

# The *heheo*. is That Even a Thing? A Sociolinguistic Approach from Loja (Andalusia)

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**Abstract.** This sociolinguistic study focuses on an underanalysed phonetic feature of the Andalusian dialect (Spanish) which can be found in the town of Loja (Andalusia): the ‘heheo’. The ‘heheo’ is the sporadic and lexically conditioned substitution of the /s/ and/or /θ/ sounds by /h/ at the beginning of a word or syllable. In spite of being widespread all-over Latin America and Southern Spain, this linguistic feature is characterised by its lack of linguistic prestige. This study can be of an interest to a diverse population: ranging from academics due to the terminological chaos around this phenomenon, to students of linguistics as this phenomenon actually constitutes a research gap. And of course, actual users of heheo, because of their low level of linguistic awareness concerning this stigmatized phenomenon. During the development of this research, a detailed analysis conducted on the sociolinguistic perception about this phonetic phenomenon. For this purpose, an online survey was designed and launched to a wide range of Spanish speakers from the town of Loja. Thanks to it, the three main research questions were answered: (1) What are the language attitudes towards the heheo in the town of Loja? (2) What is the level of linguistic awareness of the user of heheo? (3) Does a linguistic identity exists among the users of heheo? The only goal of this study is to provide new information about this research gap in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity of the Andalusian dialect.

**Keywords:** ‘heheo’; sociolinguistics; dialectology; Andalusian; Spanish

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## 1 Introduction

This sociolinguistic study focuses on an underanalysed phonetic feature of the Andalusian dialect (of Spanish) which can be found in the town of Loja: the ‘heheo’. And more specifically, it is focused on the linguistic perception and language attitudes towards the heheo in this town. This study follows the synchronic sociolinguistics' methodology by launching an online survey.

In relation to the ‘heheo's’ stay of play, it exists a lack of bibliographical references, of quantitative data and even of terminological consistency. This fact only demonstrates what a huge research gap the ‘heheo’ constitutes in itself, resulting in the necessity of collecting more real data about this phenomenon. Therefore, an online survey was launched to a wide range of local Spanish speakers from the town of Loja (Andalusia, Spain).

After all, the present study's only goal is to provide new information about this research gap in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity of the Andalusian dialect.

So, at the beginning of this research it was hypothesised that: In spite of the ‘heheo’ being a stigmatized feature, the language attitude of the user of ‘heheo’ is not so negative.

In addition, three research questions were posed:

1. What are the language attitudes towards the ‘heheo’ in the town of Loja?

In other words, what people think about this linguistic feature and how these relate to attitudes about this use of the Spanish language.

2. What is the level of linguistic awareness of the user of ‘heheo’?

This linguistic or language awareness can be defined as explicit knowledge about language, and a conscious perception and sensitivity in language use.

3. Does a linguistic identity exist among the users of ‘heheo’?

Linguistic identity refers to a person’s identification as a member of one or more groups of speakers sharing common linguistic features. The linguistic identity is often an important part of one's personal identity.

## 2 Definition

The ‘heheo’ is the sporadic and lexically conditioned substitution of the /s/ sound and/or /θ/ sound by /h/ at the beginning of a word or syllable. For instance, a user of ‘heheo’ would pronounce these three words the same way: ‘casa’, ‘caza’, and ‘caja’ as /káha/.

In spite of being widespread all-over Latin America and Andalusia, this linguistic feature is characterised by its lack of linguistic prestige. In fact, the ‘heheo’ suffers from such a strong stigmatization that it is hardly recognised among a wide range of the population.

It is a phonetic feature of the Andalusian dialect that usually can be found in familiar communicative situations among users of ‘ceceo’, which is another phonetic feature of the Andalusian dialect, meaning the pronunciation of the /s/ sound as /θ/. It is usually heard in informal contexts since in formal registers users of ‘heheo’ tend not to use it due to the negative connotations linked to it.

## 3 Location

The ‘heheo’ can be found both in the Southern Spanish region of Andalusia and also in Latin America. The ‘heheo’ in America has been a bit more analysed than in Andalusia. A few studies properly describe the ‘heheo’ in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Colombia. While in Andalusia, studies suggest that it can be heard in the provinces of Granada, Malaga, Cordoba, Seville, Huelva and Cadiz.

It makes perfect sense that the heheo, being a feature of the Andalusian dialect, is also found in American Spanish. It may be rooted in the great number of migrants from Andalusia to America that settled in the so-called New World and taught their dialect among the new populations.

## 4 Methods

As it has been already mentioned at the beginning of this paper, this study was conducted by following the synchronic sociolinguistics' methodology. The lack of information about the ‘heheo’ made crucial to collect more data so an online survey was launched in order to do so. 150 participants from the town of Loja

completed the survey. The variables designed were both quantitative and qualitative, so the type of analysis conducted was a mixed one.

As at the beginning of every sociolinguist study, the social variables were established. Being the age, sex and academic background the most important ones.

Then, the linguistic variables were presented in the shape of the online survey questions:

- (1) Do you consider the way people talk in Loja to be peculiar? If so, in what sense?
- (2) Do you think that other (Spanish) speakers consider the way people talk in Loja to be inferior? If so, how do you notice it?
- (3) Do you think that you are speaking badly by talking the way people do in Loja? Could you explain your reasons?
- (4) Do you find it difficult to be understood when talking to Spanish speakers who are not from the town of Loja? Yes/No
- (5) Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you had to change your accent in order to be understood? If so, in which situations?
- (6) Do you think that the speech found in Loja has negative connotations? If so, could you mention some of them? Do you feel ashamed of your local accent?
- (7) Do you think that the speech found in Loja has negative connotations? If so, could you mention some of them? Do you feel proud of your local accent?
- (8) Do you have any interesting comment about the way people talk in Loja that you may want to share?

## 5 Discussion

The most interesting aspect of this piece of research is how to dismantle the main prejudice concerning the 'heheo'.

Quoted from one of few authors on whom I could base my sociolinguistic study, Juan Pablo Rodríguez Prieto: "[The 'heheo'] is often used by speakers with a low educational level or from low socio-economic backgrounds, in informal or neglected speech".

Is the 'heheo' only used by speakers from low academic and socio-economic backgrounds?

According to the survey I launched to the local population of the town of Loja, the average respondent's profile is a young woman with university studies. This fact demonstrates that it exists no direct link between the *heheo* and the user's academic background. Therefore, the main prejudice of the *heheo* is overturned.

The *heheo* is a transversal phenomenon that is not only used by "uneducated" speakers. To say otherwise only denotes a stale classism. And even if this were the case, there is still no reason to disregard the way people talk. This stigmatization is only provoked by social classism, and it is directly linked to the status of the Andalusian dialect, which is still stigmatized nowadays.

## 6 Conclusions

Thanks to the online survey, the three main research questions were answered:

(1) What are the language attitudes towards the heheo in the town of Loja?

They can be easily distinguished depending on whether the speaker is a user of 'heheo' or not, finding that this phenomenon is notably more stigmatized among speakers that do not use this phonetic feature.

(2) What is the level of linguistic awareness of the user of 'heheo'?

It can be stated that it exists up to a certain level since the users of 'heheo' are actually aware of the use of this phonetic feature, although a majority of them do not know the specific term which describes it.

(3) Does a linguistic identity exist among the users of 'heheo'?

To some extent, it does; they strongly identify their accent with their cultural values and roots. To sum up, it is the great variety found in a very same language what makes it worth learning about it. I have learnt during these years that your accent is also an important part of who you are and there is nothing more beautiful and moving than being proud of your local community and roots.