

## Testing speech perception on the field: Mid back vowels in Girona Catalan

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Even though speech perception tests are mostly used, as Thomas (2002) states, in experimental phonetics and in psychology, its use in sociolinguistics could provide new powerful means for the study of language, as well as an innovative insight into language structure and variation. Some of the scarce work actually done by variationists using this methodology has dealt with vowel mergers and its implications regarding perception (see e.g. Costa & Mattingly (1981), Janson & Schulman (1983), Labov, Karen & Miller (1991), Labov and Ash (1997) or Di Paolo & Faber (1990: 166-167)), and so does our research.

Following the acoustical study carried out by Recasens & Espinosa (2009) and the remarks made by authors such as Alcover (1908: 327), Luna (1982: 32), Juliá (1986: 132) or Recasens (1996: 131), our on-going project examines the possibility that the mid-closed and mid-open back vowels ([o] and [ɔ]) in the Catalan spoken in the Girona diocese, in North-Eastern Catalonia, are in fact near-mergers. As such, the hypothesis under analysis states that these two phonemes have increasingly closer dispersion areas, and that speakers (or, in fact, *listeners*) of this variety are very possibly unable to perceive the distinction; accordingly, our study will include both production and perception tests.

Of the two, this communication will deal with the perception tests. More precisely, we will first introduce the different kinds of perception tests used to provide the necessary evidence for our study. And, second, we will discuss the methodological issues involved in carrying out speech perception tests in an environment that should be as naturalistic as possible -as corresponds to a sociolinguistic study- but where the stimuli and the listening environment and conditions must be carefully controlled in order for the results to be meaningful and reliable.