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16th Century Spanish Sibilant Reordering—Reasons for Divergence

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Sibilant Convergence

Prior to the 1950's most Romance linguists assumed a predorsalveolar [s] articulation for the IE (or at least Latin) /s/ and attributed the apico-alveolar [s] of the regions of Old Castille to a Basque or Iberian substratum influence on Peninsular pronunciation (Lapesa, Historia 4, note 24). This argument was based on common usage today in the majority of the modern Romance languages and 'supported' by the articulatory descriptions of Latin grammarians.

Since then many linguists have expounded the opposing view of an apico-alveolar [s] pronunciation extended throughout the Roman empire, and have presented an abundance of evidence to confirm their claim. In an article entitled "Concerning Some Slavic and Aryan Reflexes of IE s" André Martinet postulates the apico-alveolar [s] as the main allophonic variant of IE /s/ (92). Both Jungemann and Galmes de Fuentes contest the 'predorsality' of Latin /s/, and base their arguments in part on the vagueness of the traditional articulatory descriptions. Indeed the terse statements "dentibus repressis" and "dentibus verberatis" are not only ambiguous, but may equally apply to alveolar sounds as the latinists themselves often described them (Galmes de Fuentes 121). In addition, the above mentioned linguists argue in favor of the apical formation as a better explanation for the preclassic rotacism of Latin /s/ (Jungemann, cited in Solá 463 and Galmes de Fuentes 121).

Valuable testimonies are also offered at later stages as the new Romance languages make contact with foreign peoples. Joos supports an apical pronunciation in Old French based on 12th century loan words adopted into English which substitute the alveopalatal [z] for the apico-alveolar [s] (225). Similar transcriptions by the Jews and Moors would infer the same articulation in Iberia. They consistently transcribed the IE /s/ with 'shin', the Arabic phoneme representing an alveopalatal pronunciation. This phenomenon was generalized and came to be known as 'xexeo', or the Moorish tendency to hear the apico-alveolar [s] articulation as a prepalatal sound. Charles H. Stevenson, commenting on the apico-alveolar [s] in Iberia, generalizes its distribution to all of the Peninsula of the 9th-12th centuries (27). In his book Las sibilantes en la Romania, Galmes de Fuentes meticulously demonstrates the existence of apico-alveolar [s] even in the languages east of the Spezia-Rimini division.
In all, it would be fair to state that the apico-alveolar [s] articulation represented the main allophonic variant of Latin and possibly IE /s/ despite its near extinction in the majority of the Romance languages today. However, the apico-alveolar pronunciation did not go out without a fight, and was a major factor influencing sibilant reordering in the Middle Ages. We shall especially see how the peculiar physiology of this sound may have played a determining role in the case of the Spanish division.

While IE /s/ remained rather constant throughout the Latin and Romance periods the same cannot be said of the new dental affricate /ʃ/ (⟨q⟩). Its origins may be traced to the Vulgar Latin 'Yodization' of the voiceless dental and velar occlusives as these came in contact with a high front vowel or semivowel. Its development followed a general forward movement in the place of articulation from velar [k] > prevelar [kj] > palatal [č] > dental [ʃ]. Also affected was the manner of articulation changing from occlusive [k] > stop + glide [kj] > affricate [č] and [ʃ].

As the dialectal Romance evolved into the modern Romance languages in the Middle Ages the oppositional contrast IE /s/ : affricate /ʃ/ was still quite distinct, if not in place then certainly in manner of articulation (fricative : affricate). This distinction has endured to the present in the Eastern Romance languages, but a strong spirantization movement in the West resulted in a minimization of distinguishing features in the contrast. With the final loss of any vestige of occlusion in affricate /ʃ/, phonological distinction from IE /s/ became tenuous and difficult to maintain.

The new pair of fricative sibilant phonemes differed only slightly then in manner of articulation: [ʂ] (⟨ /ʃ/⟩ predorso-alveolar vs. [ʃ] (⟨ IE /s/⟩ apico-alveolar. In this respect Amado Alonso describes both articulations as apical which would reduce even further the distinction. However, Galmes de Fuentes argues convincingly for a predorso-alveolar pronunciation for the new phoneme /ʂ/ based on a reanalysis of the early Spanish grammarian descriptions, foreign sound approximations, and an expert interpretation of Arabic correspondences (13).

