

Pre-Oralized Nasal Codas in Mamaindê

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Mamaindê, an endangered language of west-central Brazil, is spoken by some 250 individuals on the border of Rondônia and Mato Grosso states, and has been classified as a member of the Northern Nambikwara branch of the Nambikwara language family. The present paper results from the author's own fieldwork in this language (Eberhard, 2009).

In the midst of numerous phonological phenomenon, both lexical and post-lexical, the behavior of nasal codas is one of the more salient features of the Mamaindê sound system. This behavior results in the formation of three oral/nasal contour segments in syllable final positions: [dn], [bm], and [gŋ]. I will begin by showing that in the Mamaindê language these complex codas require a phonology which views them as underlyingly nasal [^dn, ^bm, and ^gŋ] as opposed to underlyingly oral [dⁿ, b^m, g^ŋ]. Thus we must treat this phenomenon as a case of pre-oralization (as opposed to post-nasalization) where contour segments are derived from simple nasals in the presence of oral vowels. The paper will then proceed to explore two alternatives in the analysis of these pre-oralized segments, first from a phonological (autosegmental) perspective, and then from a phonetic implementation approach.

The first alternative utilizes an autosegmental framework, spreading orality or [-nasal] from the oral vowel to the coda, creating the oral/nasal contour segments under consideration. Eventually, however, the undesired result of employing binary nasal features will force us to look elsewhere, leading us to the second approach described in this paper, namely, the Oral Vowel Enhancement approach.

The Oral Vowel Enhancement strategy, proposed by Wetzels (2008), views the formation of such oral/nasal contours as a phonetic behavior, not a phonological process. Wetzels builds on work done by Keyser and Stevens (2006) who introduce the idea of phonetic enhancement, namely, that certain articulatory mechanics occur simply in order to enhance or make more prominent specific phonological contrasts already existing within a language. For languages which form oral/nasal contours for the purpose of enhancing the voicing of the coda consonant, Wetzels (2008:9-11) proposes the idea of Voiced Stop Enhancement (VSE), while for those that use these contour segments to make the orality of oral vowels more prominent preceding nasal codas, he proposes the notion of Oral Vowel Enhancement (OVE). In the end, the OVE analysis accounts for the Mamaindê data in a more intuitive and insightful manner than does the autosegmental approach, as well as having the extra benefit of avoiding the use of binary nasal features.

BIBLIO:

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