Take-Home Assignment 3

Riocontra, a jargon fruit of syllabic metathesis

I. Abstract

This paper analyzes the mechanism Italian speakers use to create “Riocontra” terms, a language game that inverts the syllable order to create new words while maintaining the same meaning. More specifically the goal is to determine if this mechanism is a pure syllabic metathesis, a shift of an entire syllable/s (onset, nucleus, and rhyme); furthermore this paper will determine what kind of clustering is preferred in trisyllable words, since the “break-point” is not as clear as even-syllable words (n. syllables / 2). To answer these questions 28 Italian undergraduate Riocontra speakers were randomly selected and surveyed on their use of the jargon (if they did at all); the students were asked to form Riocontra terms given different types of Italian words. These types included different syllable length, fricative-liquid-plosive syllable onsets/codas and homogenous digraphs on syllable boundaries (repetition of a letter, a “double” i.e. quatt.ro - “four”). The results showed that although most of the cases reported a pure syllabic metathesis, some broke the syllable structure in the presence of homogeneous digraphs or C closure (after the shift took place). The digraphs were never split and kept in front, maybe creating a stronger consonant (i.e. quattro - Ttroqua). In the C closure case, the consonant was moved to the beginning of the word (i.e. des trava “right” - “strade” instead of “trades”). When it comes to the trisyllable clustering, the results revealed

\[\text{[The reason of this study comes from a personal connection with the argot. I personally speak Riocontra and while I use it very frequently, I don’t know anything about its rules or inner workings. I therefore decided to investigate its mechanisms and how others use this language game.]\]
that speakers of Riocontra tend to cluster the first two syllables of a word together, although
the evidence is not significant enough to consider this trend as a definitive rule.

II. Introduction

In 1983, the Italian argot known as “Riocontra” [rjokontra] made its first public ap-
pearance in a renowned comedy titled Il Ras Del Quartiere. It is thought that at the time this
jargon was mainly used to talk in code, to hide information from others. While its origins are
unclear, it is spoken in the city of Milan almost exclusively. Nowadays, it has become part
of the youth language of the city. Similarly to Verlan and Vesre, spoken respectively in Paris
and Buenos Aires, this argot is fruit of a radical shift of entire syllables and/or sounds; the
meaning of Riocontra comes from “contrario” (con.tra.rio becomes rio.con.tra) which means
“reverse,” in the same way that Verlan comes from “l’envers” and Vesre from “revés.” On
the other hand, Riocontra doesn’t follow any a priori rules. In fact, according to most Rio-
contra speakers, there needn’t to be any rules; creating rules would in fact defeat its purpose,
since this language game was invented to talk in code.

This said, I would like to determine if this phenomenon is a pure syllabic metathesis (a
shift of entire syllables) or if there are some phonological influences involved (i.e. adding/
removing sounds which would break the syllable structure). A pure syllable metathesis
would exclusively consist of a “swap” of syllables, for example in English one could imag-
ine the word “garden” as “dengar.” I would hypothesize that this inversion is a pure syllable
shift (where break point = n. syllables / 2), with no exceptions. If this is the case, one will
see Riocontra terms which include the same exact syllables of the corresponding Italian
word, but inverted \((S_1 | S_2 - S_2 S_1 \| S_1 | S_3 S_2 - S_3 S_4 S_1 S_2)^2\). Furthermore, would there be a preference of inversion in trisyllable words? (i.e. giar.di.no — “garden”) For example, would one cluster together \(S_1\) and \(S_2\) (no.giar.di) or \(S_2\) and \(S_3\) (di.no.giar)? For the purpose of this paper I will use the clustering seen in “riocontra” as the hypothesis, where the cluster formed is between \(S_1\) and \(S_2\).

III. Methods

**Participants** A total of 28 participants were involved in this study. The participants were undergraduate students of the Milan area, randomly selected through social media and word of mouth. The subjects included 19 males and 9 females, ranging from 19 to 23 years of age.

**Materials** The survey was created using GoogleForms. The stimuli consisted of 13 Italian nouns: 4 bisyllabic, 4 trisyllabic, 4 tetra-syllabic, and a single 5 syllable term (*Figure 1*). The four-word sets included both C and V initial words, fricative-liquid-plosive onset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N syllables</th>
<th>alto al.to “tall”</th>
<th>strada stra.da “road”</th>
<th>Quattro quat.tro “four”</th>
<th>destra des.tra “right”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>Alfredo Al.fre.do “Alfred”</td>
<td>sinistra si.nis.tra “left”</td>
<td>giardino giar.di.no “garden”</td>
<td>Mattina mat.ta “morning”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>anaconda a.na.con.da “anaconda”</td>
<td>serenata se.re.na.ta “serenade”</td>
<td>porcellana por.cel.la.ta “porcelain”</td>
<td>telefono te.le.fo.no “phone”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>paracadute pa.ra.ca.du.te “parachute”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: “Stimuli divided by syllable length, syllable structure, English translations”*

\(^2\) \(S_x\) stands for “Syllable number x”, and \(|\) is the break-point.
and/or coda syllables and at least a homogenous digraph case (a “double” split in the syllable structure i.e. quaṭro - “four”). The words chosen were not of everyday use, to test the pure mechanism of the phenomenon with no biases (avoiding conformation to recurrent inversions of everyday terms). Moreover, the participants were asked to express their opinion on the possibility of monosyllabic Riocontra (Yes/No to confirm that the underlying mechanism is indeed syllable dependant), an estimate of their sentence use of Riocontra (based on a 20% increment scale 0%-100%), and personal data for statistical purposes. The addition of the 5 syllable term was an attempt to define a syllable-length limit for the occurrence of the phenomenon based on the work of Casadei (2016). More specifically, based on the evidence that in the VDB of Italian (basic vocabulary) words with 5+ syllables are equal to only 10,1% of the total number of terms (710/6728 words) as seen in Tabella 4 on p. 69.