To complicate matters there arose from Romance a new prepalatal phoneme /š/ which generally derived from Latin X, PSY, SSY, and other combinations. The prepalatal /š/ sibilant also infringed on the IE /s/ domain precisely because of the apical nature of the latter. This conflict was intensified in areas where a strong fricativization resulted in a high functional yield between these two phonemes. Where IE /s/ had once enjoyed centuries of phonemic isolation it was now losing territory on both sides of the acoustical spectrum.
Sibilant Confusion and Resolution in Romania

By retaining the plosive element of the affricate /s/ the Easterly Romance languages were thus able to maintain a phonemic distinction between affricate /ts/:IE /s/ (MacMurray 455). The Latin #C + e/i was fossilized at /tš/ palatal affricate in Italian and Rumanian while VL (TY, CY) stopped at /tš/ dental affricate for both languages. The voiced counterpart affricate/tʃ/ produced between vowels endured in Italian but reduced to a fricative status /ʒ/ in Rumanian. Curiously this last step caused no phonemic problems in Rumanian as the IE /s/ never sonorized in this language (Iordan 180). The proximity of IE /s/ to prepalatal /s/ produced pressure towards phonetic separation as the apical pronunciation gave way to the predorsal variant. This might explain the scarcity of the apico-alveolar allophone [ʃ] in these regions today.

By the 14th and 15th centuries the Western Romance languages were struggling to separate the series /ʒ/ predorso-alveolar — /tʃ/ apico-alveolar — /s/ prepalatal and its corresponding sonorous trio. This intermediate stage of minimal phonemic separation demanded resolution based on the structural principles governing sound change. Certainly varying pronunciation modifications vacillated over a long period of time and preceded a later phonemic reclassification once the change was generalized. The particular solution chosen by the different Romance languages depended not only on the sounds involved, but how these ‘fit’ into the phonological inventory in question.

French underwent rapid sibilant leveling that was probably accomplished by the late 14th century although dialectal variants may have continued into the 16th century (Joos 231). The solution was a merger of IE /s/ and the new predorso-alveolar /ʒ/ in favor of the predorsal pronunciation and a retention of the prepalatal /tʃ/. This process is adequately described by two different theories. In the first, Jungemann evokes a high functional contrast between the apico-alveolar pronunciation [ʃ] of IE /s/ and prepalatal /tʃ/ as they come into opposition both in word initial and medial positions (cited in Solá 463). Joos on the other hand cites the conflict between predorso-alveolar /ʒ/ and the apico-alveolar variant [ʃ] of IE /s/ where the latter suffers aspiration and disappearance, the phonemic quality being conserved through a compensating lengthening of the preceding vowel (229).

A rather early deaffrication occurred not only in French but also in Catalán and Portuguese probably dating back to the 13th century (Stevenson 29). All three of these languages conserve a strong prepalatal element /tʃ/, which in theory would favor the loss of the apico-alveolar allophone [ʃ] of IE /s/ in benefit of the newly assibilated predorsal /ʒ/ for maximum separation of phones and clarity in the phonological system (Galmes de Fuentes 97). As we have seen, this is precisely what happened in French. The same could be said for Portuguese, but only partially, as the geographic diversity of this country allowed for differences in
Contrary to the expected neutralization of sibilants towards the predorsal variant, Catalán preferred the apico-alveolar pronunciation resulting in a šešeo in the regions of Catalonia, Valencia, and neighboring Provençal. In an excellent treatment on the subject, Galmes de Fuentes reveals extenuating circumstances in the phonological structure of Catalán to explain this divergent result. He presents chronological data documenting the disappearance of the voiced affricate /ʔ/ > predorsal /ʃ/ > 0 especially in a position preceding a tonic syllable. This sonorous companion of affricate /ʒ/ (⟨ʒ⟩) not only disappeared in intervocalic position but also vocalized word finally (101). The result was an imbalance in the phonological system as the pair of apical sibilants proved more resistant than the lone predorsal surd during the deciding moments of sibilant merger and reduction (101).

For the main cultural center of Lisbon and southward the Portuguese sibilant solution mirrored that of the French predorsal šešeo. Again the high oppositional contrast of the prepalatal /š/ with the apico-alveolar variant [ʃ] of IE /s/ tended to favor a predorsal settlement (Galmes de Fuentes 111). It should be noted that the sonorous companion predorsal /ʃ/ has been preserved not only in Portuguese, but also in Catalán and French.

