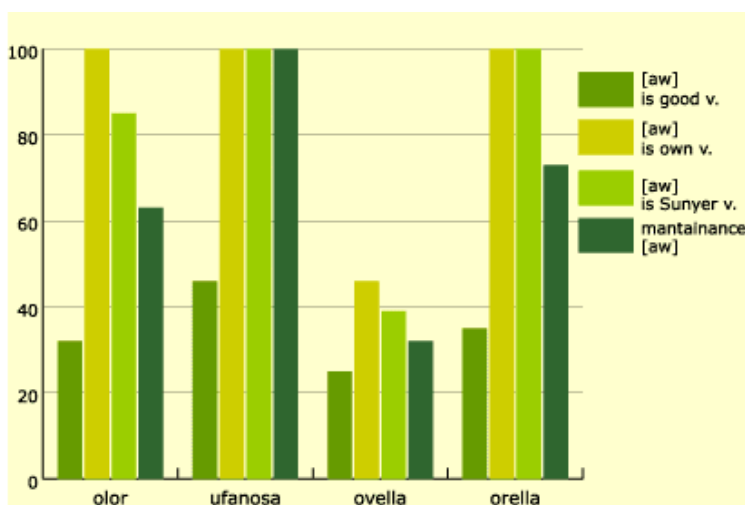


Looking at how evaluations made by the interviewees in relation to lexical items, we see that *ovella* is the word where [o] is considered most normal; on the other hand, in the case of *ufanosa*, [aw] is seen as normal. Lastly, in the case of *orella* speakers are more insecure: 75% of the interviewees deem [o] the "good" variant 100% claim [aw] is the variant they use and consider this is the form used in Sunyer. These results tie in, once again, with the data obtained in the analysis of production (see figure 5) and make it possible to track the process of decline of the [aw] realisation from the subjective point of view of the speakers.

⁹This effect is the result of an experiment carried out by Warren (1970).

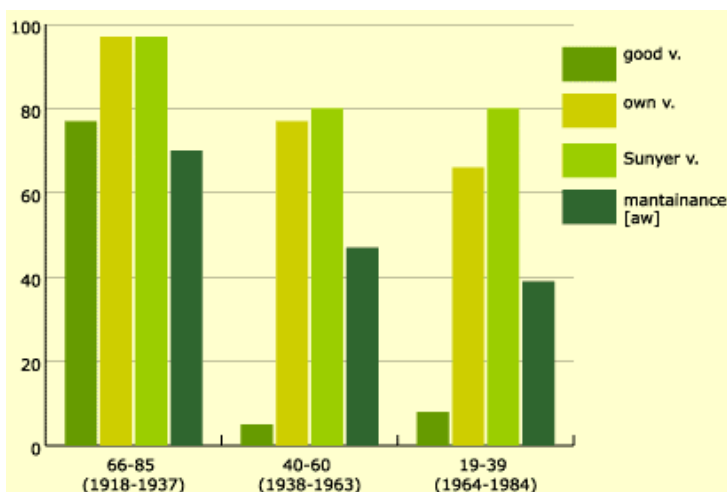
¹⁰ Feier and Gerstman (1980) detect a gap between the comprehension and production of complex sentences of speakers aged between 60 and 70 years. For other studies, see for example Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991).

Figure 5. Evaluations and probability of maintaining [aw]



The consultants' impressions regarding the pretonic [aw] variant vary significantly in relation to age: 1) [aw] is considered own variant (the variant used by the speaker) in 97% of the elderly group; among the youngest speakers this falls by some 30% but still occurs at a comparatively high rate (66%). 2) [aw] is considered the form used in Sunyer and occurs at a high level among all speakers, above all the elderly. 3) Lastly, only the elderly (mostly) view the [aw] diphthong as the "good" form, (at 77%) while in the case of the other speakers the percentage who think so falls to a mere 10% (see figure 6). From all this, we can deduce that, on a subjective level, the sound change has reached an intermediate stage in the case of the youngest speakers and practically speaking has not even begun among the oldest age group, the only ones who have a high level of linguistic security¹¹.

