/s/-deletion and the preservation of plurality in Modern Occitan

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This paper examines the progression of /s/-deletion in Modern Occitan feminine noun phrases, using data from *l'Atlas linguistique et ethnographique du Languedoc occidental* (Ravier, 1978). Occitan marks plurals with /s/ (*la-s kambo-s peludo-s* 'hairy legs'); however, this /s/ is undergoing weakening and deletion (*la-h kambo-Ø burudo-Ø*).

Following work by Poplack (1980), Guy (1981), and Eckert (1985), I consider the ramifications of /s/-deletion on plural marking. In her study of similar phenomena in southern France, Eckert found that where /s/ was lost, a simultaneous *a > [o] change had halted in feminine plurals but had proceeded as expected in feminine singulars, thus preserving the singular–plural distinction. Where /s/ remained, *a > [o] had gone to completion in both singulars and plurals.

My data are from the same region of southwest France studied by Eckert, but were collected seventy years later. /s/-weakening and -deletion have continued to spread in that area where *a > [o] went to completion. I thus examine by what mechanism plurality is maintained.

I find that /s/-deletion in Modern Occitan follows the progression s > h > j > Ø, where [j] is a vocalic offglide. Though the s > h > Ø progression is common cross-linguistically (Ferguson, 1990), vocalization to [j] is unique. I also find that where the /s/ of the article is vocalized, the article vowel surfaces as [e] (*le-j kambo-Ø burudo-Ø*), presumably raised by the palatal offglide. As in Modern French, this [e] successfully preserves the distinction between singular and plural, despite the weakening /s/. This is an important finding, as the provenance of the [e] in French plural articles has heretofore been mysterious (Spence, 1976). This paper thus not only broadens our knowledge of /s/-deletion in Romance, but also contributes to the literature on the functional effects of sound change.

References

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