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# Evidence for Borrowing as the Reason for Exceptions to the Spanish Sound Change *f* to *h*

David Riding

Even though the Spanish sound change from *f* to *h* in word initial, prevocalic position has been declared “an irrefutable law of Spanish” (García de Diego, as cited by Levy 1973, 205), there are still many Spanish words that begin with *f*, such as *familia*, *fastidioso*, *fortuna*, *femenino*, etc. Scholars have generally explained these exceptions as borrowings from other languages, mainly Latin (Corominas & Pascual, in *Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano e Hispánico* 1980, afterwards referred to as *DCECH*; Blake 1988). But some linguists question the validity of the exception argument, due to the lack of solid evidence. Blake warns about the possibility of circular reasoning, “namely, that all learned words preserve [f-], while all cases of *f*-preservation confirm the presence of a learned word” (1988, 53). However, two types of evidence show the validity of the conventional suggestion, that exceptions to this sound change are due to borrowing. First, words preserving the *f* are usually cultural vocabulary, which is more susceptible to borrowing. Second, words not having undergone the change from *f* to *h* have generally not undergone any of the other Spanish sound changes, meaning that these words appeared in the language after the changes occurred.

## *f* TO *h*

The change from *f* to *h* in word initial position is one of the main phonetic elements

that distinguish Spanish from other Romantic languages (Iribarren-Argaiz 1998). For example, Spanish *hacer* and Portuguese *fazer* both mean “to do,” while Spanish *horno* and French *fourneau* both mean “oven.” Word initial *f* did not change to *h* in every situation, only when followed by a single vowel, so words beginning with *fl-*, *fr-*, *fie-*, or *fue-* did not change.<sup>1</sup> At first the *h* was like the *h* in English, but later even the *h* dropped out to a silent letter, preserved solely in the orthography (Menéndez Pidal 1956, 199). Although evidence of the sound change can be found in literature throughout the first half of the second millennium (*DCECH*), the pivotal century was the 1300s, when the new feature became an accepted part of spoken Castilian Spanish, which would grow to be the dominant Spanish dialect (Blake 1988). There are two prevailing theories as to why *f* went to *h*. The first is that Castilian changed under the influence of a pre-Romantic language, most likely Basque, which has no labio-dental phoneme /f/ (Penny 1991, 79–80). The second theory, stated by Spaulding, is language internal; thus: “It *may* stand for the evolution of a bilabial *f*, which without difficulty becomes aspirate *h* by opening the lips, and which *may* have existed among the Romans” (1962, 90, *emphasis by Spaulding*). This phenomenon still occurs in many modern dialects, as native speakers are prone to pronounce words such as *fuerte* as *juerte* (Espinosa, as cited by Spaulding 1962, 91).

## BORROWED WORDS PRESERVING *f*

Penny (1991) and Patterson (1982) show three ways Spanish has received vocabulary from Latin. First, from popularisms: words descended directly from Latin, used continually throughout the centuries. Second, from learned, or borrowed, words: whenever the Spaniards needed a word for a new concept (generally a nonmaterial aspect of life) they would find it in the Latin literature and copy it almost exactly. If these words, such as *feliz*, *fugaz*, *fábula*, and *formar*, were copied after the sound change from *f* to *h*, they retain the *f*. Any difference between the Latin word and its borrowed Spanish reflex will only be in the ending, which is sometimes modified to fit Spanish morphology. Third, Spanish has received vocabulary from semilearned words, which were learned from oral Vulgar Latin. They are words heard in such places as church or law courts, words such as *fallecer*, *fe*, *feria*, and *falso*.

