

# The link between tongue root advancement and the voicing effect: an ultrasound study of Italian and Polish

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## 1. Introduction

It is known that tongue root plays a role in maintaining voicing in voiced stops in English. Recent ultrasound tongue imaging work has confirmed that the tongue root is advanced in voiced consonants. Tongue root advancement has been shown to be present also when vocal fold vibration is not present [1]. An interesting question arising from this is whether tongue root advancement might be correlated to other factors like, the focus of this paper, vowel duration. Several studies showed that vowels followed by voiced stops are longer than vowels followed by voiceless stops. Different languages show different magnitudes of such durational differential and some languages do not show it at all. Given the connection between voicing and tongue root advancement, it is natural to ask whether tongue root advancement is also linked to vowel duration. If this is indeed the case, then one would expect tongue root advancement to play a role in language that have the voicing effect, but not in languages that do not show it.

To test this hypothesis, I conducted an acoustic and articulatory study that looked at vowel duration and tongue contours to assess the possible link between consonantal and vocalic tongue gestures.

Although several attempts have been put forward to explain the effect of voicing on vowel durations, to date no consensus has been reached. A recurrent theme focusses on the difference in gestural implementation that characterises voiced stops in comparison with voiceless stops.<sup>1</sup> One of the first accounts that attributed the voicing effect to a difference in production is that of Halle and Stevens [9], subsequently reiterated by Chomsky and Halle [6]. According to this account, voicing in vowels is produced with a state of the glottis that diverges from the configuration necessary to produce voiced consonants, due to the aerodynamics of the vocal tract. On the contrary, it is claimed that voiceless stops do not require any specific glottal configuration and thus the voicing perpetuated during the vowel naturally ceases at closure. The authors thus hypothesise

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<sup>1</sup>However, see ... for a perceptually inclined account.

that, to allow the glottal state to change in voiced stops from sonorant voicing to obstruent voicing, the vowel is lengthened so that enough time is available for the change to happen without compromising the quality of voicing during the vowel. Although such account seemed promising at that time, later studies could not demonstrate that obstruent voicing is any different from sonorant voicing.

Tongue root advancement differences seems like a promising area of enquiry since its link to voicing has been already confirmed. On the same line of the laryngeal hypothesis, I put forward a similar account in which it is tongue root advancement rather than fold configuration that requires extra time during the vowel to be implemented. If tongue root advancement plays a role in determining the duration of preceding vowels through the extension mechanism described before, then one expects languages with the voicing effect to show a systematic advancement of the tongue root in voiced stops. On the contrary, tongue root advancement in languages without the voicing effect should be absent or less systematic.

Italian has been reported to have the voicing effect. Farnetani and Kori [8], in a study assessing general properties on segmental durations of spoken Italian, found for the pair of nonce words /lata/ ~ /lada/ that the vowel /a/ was on average 35 msec longer when followed by the voiced stop /d/ (/lata/ 223 msec, sd = 18; /lada/ 258 msec, sd = 13, p. 26). Esposito [7] extended the research to all vowels and stops and found that vowels were longer when followed by a voiced stop. Although the estimates from the statistical models are not reported in the paper, judging from the figures in the graphs, an average of 30-35 msec difference was found, which is similar to what has been reported by Farnetani and Kori [8].

On the other hand, Keating [10] reported that vowels in Polish are not affected by the voicing of the following consonant. She tested vowel duration in the word pair /rata/ ~ /rada/ and found that there was a durational difference of 2 milliseconds. As for some of the Italian studies, statistical analysis was not performed, although judging by the size of the difference, it can be assumed that it is not significant.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

Native speakers of Italian and Polish have been recruited in Manchester and in Italy. Four speakers per language participated in the experiment. The participants received a compensation of £10 (or equivalent in Euro).

### 2.2. Equipment set-up

An Articulate Instruments set-up was used for this study. This is constituted by a TELEMED C3.5/20/128Z-3 ultrasonic transducer plugged into a TELEMED

Echo Blaster 128 unit. A synchronisation unit (P-Stretch) was plugged into the Echo Blaster unit and used for automatic audio/ultrasound synchronisation. A Movo LV4-O2 Lavalier microphone plugged into a ... was used for audio recording. Articulate Assistant Advanced v2.17.1 running on a Windows laptop was used for the acquisition of audio and ultrasonic signal. A stabilisation headset produced by Articulate Instruments was used for probe stabilisation [].

### 2.3. Materials

Disyllabic words of the form  $C_1V_1C_2V_2$  were used as targets, where  $C_1 = /p/$ ,  $V_1 = /a, o, u/$ , and  $C_2 = /t, d, k, g/$  (e.g. /pata/, /pada/, /poto/, etc.). A bilabial stop /p/ was chosen as the first consonant to reduce influence on the following vowel (although cf. Vazquez-Alvarez and Hewlett [14]). Only coronal and velar stops were used as target consonants since labial consonants cannot be imaged with ultrasonography. All possible combinations were employed, yielding to a total of 12 target words. The words were embedded in medial position within a frame sentence. Prosodically similar sentences were used to ensure comparability between languages. The frame sentence was *Dico X lentamente* ‘I say X slowly’ for Italian, and *Mówię X teraz* ‘I say X now’ for Polish.

### 2.4. Procedure

The stimuli were randomised for each participant and repeated six times (the order was kept the same in each of the six repetitions due to software constraints). Before recording the stimuli, the occlusal plane of the participant was imaged using a bite plate [12], and the palate asking the participant to swallow water.

