Syllable Codas in Brazilian Portuguese; The Nature of Vexing /S/

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Abstract

Brazilian Portuguese (BP) phonology places strong phonotactic restrictions on syllable shape, generally limiting the post-vocalic segment to one of four possibilities. This paper is a re-analysis of those four underlying segments: a nasal consonant /N/ which is forbidden to surface as a coda; an approximant /l/ which is realized as [u] when syllable final; an approximant /ɾ/ which is subject to several rules of allophony and is optionally realized as a null segment in syllable final position; and /S/, which has some curious properties and stands out from the other segments in the BP inventory in terms of how it is treated by the language’s phonology.

Traditionally, these four segments have been analyzed as syllable codas despite strong pressures, both synchronically and diachronically, towards a CV typology in BP. This paper is a re-analysis of these underlying segments as surface components of the syllable nucleus, thus simplifying the inventory of BP syllable shapes and building a framework for a re-analysis of several key aspects of BP phonology.

In addition, while the re-analysis of the nasal and the approximants is fairly straightforward, /S/ turns out to be a vexing exception to CV typology. However, the properties that make /S/ so unique in the case of BP turn out to have some interesting similarities in other languages, whose phonology also permit /S/ to “misbehave” in some interesting ways.