Cultural vocabulary is much more likely to be borrowed than basic vocabulary. Cultural vocabulary includes culture-specific and conceptual words, while basic vocabulary "includes items such as pronouns, numerals, body parts, geographical features, basic actions, and basic states" (Crowley 1997, 171–72). They are words like *head*, *man*, *woman*, *flour*, *string*, etc. About 30% of the Latin words in *Vocabularium seu lexicon ecclesiasticum, Latino-Hispanicum* (Fernández de Santaella 1744) have common reflexes in modern Spanish and are of the type that would be susceptible to the *f* to *h* change. Of these, about half showed a transformation of *f* to *h* and half did not.<sup>2</sup> The items that show the change, meaning they descend directly from Latin and are not borrowed, can all be classified as basic vocabulary. Although not an exhaustive list, these are some good examples (in Spanish, not Latin): *higo* (fig), *hincar* (to nail, fasten), *hilo* (string), *hoja* (leaf), *hormiga* (ant), *horno*

(oven), *humo* (smoke), *honda* (sling), *haba* (a kind of bean), *hacer* (to do, to make), *hablar* (to speak), *harina* (flour), *hacha* (ax), *herramienta* (tool), *hervir* (to boil), *hebilla* (buckle), *heder* (to stink), and *hosca* (dark) (Fernández de Santaella 1744). The words that not only preserve the *f* but are almost identical to the Latin do not adhere to Crowley's definition of basic vocabulary, meaning they are more cultural, or conceptual: *fabricar* (to manufacture, to make), *fácil* (easy), *fábula* (fable), *falso* (false, in a lying manner), *fama* (fame), *familia* (family), *fecundo* (fertile), *fértil* (fertile), *feliz* (happy), *feria* (holiday), *feroz* (ferocious), *fiar* (to trust), *fe* (faith), *figura* (figure), *fúnebre* (pertaining to a funeral or death), *fortuna* (fortune), and *firmeza* (strength, steadfastness) (Fernández de Santaella 1744).

Of this second list, Patterson says that *falso*, *fe*, *feria*, and *fiar* are all genetic words, not borrowed (1982, 21). Since they preserve *f* but are not borrowed, they are semilearned words, taken from verbal Vulgar Latin. According to Penny, these words should have religious or legal significance, which they do. *Fe* and *fiar* both come from the same root, *fidēs*, meaning "faith." In accordance with the definition of semilearned words, they have gone through some sound changes but not all (they preserve the *f*) (Penny 1991, 32). Although *feria* shows no sound change from the Latin, it does have a definite religious history. Its original definition was "holiday," many of which were religious. Then the name *feria* was applied to every day of the week, first to replace the names of pagan gods (such as *el Sol* and *la Luna y Martes*) and also to remind ecclesiastical workers that every day should be used for religious devotion. Portuguese preserves the word *feria* in the names of the days of the week (Fernández de Santaella 1744). Although it is a limited subset, this data corresponds with Penny's description of the three types of Latinisms in Spanish: popularisms, which have gone through

the sound changes, are basic vocabulary; semilearned words, which show some but not all sound changes, are generally religious vocabulary; and learned words, which show little sound change, are less-concrete vocabulary.

## WORDS WITH *f* LACK OTHER SOUND CHANGES

In addition to this semantic evidence, there is also phonetic evidence that many words were borrowed. There are many pairs of words in Spanish that are similar in definition and phonetic form and can both be traced to the same Latin root, such as *hablar* and *fabular*, both from the Latin *fābulare*. The difference between the words in each pair is that one preserves the *f* while the other has changed from *f* to *h* and undergone the other relevant sound changes that occurred in Spanish. Step-by-step analysis of the changes in the *h*-words demonstrates how the *f*-preserving words lack these changes, having a form almost identical to the Latin. If these words had preserved the *f* for a reason other than borrowing, they would not so systematically lack the other sound changes as well. This lack of change shows that they appeared in Spanish after the changes took place. I will present six such pairs, giving present and past definitions, etymologies, and derivations. The definitions help show that the word in each pair that has changed, for example *hablar* in the case of *hablar* and *fabular*, is a more basic vocabulary item than the word that was borrowed at a later time. Citations on derivations refer to sound change rules; the derivations are my own. Each change is in the correct chronological order as far as my sources specify, but some are uncertain.