Procedure The first question asked was whether one used Riocontra on a day to day basis (Yes/No), followed by the stimuli with the Riocontra-related questions, and finally personal data. Only subjects who answered “Yes” to the first question were presented with the stimuli. The stimuli consisted of asking for the Riocontra equivalent of the displayed Italian word (13 in total). The subjects had to individually type their answers for each stimulus. After the stimuli, the subjects were asked the estimate amount of phrase-use and the monosyllabic possibility questions, followed by personal data (age, sex) and finally dismissed.

Compiling Once the data was exported to an excel-like document, it was simplified by eliminating irrelevant answers that did not follow the survey’s directions (i.e. blank answer).
IV. Results

Out of the 28 subjects 71% reported to use Riocontra (20/28), with an average frequency of sentence use of 27% (min= 20%, max= 80%); while only 3 of the 20 speakers reported the inversion of monosyllable terms as possible, confirming the shift as multi-syllabic only.

**Bisyllabic** In Figure 2 it is possible to see the results for the bisyllabic terms. For the words “alto” and “strada” subjects almost exclusively performed a pure syllable metathesis, yielding “toal” (16/20) and “dastra” (17/20). On the other hand, for the words “destra” and “quattro” some interesting phenomena took place. Only one subject applied a pure syllabic metathesis on “destra”, yielding “trades.” The rest (14/20) moved the closing /s/ in front, yielding “strade,” refusing the C closure (see 2nd ¶ Discussion). For “quattro” the subjects exclusively reported “ttroqua” as their answer (19/20), neglecting the syllable structure and keeping the homogenous digraph /tt/ intact and in front.

**Trisyllabic** In Figure 3 it is possible to see the results for the trisyllabic terms. For the words “giardino” and “Alfredo” subjects almost exclusively performed a pure syllable metathesis, yielding “nogiardi” (11/20) or “dinogiar” (4/20) and “Doalfre” (16/20). To note that two subjects formed the term “nordigia” from “giardino;” although this is a very inter-
esting mechanism, I decided not to analyze it as it wasn’t the focus of this paper. Similarly to the bisyllabic stimuli, “sinistra” and “mattina” show both the refused C closure and the homogeneous digraph exceptions, yielding almost exclusively “strasini” (15/20) and “ttinama” (19/20). Also avoiding the C closure of “sinistra” two subjects performed a pure syllabic metathesis resulting in “nistrasi.” Based on these results, the hypothesis of the trisyllable clustering being formed by $S_1$ and $S_2$ appears to be correct, unless a homogenous digraph or closure in C is present (although it requires further investigation to form a definition/rule).

![Figure 3: “Trisyllabic results. Other= discarded results”]

**Tetra-syllabic** In Figure 4 it is possible to see the results for the tetra-syllabic terms. Note that most subject’s answer to this data set was blank, which caused their entries to be discarded. For “serenata” and “telefono” subjects used a pure syllabic metathesis. The main results were “natasere” (5/20) and “taserena” (2/20), “notelefo” (4/20) and “fonotele” (7/20). Similarly to the other homogeneous digraphs cases, “porcellana” mainly yielded “llana-porce” (7/20) although two subjects answered with “naporcella.” Lastly, “anaconda” was only translated three times, all yielding “condana,” losing the repetition of an a (should be “condaana”).
The word “paracadute” was translated only once into “cadutepara.” This confirms the hypothesis that 5+ syllable words are rarely if ever used in Riocontra.

V. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to give a first look to the Italian language game known as Riocontra. The research yielded some very interesting results. For example, the retainment of homogenous digraph in front of Riocontra terms is a very particular phenomenon that requires some further investigation. How does it sound? Being a speaker of Riocontra myself I voice it as a harder consonant sound, yet this is not enough to form any kind of rule.

I found very interesting how most subjects rejected the C closure terms, shifting the consonant back to the front of the words. In my personal opinion, this is because there aren’t any Italian words ending with a consonant, therefore forcing the ulcerior shift. This said, Italian speakers use plenty of borrowed words from other languages which have C closure (i.e. computer, hotel, business), so I wonder what “feels wrong” and induces the C shift.

Related to the notes above, I consider the inability of talking to the subjects one of the biggest flaws of this experiment. I found myself analyzing the data and wondering how
would one voice some Riocontra terms, or why some answers were left blank. Was that based on personal preference (they would never use the word in speech)? Or rather they weren’t able to form Riocontra terms? To avoid this problem (if direct dialogue with the subjects is not possible), I would use a mixture of both everyday/non-everyday use words, to be able to have a better generalization of the shift mechanisms.

Moreover, I would suggest a different approach for further research, it would be more effective to examine this language game similarly to the works of Ozburn & Murray (2019). A theoretical analysis of Riocontra might be a more effective method to determine and categorize particular shifts, or perhaps discover new ones. For example “giar.di.no” being transformed into “nordigia,” which appears to be a very complex case. This might help to categorize these language game mechanisms, which could help understand the sociolinguistics of different idioms, and most importantly how a speaker “thinks” about their own language.

VI. Bibliography

