

Underspecified nasals in Nambikwaran languages (Brazil)

Luiz Antonio de Sousa Netto

(Köln)

In this study, we analyze the underspecified nasal consonants across the Nambikwara language family, a smallish and highly endangered language family of Brazil, by comparing the data of Northern Nambikwara lects spoken by the Latundê (Telles 2002), Mamaindê (Eberhard 2009) and the Negarotê (Braga 2017) groups, as well as the data from Southern Nambikwara lects spoken by the Halotesú, the Kithãulhú, the Sawentesú and the Wakalitesú, collected in 2017. We aim to determine how underspecified nasals behave and to what extent they are phonetic/phonological similar in genetically related languages. Underspecified nasals have been reported for most Nambikwaran languages from both Northern and Southern Nambikwara branches, but they do not occur in the most genetically distant Nambikwaran language spoken by the Sabanê (Araújo 2006). The first account on underspecified coda consonants in the Nambikwara language family was first proposed by Price (1978:23), in his attempt to reconstruct the Proto-Nambikwara language, who posited that there was an underspecified consonant /C/, which occurred in the coda of reconstructed Proto-Nambikwara words. Due to their specific behavior in the coda, as well as the broad variation, the nasal /n/ is usually treated as an underspecified segment for place, usually referred as /N/. In the coda slot, the most common surface forms of /N/ in Nambikwaran languages are plain [n, m, ŋ] and pre-oralized [ᵀn, ᵀm, ᵀŋ] nasals, but pre-glotalized [ʔn, ʔm] and post-oralized [nᵀ] nasals were also reported by Telles (2002) in Latundê and Santana (2010) in Tawandê, respectively, two Northern Nambikwara lects. Pre-oralized nasals are characterized by both an oral and nasal phase and were reported across indigenous languages in Brazil (Wetzels 2008). Such nasals maintain their manner features and have place features commonly determined by the place features of the preceding vowel (Kroeker 2001, Telles 2002, Eberhard 2009, Braga 2017). Preliminarily, the results of this family-based typological study show that phonetic implementations of corresponding phonological phenomena may be language specific. Similarly, there are also cases where phonological distributions and phonetic implementations of /N/ share similar properties (e.g. pre-oralized nasals), being therefore highly predictable. Overall, partial oralization in the coda seems to be used to enhance oral/nasal contrasts on vowels.

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