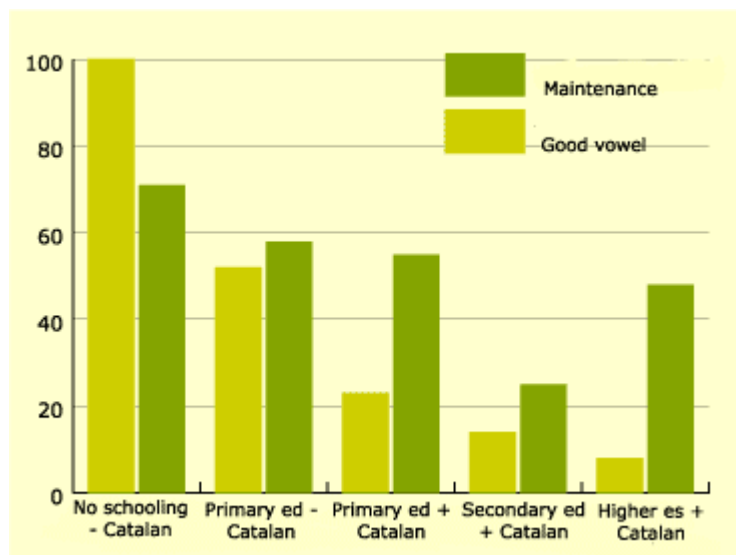
Figure 6. Evaluation and probability of maintaining [aw] by age group of interviewee



¹¹ In keeping with the Labovian paradigm, it was observed that a lack of correspondance awareness of behaviour and awareness of what is normal or correct generates a type of linguistic instability which is typical of certain kinds of sound changes. This is established in research carried out by Labov (1966), and commented on by Marcellesi and Gardin (1974), Macaulay, (1975) and Gadet (1989), in tests of linguistic insecurity what is measured is the difference between what forms the speakers think are the correct ones and which they consider real; and when the variant recognised as the norm and the variant that the speaker thinks he or she actually uses do not coincide this is what is technically known as linguistic insecurity, and the state of the issue of insecurity (Almeida, 2002).

As regards schooling, the only evaluations that present interesting differences among the interviewees are those that have to do with which vowel is considered the good one. In effect, the interviewees who have no knowledge of written Catalan and those who did not receive any schooling consider [aw] to be good; all the others view [aw] as the good variant in a progressively decreasing curve in inverse relation to education (see figure 7). This, combined with the results obtained in the analysis of production enable us to detect the beginning of the sound change among the more educated, who are in turn show greater discrepancy between their evaluations and production.

Figure 7. Evaluations of [aw] as good vowel and probability of maintenance of [aw]



5. General considerations

The sound change which we have looked at constitutes yet another instance in the Segrià (western Catalonia) of the progressive imposition of a model of prestigious speech which is directly connected to the forms used in the written language. This model presents divergences which carry social connotations for speakers of all populations, namely age, educational level, and knowledge of (written) Catalan. Age, together with schooling, is one of the most important variables when it comes to explaining trends of this sort: in this particular case, we observe that the oldest inhabitants, who in many instances are those with the least schooling, maintain the traditional variant [aw] in a very large percentage of cases; on the other hand, with those in the middle age range and those in the youngest age group, the probability that they will use this traditional form is relatively low.

Turning to subjective factors linked to change, we should remember something that is sometimes forgotten: that in a speech community there are forms which are prestigious or stigmatised by speakers¹² in accordance with overt or covert prestige determined by social status and by group solidarity. These subjective criteria for evaluation which speakers take as reference points are directly related to language production and in the case under analysis here, serve to complete or fill out the explanation for the change in progress which we analyse in the following way:

- a) In general terms, the informants evaluate the [aw] variant as odd in half the realisations that they heard (52%), suggesting the diphthong lacks prestige for the people of Sunyer.
- b) In Sunyer, *unusual* pronunciations are not tolerated and [aw] is viewed as odd in words that seldom adopt this outcome, for instance *oració*. Directly connected with this, there is a substantial relationship between the degree of tolerance of a phonological form and the frequency of usage; on this point, note that words in which [aw] is considered neither a

¹²Granted that there is neither a bilateral relationship nor one of exclusion between the two terms, and that variables without such connotations can therefore be detected.

good option nor own pronunciation or that of the community have in common that they are seldom realised with [aw], as in the case of *ovella*.

- c) Finally, there is a correlation between the use of a form by a given generation of speakers, and the degree of acceptance of this form by members of the said generation, such that, generally speaking, younger, more educated speakers are the ones who least use and least tolerate [aw].

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Josefina Carrera-Sabaté

[Universitat de Lleida](#) and [Universitat de Barcelona](#)
josefinacarrera@teleline.es

Elisabet Freixenet i Esteve

[Universitat de Lleida](#)
efreixenet@alumnes.udl.es