### 2.5. Data processing

Durational measurements were obtained from acoustics. A first rough annotation was achieved through force alignment using the SPASS force aligner [5]. The criteria for the annotation of the acoustic data were the following:

- the target vowel onset was marked by visual inspection at the time of appearance of higher formants in the spectrogram following the burst of /p/
- the target vowel offset was marked by visual inspection at the time of disappearance of the higher formants in the spectrogram; this point also corresponded with the consonantal onset
- closure offset was marked by visual inspection at the time of formants onsets of the following vowel
- burst onset was determined automatically by a Praat implementation of the algorithm described in Ananthapadmanabha et al. [2]

Finally, vowel duration, consonant duration (including burst and VOT), and closure duration (from vowel offset to burst onset) were also automatically extracted with a Praat script.

Tongue contours were extracted from the ultrasonic data using Articulate Assistant Advanced [AAA, 3]. Spline lines were first fitted to the visible contours using the batch tracking function natively included in AAA. Manual correction was applied in the cases where the automatic tracking showed clear errors. Tongue displacement along time was thus calculated in AAA using a custom module provided by Dr. Patrycja Strycharczuk [13]. The displacement was calculated based on the movement of the splines along a given fan line. For each speaker, two relevant fan lines were chosen: one for the tongue tip and one for the tongue dorsum. The selection of the fan lines was based on the inspection of the standard deviation of the splines in the relevant area of the tongue. The fan line that showed the highest standard deviation was then chosen as the relevant fan line for the calculation of displacement. Velocity and tangential velocity were also calculated. The time of maximum displacement based on tangential velocity was finally obtained using a modified version of a search set-up provided by Dr. Patrycja Strycharczuk.

## 2.6. Analysis

The coordinates of the splines were exported at acoustic closure and at maximum displacement. The contours were normalised by applying offsetting and rotation relative to the participant’s occlusal plane [12]. Generalised additive mixed effects models [15] were used for the statistical analysis of tongue contour data in R [11]. Duration measurements were subject to linear mixed effects models using `lme4` in R [4].

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Vowel duration and voicing

A linear mixed effect regression model was fit on the Italian vowel durations with duration as the outcome variable, vowel quality (/a, o, u/), voicing and place of articulation of the following consonant, sentence duration as fixed effects, random intercepts by speaker and word, and random slopes for voicing by speaker. An interaction between voicing and vowel quality was also included, which turned out to be significant. P-values were obtained through likelihood ratio tests comparing a model including voicing with a null model without voicing. According to the model, Italian vowels are 19.5 msec ( $\pm 5.5$ ) longer if followed by a voiced stop ( $\chi^2(3) = 18.5$ ,  $p = 0.000337$ ).

For Polish, the same model structure was used, excluding the voicing-vowel interaction (which was not significant). Surprisingly, the model reported a partially significant 8 msec ( $\pm 3$ ) effect of consonantal voicing on the preceding

vowel ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.4$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). The exploration of the random slopes by speaker showed that one speaker showed a particularly higher slope for voicing, meaning that the effect of voicing was stronger in his data. This observation will come handy while discussing about the results of the tongue contour data.

### 3.2. Tongue contours

The Italian tongue contour analysis showed that voiced stops are produced with advancement of the root of the tongue. Generalised additive mixed effect models were fitted for each speaker: the y-coordinates of the contours were the outcome variable; the x-coordinates the parametric term; a reference smooth term for X, with difference smooths for X by voicing, vowel quality, and place of articulation of following consonant; random smooths by word. A first-order autoregressive model was included, given the high auto-correlation residuals as obtained by visual inspection of the residuals. For two participants out of four, the root was significantly more front in voiced stops in both vocalic contexts (/a, o/). On the other hand, one participant had significant tongue root advancement only following /a/, while the fourth participant didn't show advancement at all. For Polish, three out of four speakers did not have tongue root advancement, while the fourth speaker showed significant advancement in both vocalic contexts.

Further contour analysis was carried out at the point of acoustic closure for Italian and for the Polish speaker showing advancement. Surprisingly, the tongue root in the voiced condition was found to be already in advanced position at closure. Both the Italian (4 speakers) and the Polish data (1 speaker) show that the root of the tongue at the time of consonantal closure is advanced in both languages. Models fitted on the individual speakers comparing tongue contours at closure and at maximum displacement further confirmed that root advancement was bigger at maximum displacement for Italian, but not for Polish.

## 4. Discussion

The presence of tongue root advancement in Italian but not in Polish initially supports the idea that vowels are longer if followed by voiced stops to allow time for the root to reach a position suitable for consonantal voicing. The reported absence of the voicing effect in Polish could then be ascribed to the absence of tongue root advancement in the voiced consonants of Polish. However, such statement is complicated by two facts that emerged from the data analysed in this study. First, tongue root advancement was found in one of the Polish speakers and it was absent from one of the Italian speakers. Second, even though the effect was not as big as for Italian, the Polish duration data nonetheless showed a difference of 8 msec. However, as mentioned above, one Polish speaker had a particularly higher slope for voicing, and incidentally this is also the same and only Polish speaker who showed root advancement. Moreover, a difference

of 8 milliseconds could be considered to be quite small in any case, although statistically detectable.<sup>2</sup>

The data also showed raising of the tongue dorsum concomitant to the advancement of the root. Although such gesture was not prospected on the basis of the tested hypothesis, it makes sense from an anatomical stand point. Given the anteriorisation of the tongue root, other things being equal, it derives that the tongue mass gets compressed. Such compression can be counterbalanced (entirely or partially) by allowing the dorsum of the tongue to raise. It is not thus surprising to observe a raised dorsum in voiced stops accompanying root advancement.

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<sup>2</sup>A model fitted on the data excluding the outlier speaker leads in fact to a smaller estimate of about 6 msec.

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