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Article

Sociolinguistic Interpretation of the Preservation of Palatalization Assimilation of Labial Consonants Before Velars in the Speech of Saratov Residents

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Abstract

This article serves as a supplementary interpretation of data previously described in an earlier study. It examines the results of a 2025 investigation into the phonetic phenomenon of palatalization assimilation of labial consonants before velar consonants in the speech of Russian-speaking inhabitants of Saratov. The object of study is the preservation of various phonetic variants in contemporary Russian, while the focus lies on the reasons behind the maintenance of this phenomenon within the Saratov regional dialect. The purpose of this work is to explain the persistence of this assimilation from a sociolinguistic perspective. The article analyzes existing linguistic and sociolinguistic interpretations, identifies contradictions with traditional theories (such as Optimality Theory), and proposes novel explanations based on the concepts of social indicators and supplementary distribution in the usage of forms without assimilation—which constitute a more popular normative variant—and forms with assimilation. Particular emphasis is placed on the influence of social identity and the historical prestige of phonetic forms as factors contributing to the retention of palatalization assimilation in the region under study. The findings underscore the importance of sociolinguistic approaches for understanding the mechanisms underlying the preservation of regional linguistic features within variants of contemporary Russian literary language.

Keywords: palatalization assimilation; regional dialect; language norm variant; sociolinguistic indicator; sociolinguistic parameter; markedness; Optimality Theory

Introduction

This article discusses the results of observations of the speech of Russian-speaking residents of Saratov, conducted in 2025 and described in detail in a prior publication [11], interpreting them through the lens of contemporary linguistic and sociolinguistic research. The study object is the preservation of different phonetic variants in identical phonological contexts in modern Russian. The subject is the causes underlying the maintenance of palatalization assimilation of labial consonants before velars (e.g., [sprá'k'i] and [rá'm'k'i]) in the speech of Saratov residents in 2025. The research aim is to explain this assimilation's persistence from a sociolinguistic standpoint. Research tasks include analyzing existing linguistic and sociolinguistic interpretations of the phenomenon and, on that basis, formulating an interpretation explaining its preservation. The relevance of this study lies in the need to investigate the mechanisms responsible for maintaining regional linguistic traits within standard language variants while these features disappear in more widespread forms of Russian literary language.

Materials and Methods

Data were collected using participant-observation methods. Speech samples from 17 speakers totaling 60 instances were recorded. A general scientific analytical method was applied to interpret the results for a detailed examination of labial assimilation before velars.

Results

From the standpoint of the language norm, the speech of Saratov residents can be interpreted in various ways. On one hand, it does not constitute a dialect but rather a regional lect. On the other hand, the speech fragments under study functioned in both formal and informal contexts, allowing interpretation as a norm variant of contemporary Russian literary language. The phonetic phenomena considered here were previously examined in 1995 by K. Zubritskaya [12], who discussed the loss of assimilation in modern Russian literary language using Optimality Theory as an explanatory framework. She notes that assimilation tends to be lost more rapidly if the target sound is labial. Optimality Theory accounts for this through the reassignment of phonological constraint hierarchies, where constraints enforcing assimilation are ranked lower than others obstructing complex place of articulation requirements [12]. The absence of markedness in this theory conditions the preservation of phonetic phenomena, whereas its presence indicates a language tendency to replace marked elements with less marked ones. This adequately explains the gradual elimination of palatalization assimilation typical in Russian media speech, but contradicts the preservation of labial assimilation before velars found in Saratov speech. Notably, in Saratov, assimilation loss—where it occurs—does not begin with labials, conflicting with the established phonological hierarchies proposed by Zubritskaya's algorithm for assimilation loss. Such generalizations fail to account for the preservation of linguistic features lost in other literary variants, as phonological changes manifest differently across Russian-speaking areas despite identical places of articulation.

Haspelmath has criticized the overuse and ambiguity of the term “markedness,” proposing its replacement with clearer concepts and arguing that authors wishing to use it must justify its application [10]. Consequently, it is expedient to examine the phenomenon within sociolinguistic frameworks. The sociolinguistic equivalents of markedness are social variables—social markers and social indicators. A social indicator is defined as “a sociolinguistic variable reflecting the speaker's social position, characterized by variable quantitative or qualitative distributions across different social, socio-demographic, or professional groups, yet remaining stable across variations in communicative contexts” [4].

