UNSTRESSED VOWEL REDUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY STANDARD BULGARIAN: ASSESSING RECEIVED VIEWS AGAINST CORPUS FINDINGS

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Bulgarian is often cited in phonological work for its vowel reduction, with the assumption that the six-vowel stressed inventory, /ɛ, a, ɔ, i, ɤ, u/, shrinks to a sub-inventory of three contrastive vowels in unstressed position, /i, ɤ, u/, by virtue of /ɛ, a, ɔ/ raising and merging with /i, ɤ, u/, respectively. The literature in Bulgarian, on the other hand, maintains that /ɛ–i/ do not merge in Standard Bulgarian; that unstressed vowels are more open in immediately pretonic syllables than elsewhere; that unstressed high vowels are lowered, while nonhigh vowels are raised; and that reduction is strongest in /a/. These claims have been challenged in recent work, and we present a new investigation based on 11 615 vowel tokens from 140 speakers in the BulPhonC speech corpus. MANOVA and LMM results provide clear evidence that there is no unstressed high-vowel lowering, no difference between pretonic vs other unstressed vowels, and that unstressed /a–ɤ/ and /ɔ–u/ merge completely through the raising of /a/ and /ɔ/ to [ɤ] and [u], respectively. At the same time, unstressed /ɛ–i/ remain spectrally distinct.

Keywords: vowel reduction; stress; neutralisation; Contemporary Standard Bulgarian

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