### *fastidio*, *hastío*

The Spanish words *fastidio* and *hastío* both trace their origins back to the Latin word *fastidium* (DCECH), meaning

“weariness, monotony, an aversion, loathing” (Diamond 1961). Both Spanish words have meanings close to their common root (Peers et al. 1960). In the early seventeenth century,<sup>3</sup> *fastidio* carried this same meaning, but *hastío* had an additional, more specific meaning in everyday Spanish—having little desire to eat and the abhorrence of food because of an upset stomach (de Covarrubias 1943). This would seem similar to the way we use the word *fastidious* in English, which is the characteristic of being hard to please because of previous experience in the area (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2001). The first instance of *hastío* in literature was in 1495, while *fastidio* appeared in 1251 (Corominas 1967). The word *hastioso*, an adjectival form, was later replaced by *fastidioso* (DCECH).

*Fastidium* went through many changes to become *hastío*<sup>4</sup>:

- fastidium* —> *fastidū*—word-final *m* is eliminated in Latin by first century BC (Penny 1991, 74)
- fastidū* —> *fastidio*—vowel leveling from classical Latin to Vulgar Latin (syllable final *u* becomes *o*) (Resnick 1981, 47)
- fastidio* —> *fastiyo*—*dy* (a stop followed by a palatal glide) becomes just the palatal glide
- fastiyo* —> *fastío*—*y* in contact with *e* or *i* is deleted (Resnick 1981, 67)
- fastío* —> *hastío*—*f* is converted to *h*

### *hijo*, *filial*

*Hijo* and *filial* are not exact cognates, but they do have the same root, so they can be used to show how *hijo* has changed over time. *Hijo*, meaning “son” or “child” descends from *filii*, the Latin word for the same concept, while *filial* (same as the English word *filial*) is an adaptation of *filialis*, meaning “befitting a

son" or "filial" (Diamond 1961, 58; *DCECH*, 359; Peers et al. 1960, 424, 475). The English definition of *filial* from the *OED* is "of or pertaining to a son or daughter."<sup>5</sup> *Filial* was in use by then, meaning "that which pertains to the son, like filial love" (de Covarrubias 1943, 595). We can see the sound change *f* to *h* taking place as we find examples of *fijo* (1100 AD) and *hijo* (1062) occurring around the same time (Corominas 1967).

*Hijo* came to its present form in this manner:

- filū* —> *fiʎo*—*l* palatalized before a glide (the *ɨ*) (and the same *u* to *o* change)  
*fiʎo* —> *fiyo*—*ʎ* becomes the semivowel *j*  
*fiyo* —> *hiyo*—this positioning is uncertain  
*hiyo* —> *hiʒo*—in the twelfth century, *y* goes to *ʒ*  
*hiʒo* —> *hifo*—*zh* sound goes to a *sh*  
*hifo* —> *hixo*—in the sixteenth century, the *sh* becomes the velar fricative  
*hixo* —> *hijo*—no sound change, just a change in orthography (Resnick 1981, 39)

### *humear, fumigar*

The Latin word *fūmīgāre* (to smoke) has given Spanish the words *humear* and *fumigar* (Diamond 1961; *DCECH*). *Humear* has descended from the original Latin and means basically the same thing: "to smoke, emit smoke, fumes, or vapors." *Fumigar* was borrowed later from Latin and is similar to the English *fumigate*: "to fumigate, smoke, fume, purify, or mediate by vapors" (Peers et al. 1960, 483, 437). De Covarrubias does not mention either of these words but does define *humo*, "smoke" (noun), the same way we do today. He also notes that *perfumar* and *perfume* come from the same root (1943).<sup>6</sup> *Humear* first appeared in literature in the mid-thirteenth century (*humo* appeared in 1088). *Fumigar* came much later, in

1817, which explains why de Covarrubias makes no mention of it (*DCECH*).