The fact that a šešeo, whether apical or predorsal, is maintained in the 'other' languages of the Iberian peninsula indicates that the desonorization was subsequent to the deaffrication. Some have questioned the validity of this argument since sibilant devoicing was a regional (Castilian) phenomenon and thus could not affect these distinct languages. Yet further evidence is provided by Judeo-Spanish and Andalusian Spanish which both used šešeo during the 15th century. The former has preserved the mark of voicing through separation and isolation, while 'Andaluz' eventually devoiced in line with the Castilian norm.

The north and eastern regions of Portugal and Galicia have historically had less contact with the cultural center of Lisbon and more so with Castille. The historical fact is not lost on the linguistic reality. This area essentially followed the Castilian pattern maintaining sibilant distinction over an extended period of time. More recently however, literary influence has erased for the most part this sibilant distinction (Galmes de Fuentes 109). The final result is a predorsal (and in some cases - apical) šešeo in imitation of the Lisbon 'educated' or, in some areas, an interdental /θ/: predorsal /ʃ/ type opposition consistent with Castilian.

Even so, there remains a small pocket of conservative resistance in the extreme north of Portugal where phonological distinction between the predorsal and apico-alveolar sibilant
quadruplet has continued to the present day. This has only been possible, as Galmes de Fuentes explains, through an articulatory exaggeration of the minimal distinctive features that phonemically separate the two pairs (109). In the case of the predorsals an intensifying of the sibilant matrix was carried to an extreme, while the prepalatal character of the apicals was emphasized by increasing its grave timbre (107). This apicoprepalatal, exaggerated /s/ is not confused with the dorsoprepalatal /ʃ/ since the special phonological structure of Northern Portugal places these two sounds in very low oppositional contrast.

The Spanish Case
The meridional resolution of Andalusian Spanish is similar to neighboring Lisbon. Again there existed a rather high functional yield between the prepalatal and apical sibilants. In Portuguese it occurred with the surds while in Spanish it was the voiced pair, prepalatal /ʎ/: the apicoalveolar pronunciation of /z/ (Galmes de Fuentes 112). In order to maximize this sound distinction, the apico-alveolar articulation merged with the predorsal /ʃ/ yielding a çeceo and zezeo and later devoiced to eliminate the sonorous companion.

In Castille as in Northern Portugal the old distinction between sibilant phonemes was preserved in spite of the minimal auditory differences. Rafael Lapesa concurrs with Galmes de Fuentes in the need for modification of the sounds produced so as to increase their distinguishability. Lapesa explains that as the predorsal /ʃ/ is intensified the convex tongue flattens and fronts to an interdental position with 'ciceante' timbre /θ/ ("Ceceo" 89). This process corresponds with Galmes de Fuentes' description of an 'exaggerated, more sibilant' predorsal /ʃ/ produced in distinguishing Northern Portugal.

What is curious about the Spanish case is why these two distinct roads to sibilant resolution were taken by dialects with exactly the same phonological structure and core of phonetic realizations. The split in Portuguese may be explained by alterations in the dialectal phonological inventories resulting in high yield and low yield conflicts and hence seseo or distintion. The same cannot be said of Spanish.

The existing literature is silent on the matter, either glossing over it, or completely avoiding the issue. Kilburn MacMurraugh (among others) has attempted to explain the distinguishing Castilian resolution with a Basque adstrat influence. As with most substrat theories, it is difficult to concede it the determining influence that it purports to affect. The question remains why the divergence?

Articulatory Habits and Physiology
Many Romance philologists have indicated the importance of historical events in the precision of linguistic divison during the Spanish Golden Age. Manuel Alvar cites the changing of the capital from the old Toledan court to Madrid and the rising social
importance of Seville (among other elements) as influencing factors in the extension of devoicing and repartition of seseo (52-53). In his article "Sobre el ceceo y el seseo andaluces", Lapesa concludes that the diverging treatment of sibilants in Castille and Andalusia can be directly linked to problems of communication, a changing lifestyle, and the rising importance of Seville as a prestigious cultural-linguistic center (94).

What is clear is that there was a newly emerging "Sevillian norm" that gained prestige and territory as the expanding Imperial Spain based its center of operation and exploration of the New World around the port city of Seville. It was during the Golden Age that meridional Spanish was diverging from Castilian in its treatment of the sibilant phonemes, and in the centuries that followed it would generalize this and other linguistic elements that would make it unique. Today 'Andaluz' is considered one of the major dialects in contrast with Castilian Spanish.

