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Spanish Sibilant Evolution

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During the Middle Ages Spanish had six sibilants in its phonological system. The sixteenth century marked a time of great change in the medieval sibilant system. The purpose of this investigation is to analyze and document the processes that transformed the medieval sibilants into the two sibilant systems known today. This investigation will deal with the sibilants anciently represented graphically as {ç, z, s, ss}, and the way in which they evolved by means of four processes: deaffrication, devoicing, deapicalization, and interdentalization. The phonemes that will be dealt with will be the following:

- /ž/ voiced, apico-dental affricate. Written {z}
(fazer, hazer)
- /š/ unvoiced, apico-dental affricate. Written {ça, ço, çu, ci, ce}
(braço, cerca)
- /s/ unvoiced, apico-alveolar fricative. Written {s-, -ss- -Cs-
(followed by a consonant)} (passar, señor)
- /z/ voiced apico-alveolar fricative. Written {-s- (intervocalic)} (rosa, prisión)¹

Deaffrication

Deaffrication of the the affricate sibilants, /ž, š/ written {z, ç}, marks the first evolutionary change in the Spanish sibilant system. During this phase /š/ and /ž/ lost their affricative quality to become respectively /s/, and /z/.² Since the phonemes corresponded with their written form, one may find evidences of this process in the writings of the time. The apparent confusion and mixed use of {z} with {s}, and {ç} with {ss} is evidence that deaffrication was taking place. In 1419 one author writes "diesmo" in place of "diezmo," and "çatan instead of "satan;" In 1487 one may see "Andrez" written instead of "Andrés." The poet Juan de Padilla Cartujano (1468-1522) rhymes {s} with {z} and {ç} with {ss}.³ Juan de Valdés in 1535 notes the confusions in spelling and in the pronunciation of {z} and {s}:

«Esse es vicio de las lenguas de tales que no les sirven para la asperilla pronunciación de la z y ponen en su lugar la s, y por hazer dicen haser, y por razón, rasón y por rezio, resio, etc.»⁴

When the affricates, /š/ and /ž/, became the fricatives, /z/ and /s/, they were no longer in opposition to the apico-alveolar fricatives, /ž/ and /š/ in terms of their manner of articulation. Those who maintained the apico-alveolar articulations, /ž/ and /š/, still felt an opposition, not in the manner of articulation, but in the place of articulation.

The first signs of deaffrication are found in Andalusia. Lapesa believes

that this phenomenon started in Seville and in the Atlantic coast and later spread to cover all of Andalusia. The same thing occurred as a separate phenomenon in the north, and in the septentrional plateau, but at a later date.⁵ Zamora uncovered an interesting observation of deaffrication:

Quizás el testimonio más significativo es el de Arias Montano....Estaba matriculado in el colegio de Santa María de Jesús, en Sevilla, en 1546-47....En 1588, Arias Montano escribe sobre la pronunciación de los Sevillanos, y dice que «siendo él joven, su pronunciación era la misma que la de los castellanos de ambas Castillas», pero veinte años después (es decir en 1566) «truecan la s por la z, y al revés, la z o ç castellana por la s» y añade: «La antigua y común pronunciación todavía (en 1588) se guarda entre buena parte de los viejos más graves» y «que no pocos de los jóvenes mejor educados la practican».⁶

The process of deaffrication started in the fifteenth century and continued throughout the sixteenth century, until it became firmly established at the beginning of the seventeenth century. There are indications that the voiced affricate, /ʒ/, lost its affricative quality before the unvoiced affricate /ç/. The examples already cited testify to the deaffrication of the voiced affricate, /ʒ/, since they have to do with spelling confusions between the {z} and the {s}, and not between the {ç} and the {ss}. Examples of deaffrication of the unvoiced affricate /ç/ were found later. Amado Alonso postulates that deaffrication took place first in word final position, then in intervocalic position, and finally in post-consonantal position and word initial position, "conquering progressive resistances."⁷ According to his chronology {z} and {ç} were pronounced as linguodentals until the sixteenth century. Towards the middle, and more specifically at the end of the sixteenth century, these affricates lost their affricative quality, starting with the voiced member, /ʒ/.