Here is the transformation from *fūmīgāre* to *humear*:

- fūmīgāre* —> *fūmɨγāre*—between vowels, *g* (like other voiced stops) is weakened to *γ*, a voiced velar fricative  
*fūmɨγāre* —> *fūmɨāre*—*γ* drops out completely (Harris-Northall 1990, 7–10).  
*fūmɨāre* —> *fumeare*—*ɨ* > *e* in unstressed position, other vowels level  
*fumeare* —> *humear*—*f* to *h*  
*humear* —> *humear*—final *e* is dropped (Penny 1991, 96–97).

### *hembra, feminino*

This is another example where the two words do not come from exactly the same word but from the same root. *Hembra* is from Latin *fēmīna* (a female, a woman), and *feminino* is from the adjective *fēmīnīnus* (feminine) (Diamond 1961). Current Spanish defines *hembra* as a "female animal or plant" and only vulgarly as a woman (Peers et al. 1960). In the seventeenth century, the word was commonly applied to any type of female, human, animal, or vegetable (de Covarrubias 1943). *Feminino* simply means "feminine" in the present day (Peers et al. 1960), but de Covarrubias has no earlier definition of it. *Hembra*, which has been used throughout the centuries since Latin, was first recorded in its present form in the late twelfth century. We do not see *feminino* until 1438.

- fēmīna* —> *femna*—vowels in syllables next to stressed vowels (the *e* is stressed in this case) that are adjacent to *r* or *l*, or sometimes *s* or *n*, tend to drop out; this does not happen to

	vowels that begin or end words
<i>femna</i> —>	<i>femra</i> —dissimilation of <i>m</i> and <i>n</i>
<i>femra</i> —>	<i>fembra</i> —epenthesis (adding a consonant) to break up a difficult cluster (Resnick 1981, 71–72)
<i>fembra</i> —>	<i>hembra</i> — <i>f</i> to <i>h</i>

If *femenino* had descended from Latin and not been borrowed later it would not have retained the *i* between the *m* and the *n*, which itself causes a lot more changes. The changes that have occurred in *femenino* can be explained thus:

<i>fēmīnīnus</i> —>	<i>femeninus</i> — <i>ī</i> goes to <i>e</i> in Vulgar Latin
<i>femeninus</i> —>	<i>femenino</i> —borrowings tend to modify endings to fit the language (Penny 1991, 96, 210).

### *huir, fugitivo*

*Huir*, “to flee, to escape” descends from Latin *fūgĕre*, meaning “to flee, to flee away from” (Peers et al. 1960, 483; DCECH, 422; Diamond 1961, 61). *Fugitivo*, “fugitive, runaway,” and other words such as *fugaz* (fleeting, volatile) and *refugio* (refuge) all come from the same root as *fūgĕre*: *fugio* (Peers et al. 1960, 437; Llauro Padrosa 1957, 263). *Fugio* is also the root of the musical term *fugue*, which in Italian means “flight,” alluding to the feeling of the music (OED 2001). The specific word borrowed into Spanish for *fugitivo* is *fugitivus* (Llauro Padrosa 1957, 263). *Huir* has been elevated a bit since the time of de Covarrubias. Roughly translated, he says *huir* “commonly denotes cowardliness in the military, unless one is trying to trick the enemy or the enemy is so powerful he has no chance. Even in these situations many will stay, preferring to die in battle than to flee” (1943, 704). Now “fleeing” has a more general sense; it may be done

for both good and cowardly reasons. In the seventeenth century, *fugitivo* had a narrower definition, as it generally referred to an escaped slave (who could be found because he was walking in irons). *Fugaz*, which used to just mean something with the condition to flee, like a rabbit, came to mean “fleeting” when it was applied poetically to things like time and ages (de Covarrubias 1943). *Huir* was recorded with an initial *f* as early as 1054 and with an initial *h* in 1490. *Fugaz* was recorded in literature in 1580 (Corominas 1967).

