Clinical Perspective

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Suggested Citation

Cancel, C. A. (1976). Lisping in Spanish: A defect or dialectual trend?. *International Journal of Oral Myology*, 2(4), 94-97.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52010/ijom.1976.2.4.2>

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Lisping in Spanish: A Defect or a Dialectal Trend?

By Cruz A Cancel, Ph. D.

Recent studies have demonstrated that there are selected non standard characteristics which vary with the social status of the speakers (Williams, 1970, Williams and Naremore, 1969). Some speech cues may have elicited some type of general personality, culture, or ethnic stereotype which should not be confused with a speech defect (Williams, 1970). For example, Holdstein and Borus (1976) in their study of the kibbutz children in Israel found significant differences between the syntactic and articulation deviations of kibbutz and city children in Israel. Children who live in kibbutzim enter at the age of three to four days and learn their primary language from the women that work there caring for them. The kibbutz children were found to make many errors in sibilant sounds. However, the teachers and the nursemaids at the kibbutzim considered the lisping of these children a 'normal' behavior.

The professionals in the rehabilitation team, evaluating cases whose dominant language is Spanish, are expected to identify speech deviations in the production of sibilant sounds. Many of these cases may have some dialectal variations unknown to these professionals that may or may not be related to a speech defect.

Therefore, this study is an attempt to aid the speech pathologist and the dentist in identifying the speech deviations present in the speech of Puerto Ricans who have oral myofunctional disorders.

Spanish speakers from the Antilles, Central America and from many parts of Spain, except Castile, speak general or standard Spanish (Cancel 1957). This Spanish is characterized by "seseo" which is the pronunciation of the sibilant sounds /s/, /z/, and c, before e and i, as /s/ in all positions of words and syllables. Those from Castile speak Castilian Spanish which is characterized by lisping, called "ceceo". This lisping became the accepted way of producing the sibilant sounds /s and /z/ as o because the people imitated the royal family of Castile. Various members of this royal Spanish family were handicapped and were thus unable to produce the sibilant sounds correctly (Davis and Silverman, 1970). Therefore, lisping became a sign of nobility.

The pronunciation of /s/, /z/ and the letter c before e and i as /s/ not only differentiates the Spanish spoken in Spain from the Spanish spoken in America, but also gives a specific modality, a pronunciation characteristic, to each region (Rosenblat, 1951). However, Rosenblat observed that the language is about the same among "cultured" speakers in the Spanish countries. Nevertheless, a great number of high school and university teachers in

the United States are still teaching the Castilian Spanish pronunciation (Cancel, 1974, 1976).

Sibilant distortions have been associated with tongue thrust swallowing (Bloomer, 1957, Palmer, 1962, Jann, 1964, Weinberg, 1968, Bzoch, 1972, Cole, 1972 Fletcher, 1972, Starr, 1972, McClove and Proffit, 1973, Barrett and Hanson, 1974, Mason and Proffit, 1974). The sibilant sounds most frequently affected in the presence of tongue thrusting are /s/, /z/, Z, S, tS, DZ (Jann, 1964). Therefore, in the diagnosis of tongue thrusting of Spanish speakers, the examiner should be aware of the above dialectal variations during the articulation evaluation of the production of the sibilant sounds. Another modality to be taken into consideration by the examiners of these bilingual cases is the omission and or aspiration of the s sound in final position of syllables and words. This is common among the people from the coastal regions such as Puerto Rico, Panama, and Columbia (Cancel, 1957).

It is possible that this omission may be the result, in part, of the effect of the phonetic characteristics of the Spanish language. The results of an intelligibility test using 1,000 bisyllabic grave words administered to 60 Spanish American speakers revealed certain phonetic characteristics of the Spanish sounds which may deter the intelligibility of the Spanish language as follows:

- 1-the presence of the /s/ phoneme
- 2-the presence of the /n/ phoneme
- 3-the presence of consonants in final position of words and of syllables.

Many of the plural words in Spanish are formed by the addition of /s/ or /n/. Both have been found to deter the intelligibility of the Spanish words. Based on this, one may suspect that the correction of sibilant sounds in final position of words and of syllables may not be a successful approach. Thus, the use of verbal materials for therapy should be with the objective of improving the production of the /s/ sound in the initial position of word and of syllable to provide opportunity for gaining self-confidence through success.

In conclusion, verbal materials used in the evaluation and therapy of tongue thrust individuals should be based on the phonetic characteristics of their language. The therapist treating oral myofunctional of bilingual children has as much need to be familiarized with the dialectal variations of the languages of his clients as does the teacher of a bilingual program.

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