Deaffrication of /ç/, which was a later phenomenon, did not become widespread until the beginning of the seventeenth century: In 1607 Pedro Martínez, commenting on the way Spaniards spoke, said that they pronounce "ratio", "ratsio." Kaspar Schoppe noticed something similar in 1613-1614. He heard Spaniards say "Dsidsero" for "Cícero." In 1618 Bautista de Morales maintained that there was still a distinction in the pronunciation of the {z} and the {ç}.⁸

Deapicalization: THE BIRTH OF CECEO AND SESEO

There are various hypothesis regarding the origin of the apico-alveolar fricative, /s/. Alonso taught that it had its roots in the Iberian substratum and calls it the Iberian "s".⁹ Otero is of the opinion that the apico-alveolar fricative did not exist in Medieval Spanish, but that one of the steps in the castilianization of Romance was the apicalization of the dental fricative, /s/. He attributes this process to the Basque influence in Castile.¹⁰

This theory that the dental fricative suffered a modification in its

place of articulation, transforming itself into an apico-alveolar fricative, becomes weak in view of other findings. There is evidence to show that the apico-alveolar fricative existed not only in Romance but also in other non-Latin, Indo-European languages.¹¹ If emigrants to the Americas used the apico-alveolar fricative, it is possible that one may find remains of it in America. There are, in fact, pockets of apical-alveolar /š/ in parts of Colombia, Puerto Rico, and Peru.¹² Jungemann provides further evidence for the early existence of the apical-alveolar /š/. He believes that old descriptions of Romance can be interpreted more clearly if the pronunciation of {s} is considered apico-alveolar instead of linguodental. If this is true, the idea that the apical pronunciation of the /s/ is due to a pre-Roman substratum is made void.¹³ In that case, the third step in the development of the Spanish sibilants is not the addition of an apical element, or apicalization as Otero suggests, but rather, the loss of the apical element, or deapicalization. In Spanish, deapicalization took place in the south, while the north retained the apical-alveolar articulation of the {s}.

Chronologically, deapicalization started after deaffrication, but before devoicing.¹⁴ When the affricates, /ž/ and /š/ lost their affricative characteristic, the resulting phonemes, /z,s,z,s/, grew phonologically closer. Llorach explains what usually happens as a result of such a drawing together:

La tendencia de la «economía» del sistema fonémico obliga a la lengua a buscar el aprovechamiento de un número mínimo de distinciones fonológicas cuando una oposición diferencial tiene escaso rendimiento..., el sistema de la lengua tiende a perder esta distinción y reducir los dos fonemas a uno solo... cuando dos fonemas de gran rendimiento pueden confundirse por la proximidad de sus realizaciones fonéticas, la lengua tendrá a alejarlos entre sí, cambiando la realización fonética de uno de ellos.¹⁵

In the case of Andalusian, the apical element was lost, and {s} and {ss} were articulated with a variety of dental and interdental articulations. What was referred to as "ceceo", "çeçeo", or "zezeo" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the adoption of the dental articulation given to {z} and {ç}, to {s} and {ss} which before were apico-alveolar, or in other words, the loss of the apical articulation.¹⁶ More specifically, "ceceo" or "çeçeo" was the use of any dental articulation usually given to {ç} to pronounce {ss}. "Zezeo" was the use of any dental articulation given to {z} to pronounce {s}. With the rapid arrival of devoicing "zezeo" became quickly extinct, transforming itself into "ceceo".¹⁷

"Seseo" is another term that is usually brought up when talking about Spanish sibilant confusion. In the seventeenth century it did not refer to the Andalusian phenomena of deapicalization, but to the Catalanian and Valencian habit of dropping the dental sibilants in favor of the apico-alveolar ones. That is, {ç} and {z} were given an apico-alveolar articulation instead of a dental one.¹⁸ In the case of Valencian and Catalan, apicalization took place; in Andalusia deapicalization occurred. In Castile the distinction between linguodental and apico-alveolar sibilants was maintained.

Areas that had experienced deaffrication, deapicalization, and devoicing were now able to consolidate the old articulations of {z,ç,s,ss} into a single phoneme. This phoneme, however had a wide variety of dental and interdental articulations. What is known today as "seseo" is the neutralization of the four medieval sibilants, /š,ž,ź,š/, by means of deapicalization, into a variant of /s/ with a "siseante" timbre. "Ceceo", then, is the neutralization of the ancient sibilants into a variant of the interdental fricative, /θ/, or of the dental fricative, /s/ with a "ciceante" timbre. Both "ceceo" and "seseo" are outcomes of the same Andalusian phenomena anciently called "ceceo" or "zezeo".¹⁹