I believe that the cause for the linguistic differences in general may be traced to the developing pattern of articulatory habits of these two dialects. The unique characteristics of Castilian Spanish are a crisp articulation base with a high degree of tenseness in the articulatory muscles, an increasing intensity level, strong consonantism, pure vowels, retention of the intervocalic fricative element, etc. Andalusian Spanish, on the other hand, was developing in another direction. The key features composing its articulation base include a quite relaxed articulation, less tenseness of the articulatory muscles, a wider range and variety of vowel sounds, loss of the intervocalic fricative element, a greater occurrence of sibilant aspiration, and more vocalism as opposed to the Castilian consonantism.

Although still the same language these divergent bases of articulation give the two dialects a very different 'sound'. In addition, as Quilis states these (differing) articulatory habits may have an effect on the development of diachronic sound changes (Curso 34). In the case of the Spanish sibilants their ultimate resolution may have been influenced not only by the articulation base, but also by the particular physiology of the apico-alveolar pronunciation [ʃ] within this overall context.

An examination of the physiological character of the apico-alveolar [ʃ] reveals a high degree of muscular tension involved in the formation of this sound in isolation. The concave hollowing of the tongue calls for muscular excursion in the raising of the back of the tongue, firmness in raising the tongue apex to the alveolar region, and a general tenseness in the slight lowering and forward movement of the mandible as the tongue dorsum dips down. This tenseness could ultimately be measured and shown to be greater than the more lax predorso-alveolar [s] articulation.

The very nature of apico-alveolar [ʃ] then, would not 'fit well' within the context of a more relaxed articulation base developing in Andalusia. A gradual relaxation of the predorsal
[ʒ] articulation would create no major change while a similar relaxation of the apico-alveolar [ să ] would lead to a gradual flattening out of the tongue. The loosened muscles would gradually drop the tongue back and tip, flattening out the concave hollow towards a more flattened or even convex formation.

The more relaxed articulatory habits of Andalusia had probably been developing and modifying the phonetic character of apico-alveolar [ să ] centuries before the great sibilant crisis in the 1500's. This would correspond to the historical-linguistic reality as Lapesa remarks that by this time (1500's) in Andalusia many people preferred a coronal or predorsodental pronunciation of IE /s/ replacing the once apical variant [ să ] ("Ceceo" 90). With the total deaffrication of the dental /ʃ/ (→ predorsal /ʒ/) and concurrent modification of the apico-alveolar allophone of IE /s/ (now coronal), the resulting phonemic contrast was much too proximate and tenuous to hope for a separation of sounds. The result was sibilant merger as the predorsal /ʒ/ triumphed and the Andalusian seseo emerged as a distinguishing feature of this dialect.

In the regions of Old Castille the apico-alveolar [ să ] had a much better chance of survival. The tense, exacting pronunciation scheme of Castilian accommodated comfortably the intense apical articulation. By the time of the sibilant convergence, the newly fricativized predorsal /ʒ/ (← /ʒ/) would not be quite so close to the apico-alveolar variant [ să ] of IE /s/ as in the South, and within a tenser articulation base the predorsal /ʒ/ would actually become more distinct.

With the preservation of the apico-alveolar articulation [ să ] of IE /s/ and greater phonetic distance from a tense variety of predorsal /ʒ/ the linguistic awareness of this phonemic contrast was enhanced. In an effort to secure the opposition of predorsal /ʃ/ : IE /s/ and in complete harmony with the articulation base, the distinctive features of these phonemes were exaggerated to a more extreme pronunciation in precisely the same manner as occurred in the distinguishing lands of Northern Portugal. This meant a more grave timbre for IE /ʃ/ while a tenser, 'more sibilant' predorsal /ʒ/ pushed the tongue forward to an interdental position /θ/ and a 'ciceante' timbre similar to that of some parts of Andalusia but with the tongue much flatter.

Hence while the phonemic contrast of predorsal /ʒ/ : IE /s/ was weakened and their phonetic realizations drawn closer within the relaxed articulation base of Andalusian Spanish, the opposite effect was produced in the region of Old Castille. It may be noted that as the apical (IE) /ʃ/ acquired a more grave timbre in Castilian it probably moved closer to an alveopalatal articulation which in turn placed it in conflict with prepalatal /ʃ/. This proximity may be one of the reasons that prepalatal /ʃ/ was later retracted to the velar region (→ /x/).
Works Cited