In this case, the preserved palatalization assimilation does not function as either a social indicator reflecting status or a social marker [4] tied to communicative conditions, as evidenced by its presence in both formal (lectures) and informal (conversations among friends, shopping dialogues) speech contexts in Saratov.

Awareness of this feature among speakers of the more widespread non-assimilated norm is reflected in the Great Orthoepic Dictionary of Russian, where it is linked to the social parameter of age. However, dictionary data do not explain the maintenance of assimilation in Saratov across both younger and older speakers observed. This calls for explanations beyond purely linguistic factors.

One possible explanation is the coexistence of phonological differences unrelated to social processes within the Russian linguistic space, enabling their survival alongside dominant norm variants under conditions of supplementary distribution.

Thus, supplementary distribution may serve as a systemic factor preserving phonetic traits within parallel norm developments across regions. Such phonetic differences remain largely unconscious to speakers without enhanced phonetic awareness or philological training. Recognition of these differences can transform a variant into a social indicator if associated with distinct social groups, commonly emerging when sharply contrasting social groups are compared — language then functioning as a tool for demarcating “Insider” versus “Outsider” status [5].

Support for this claim derives from studies of semantic fields where language acts as an attribute of “otherness” in Russian-speaking free associations. For instance, associative dictionaries link the stimulus “foreign” with “language” as well as “stranger,” indirectly suggesting that perceived linguistic difference correlates with social distance [9].

Experiments by G. V. Faizieva identify “language” within the lexical-semantic field of “stranger” among Russian speakers. Intriguingly, language also emerges as an antonymous associative link

within Russian verbal associative fields [7]; for example, M. A. Samkova's study associates "Russian language" [3] in opposition to "migrant". Variations within the Russian-speaking environment itself can also become social indicators, as shown in a study where residents of Siberia perceive Muscovites as "mercantile, with unfamiliar speech patterns ('drawn-out words', 'horrible Moscow accent', 'unpleasant manner of speaking', 'accent')" [8].

Zh. K. Gaponova's associative experiment on provincial self-awareness similarly reveals negative language-related associations tied to regional identity, such as "bad speech, dialect" [1] among Russian regional residents. Collectively, these findings underscore language's significance as a social identity marker both vis-à-vis external linguistic communities and within internal group dynamics.

Discussion

The lack of differentiation along this feature despite phonemic differences in identical positions may indicate an indistinct or underdeveloped social grouping on other socially salient parameters, complicating the formation of "Insider"/"Outsider" oppositions. Furthermore, the preserved labial assimilation before velars characteristic of Saratov speech may carry not only neutral but also positive associations linked to a prestigious historical pronunciation norm, notably the older Moscow standard described by Ushakov [6]. Indirect support comes from this phenomenon's classification as an archaic feature rather than a regional one in modern Russian dictionaries [2]. Accordingly, its status among speakers is not associated with low-prestige regional dialects but with a venerable, prestigious Moscow standard, contrasting with the "bad speech" attributed to provincials in Gaponova's study.

Conclusions

The most plausible explanation for the preservation of palatalization assimilation of labials before velars is a combination of two sociolinguistic factors. On the one hand, the phenomenon lacks the role of a social indicator due to insufficiently defined social groups in speakers' consciousness, with supplementary distribution serving as an additional systemic factor. On the other hand, the historical presence of this phonetic form in the normative language register, documented in authoritative dictionaries and associated with the sociolinguistic parameter of age, likely contributes to its retention. It is also plausible that this assimilation is not unique among phonetic changes in contemporary Russian literary variants, with other similar changes remaining underexplored due to subtle acoustic differences from the predominant normative variants.

Ethical Considerations: The research procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee of the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute and adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and its subsequent amendments. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the speakers' data. No personally identifying information was collected or published. Given the unobtrusive nature of the observation method, care was taken to minimize any potential discomfort or influence on participant behavior.

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