The process of deapicalization, like the other processes discussed, occurred mainly during the sixteenth century. According to Lapesa, around the year 1500 the "s" of Seville and surrounding areas was apico-alveolar. In about 1584 the "s" had already lost its apical characteristic and adopted a dental articulation.²⁰ Fontanella sets an even earlier date for this occurrence. According to her, the equalization between apicals and dentals started earlier, and became generalized in the fifteenth century. It is difficult to set a date for deapicalization, but it can be said with some certainty that it happened before devoicing and after deaffrication.²¹

DEVOICING

A short time after /ž/ and /š/, ({z} and {ç}), began to lose their affricative quality, which process started in Andalusia, another evolutionary process was heard in Castile: the devoicing of the voiced linguodental and apico-alveolar fricatives, /z/ and /z/, which were represented in spelling by the letters {z} and {s}. In regions in which deaffrication had already taken place the voiced fricatives were devoiced: /z/ > /s/ and /ž/ > /š/.

In zones that had not yet undergone deaffrication, the voiced dental affricate, and the voiced apico-alveolar fricative were devoiced: /ž/ > /š/ and /z/ > /s/. In regions that had undergone deaffrication, and deapicalization, the voiced dental fricative was devoiced: /z/ > /s/. For those who maintained the distinction between the linguodental and the apico-alveolar sibilants, deaffrication caused no spelling confusion since the distinction in place of articulation was kept. Deaffrication caused orthographic confusion only for those who did not distinguish between the linguodental and apico-alveolar sibilants. The confusion was manifest in spelling confusions between {z} and {ç}, and between {ç} and {ss}. However, devoicing of the voiced sibilants, caused confusion even for those speakers who differentiated between apico-alveolar and linguodental sibilants.

What makes the matter a bit more complicated is that deaffrication, and devoicing occurred during a relatively short period of time. For some time there were areas in which the sibilants had been devoiced, some areas where they had been disaffricated, and other regions in which they had been both disaffricated and devoiced. On top of that, within each of these three areas, there were also areas that had experienced deapicalization, and differentiated

linguodentals and apico-alveolars, and regions that did not. The spelling confusions found in any given area evidence which processes were taking place in that region. In regions that made no distinction between linguodentals and apico-alveolars, like Andalusia, the orthographic confusions were more numerous than in distinguishing regions like Castile.

The first evidences of devoicing are found in Castile at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Santa Teresa de Jesús writes "deçir" with {ç}, instead of "dezir" with {z}, and "matasen" with a single {s} instead of "matassen" with {ss}.²² The Andalusian, Juan de Baraona y de Padilla describes the devoicing tendency of the Castilians:

Quanto a la .S. y la .Z. se les puede corregir [i.e. the Castilians] (sic) la blandura con que las pro[n]uncian, porque la .s. senzilla no saben diferenciar de la doblada, ni de la Z en medio, o principio de parte de la c con cedilla: como entendiera qualquier que los oye, si tiene practica desto. Los Andaluzes que aciertan a hablar bien, como de naturaleza tienen las lenguas ásperas, danles su fuerça a estas letras, y aun aueces demasiada.²³

The softness mentioned is a reference to the lack of voicing, while the strong pronunciation refers to the voiced fricative.

INTERDENTALIZATION

In Andalusia, the early confusion between the group of dental sibilants, /z, ç/ ({z,ç}), and the group of apico-alveolar sibilants, /s, ss/, ({s,ss}), eventually led to the fusion of the two groups into a single phoneme. On the other hand, in Castile, the distinction between the two groups was maintained since early times. This has led the Castilians to maintain the distinction until present times. The Castilians kept the apico-alveolar pronunciation of {s} and {ss} but then began to distance the dental group {z,ç} from the alveolar one. Distancing the dental group, by changing its place of articulation, was necessary since the only difference between the two groups was their point of articulation. The articulation of the graphemes {ç} and {z} experienced various dental articulations with "ciceante" and "siseante" articulations during for a season, until they abandoned their dental place of articulation and adopted a new interdental position.²⁴ And thus, the interdental fricative, /θ/ was born.