How to get *huir* from *fūgĕre*:

<i>fūgĕre</i> —>	<i>fugĕre</i> —documented Vulgar Latin (DCECH, 614)
<i>fugĕre</i> —>	<i>fuyire</i> — <i>g</i> before <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> goes to <i>y</i>
<i>fuyire</i> —>	<i>fuire</i> — <i>y</i> before <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> drops out (Resnick 1981, 67)
<i>fuire</i> —>	<i>fuir</i> —final <i>e</i> drops off (Penny 1991, 97)
<i>fuir</i> —>	<i>huir</i> — <i>f</i> to <i>h</i>

The presence of the *g* in words like *fugitivo* and *refugio* shows they were borrowed at a later time.

### *habla, fábula*

Both of these words are directly related to the Latin *fābula*, “conversation; story without a guaranteed history.” They are related to *hablar* and *fabular*, which descend from *fābulare*, which means “to talk, to converse” (DCECH, 296; Diamond 1961, 56). A *fābula* is a “fable, legend, fiction, storytale,” which is one part of the Latin *fābula*, while *habla* is “speech, language, idiom, dialect,” the other part of the definition. In addition to being consistent with what we think of as a fable, in the seventeenth century, *fābula* also meant “the rumor and talk of the town,” or the gossip it seems. It was “something without foundation” (de Covarrubias 1943, 579). This gives new insight on what Paul means when he says, “And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned

unto fables" (2 Tim. 4:4). *Hablar*, which used to be a transitive word, was first used in literature in 1492. We can first see *fábula* in a book from 1438 AD (DCECH).

*fábula* —> *fabla*—*u* is deleted for the same reason as the *i* in *femina*: it is near a stressed syllable and next to an *l*

*fabla* —> *habla*—*f* to *h* (Penny 1991, 96)

The presence of the *u* in *fábula* shows us that it is a learned word.

## CONCLUSION

Although there is some disagreement among scholars as to the source of words that preserve an *f* at the beginning despite the rule that *f* went to *h*, evidence is available that these words are a result of borrowing. Words that preserve the *f* are generally cultural words, which are more likely to be borrowed, and those which have undergone the sound change are mostly basic vocabulary. Also, words beginning with *f* have not undergone any of the other sound changes in Spanish, showing they were introduced into the language after these changes had occurred. Further research could apply these same methods to other Spanish sound changes to see whether their exceptions are also a result of borrowing.

## NOTES

1. *f* could not have gone to *h* in the times of Vulgar Latin because that is when *e* > *ie* and *o* > *ue*. This change to diphthongs had to happen before *f* went to *h* or else words with diphthongs today would have experienced the sound change as well (Menéndez Pidal 1956, 200).

2. The *Dictionary of Liturgical Latin* (Diamond 1961) shows an even greater percentage of words with initial *f*, since many more words had been borrowed by

the time of its printing. The Fernández de Santaella dictionary is used to give definitions closer to what would have been in use when the sound change was completed.

3. All seventeenth century definitions are from De Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española*, which was originally written in 1611.

4. The transcriptions of the sound changes are done mostly according to Spanish orthography. For example, *y* is used for a palatal approximant, which is *j* in IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet). IPA is used when there is no letter available, namely, *ʎ* for a palatal lateral approximant, *ʝ* for a *zh* sound, and *ʃ* for an *sh* sound.

5. Although his older definition of *hijo* is the same as it is currently, de Covarrubias gives us some interesting insight into his view of what a son really is, calling a child "what binds the love of its parents, as both agree to love it" (1943, 689).

6. The *OED* explains the development of this concept in English: originally *perfume* meant pleasant odorous fumes given off by burning something such as incense. The word eventually came to mean any odor emitted in particle form by a sweet-smelling substance.

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