The first description of a "ciceante" sibilant was given in 1501, and was considered a type of "ceceo".²⁵ In 1560 and again in 1578, the pronunciation of {c} and {ç} was described as the interdental sibilant, /θ/.²⁶ The interdental pronunciation of {ç} and {z} became general throughout the seventeenth century, becoming firmly established in the eighteenth century.²⁷ Lapesa explains the necessity for the creation of this new sibilant:

...al hacerse fricativas las antes africadas ç y z, las oposiciones ç/s sorda y z/s sonora perdieron uno de sus rasgos diferenciales: para mantenerlas en la lengua general fué necesario acentuar otra marca diacrítica que reforzase la distinción entre los fonemas

opuestos; y así se hizo cada vez más ciceante la articulación de ç y z para mayor contraste con las siseantes puras s,ss.²⁸

Some believe that the Castilian conservation of this distinction is due to the influence of the Basque language. Basque influence has already been thought to have affected the loss of the initial /f/, and the confusion between {b} and {v}.²⁹ Basque maintained the same opposition between linguodental and apico-alveolar sibilants as Old Spanish; the dental fricative, /s/ was opposed to the apico-alveolar fricative, /š/ in place of articulation; the voiceless affricate, /š/ was opposed to the dental fricative, /s/, in manner of articulation. MacMurrough affirms that Basque speakers helped Spanish speakers to maintain the distinction between the sibilant groups:

Since the Basque speakers of Spanish easily distinguished the fricative /ç/ and /s/ thanks to the same contrast in their primary language, they provided the decisive brake against the merger which occurred in the South; the monolingual Spaniards then advanced the articulation of /ç/ to increase the phonetic distinction which they did not perceive as easily as the Basques.³⁰

Interdentalization was the last step in the series of processes that was able to evolve the medieval sibilant system into the two systems known today. With the publication of the Diccionario de autoridades in 1726, the ancient graphemes {z,ç,s,ss}, that no longer reflected their modern pronunciation, were eliminated or restricted to certain contexts. The {ss} was dropped in favor of the {s}, and {ç} was also abandoned. The use of {z} in spelling was restricted to final word position, followed by a consonant or before {o,u,a}. {C} when followed by {o,u,a} was to be pronounced as the voiceless velar stop, /k/, while when it was followed by {i} or {e} it rendered the interdental fricative, /θ/.³¹

In the space of about a century and a half, by means of the four processes treated here, the four sibilants, /š,ž,š,ž/ were reduced to /s/ in most of Andalusia and all of America, and to /θ/ and /š/ in most of the rest of Spain. Perhaps the most interesting result that this series of processes created was the retention of the distinction between linguodental and apico-alveolar sibilants in Castile, and the transformation of the latter into the interdental fricative, /θ/.

NOTES

1. Rafael Lapesa, Historia de la lengua española, 9th ed. (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1984), pp. 204-205.

2. Lapesa, Historia, p. 567; María Beatriz Fontanella de Weinberg, "Interpretaciones teóricas y estudios documentales sobre la evolución de las sibilants españolas," Romance Philology 31 (1977-1978): 302.

3. Lapesa, Historia, p. 284.

4. Amado Alonso, De la pronunciación medieval a la moderna en español (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1967), p. 311.

5. Lapesa, Historia, pp. 283, 284, 373.

6. Alonso Zamora Vicente, Dialectología española (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1974), pp. 304-305.

7. Alonso, p. 310.

8. Alonso, p. 314.

9. Kiddle, p. 329.

10. Carlos-Peregrín Otero, Evolución y revolución in romance (Barcelona:Editorial Seix Barral, 1971), pp. 106,188,189.

11. Kiddle, p. 329; Donald F. Solá, Review of La teoría del sustrato y los dialectos hispano-romances y gascones, by Fredrick H. Jungemann. Language 33 (1957): 462-463.

12. Lapesa, Historia, p. 568.

13. Solá, p. 463.

14. Lapesa, Historia, p. 567; Fontanella, p. 302.

15. E. Alarcos Llorach, "Esbozo de una fonología diacrónica del español," in Vol. II of Estudios dedicados a Menéndez Pidal, Consejo Superior De investigaciones Cientificas, (Madrid: S. Aguirre, 1951), p.11.

16. Lapesa, Ceceo, pp. 88-89.

17. Zamora Vicente, p. 307.

18. Lapesa, Ceceo, pp. 77-78.

19. Lapesa, Ceceo, p. 89; Lapesa, Historia, pp. 374-375.

20. Lapesa, Ceceo, p. 86.

21. Fontanella, p. 300.

22. Lapesa, Historia, pp. 283,371.

23. Amado Alonso, De la pronunciación medieval a la moderna en español, II (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1969), cited in Kiddle, p. 330.

24. Lapesa, Ceceo, p. 90.

25. Lapesa, Ceceo, p. 81.

26. Alonso, pp. 232,238.

27. Lapesa, Ceceo, p. 90; Lapesa, Historia, p. 374.
28. Lapesa, Ceceo, p. 90.
29. Lapesa, Historia. pp. 38-44.
30. MacMurraugh, p. 457.
31. Lapesa, Historia, pp.422-423.