NOTE ON THE ASPIRATION AND LOSS OF THE LATIN INITIAL *F-*. A COMPARATIVE VIEW ON THE LATERAL AREAS OF THE *ROMANIA CONTINUA*

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Resumen. *En ciertas variedades románicas, la f inicial latina, cuando iba seguida por una vocal, se pronunció como bilabial, y luego se aspiró ; a continuación, una parte de esas variedades conservaron la aspiración, mientras que en otras ocurrió el enmudecimiento de la misma. En este artículo intentaremos observar las variedades romances donde se da tal fenómeno, tratando de analizar las posibles causas, comunes o no, según los elementos del sustrato, estrato y adstrato o superestrato.*

Palabras clave *: f inicial latina, aspiración, enmudecimiento, variedades románicas.*

0. Ever since the discovery of Sanskrit and Vedic, European linguists have been concerned with the history and comparison of languages, especially when it came to European ones. Luckily enough, Romance linguists can make use of a fairly useful instrument, albeit indirect, i. e. classical Latin, which is widely known through a range of written texts and inscriptions.

Obviously, Romance languages are not the direct heirs of the classical Latin type, but of a simplified version of Latin (phonologically and morphologically speaking), known as Vulgar Latin. While some of the linguistic changes occurred in vulgar Latin and were transmitted to all (or most) of the Romance languages (such as the reduction of the diphthongs, the loss of final consonants, the preference for analytical versus synthetic forms in flexional paradigms, etc.), there are linguistic changes that are specific to one Romance language or to a particular group of idioms, which contributed to the fragmentation of Latin and defines the individual character of each language.

After the publication of Matteo Bartoli's *Introduzione alla neolinguistica* (1925) and *Saggi di linguistica spaziale* (1945), Romance linguists have accepted, at least in theory, the four (or five) norms he maintains in his works, concerning the distribution of older or

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newer linguistic forms according to the history and/ or geography of the areas of formation of Romance varieties. In his opinion, lateral or peripheral areas of the *Romania continua* are more conservative than the central one, and Romanian, Spanish and Portuguese lexical elements are often given as examples that illustrate this phenomenon.

1. Nevertheless, any similarities between Castilian and Romanian dialects regarding the treatment of Latin initial *f* do not constitute an example of conservatism and are, probably, a mere coincidence.

In certain Romance varieties, the Latin initial *f*, when followed by a vowel, was pronounced as bilabial at first, and then it was aspired ; subsequently, some of the Romance varieties preserved the aspiration, while in others it was muted.

Spanish linguists often consider the aspiration, followed by the loss, of the initial *f* as evidence for the action of the Proto-Basque and/or Iberian substratum[1] (the same phenomenon occurs in Gascon, a Romance dialect or language that has an Aquitanian substratum, e. g. Lat. **filiu** > Gasc. *hilh*, Lat. **farina** > Gasc. *haria*, Lat. **focu** > Gasc. *huec*, etc. ; Gascon preserves the aspiration). Strangely enough, Castilian is, with few other exceptions, the only Iberian-Romance variety that allows the aspiration of the Latin initial *f*, still its substratum is neither Basque, nor Iberian, but Celtic or Celtiberian at most. We could accept, though, a possible phonological influence of the Iberian language on the Celtic spoken by these tribes, as it makes sense to admit the indigenous paternity of the phenomenon, since there are similar changes in some non-Castilian varieties of the region. Initial *f* in Basque was lost in Latin loans from Spanish in the ancient language, s. a. Lat. **flore** > Bsq. *lore*, Lat **farina** > Bsq. *irin*, etc. On the other hand, the aspiration of Latin initial *f* is common in Cantabrian (sometimes with loss in its eastern varieties), and also in eastern Asturian, e. g. *ḥaba*, *ḥacer*, *ḥariñe, aḥumáu, ḥitu* with aspirated *h*, as opposed to *faba*, *facer*, *fariña*, *afumáu*, *fitu* in Western and Central Asturian, or *haba*, *hacer*, *harina*, *ahumado*, *hito* in Castilian.

The geographical proximity to the Basque territory could be an argument for the previous theory, but, as some linguists indicate, in some dialects of Basque the bilabial *f* evolved towards a labiodental pronunciation in quite ancient times, so, in the words of Koldo Mitxelena, the Basques do not seem to have encountered much difficulty in pronouncing that sound. Furthermore, in the Romance varieties of Navarra and Alto Aragón, areas of interference with the Basque varieties, the Latin initial *f* is preserved. Therefore, some specialists consider that, since this is a late phenomenon and is not shared by all the Romance varieties that have been in contact with Basque, it could be an influence of the adstratum.

The aspiration of the initial *f*, followed or not by its complete loss, is common to all the linguistic varieties originated in the Castilian dialect. This phonetic change began during the medieval period (although the orthography would change later), and it appears that the stage of aspiration had disappeared from literary Castilian sometime during the 16th c., while remaining active in some parts of Leon, Extremadura, some western parts of Castilla-La Mancha and Andalusia.

The aspiration is generalized in Extremeño : *hazel, hueu*, vs. Cast. *hacer, fuego*, but it is present only in the western parts of Andalusia, while the eastern part follows the standard Castilian model of h-dropping. Researchers have offered a variety of possible

[1] But then the *Vascoiberismo* theory has its flaws, its grey areas and its detractors, so, while the genetic relationship between Basque and Aquitanian is widely accepted, the status of the Iberian language is uncertain.

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explanations to this phenomenon (conservation of the aspiration in western Andalusia), including historical facts regarding the Reconquista or the geographical situation of certain territories in relation to the cultural centers of Madrid and Seville. Nevertheless we need to point out that the aspiration is also a socio-cultural fact, since it depends on sociolinguistic factors such as age, cultural background and environment, being more frequent in the speech of elderly people in the rural areas.

We can follow the aspiration of the Latin initial *f* from north to south, in a line descending from eastern Asturian and Cantabrian to western Castillian, Extremeño, and western Andalusian. West of this line we find the Galaico-Portuguese varieties, which do not manifest any trace of aspiration of the Latin initial *f*.

The Eastern border of the Castilian variety is, nevertheless, abrupt. The remaining Iberian-Romance varieties, such as Aragonese and Catalan dialects, preserve the Latin initial *f* unchanged.

2. On the other hand, the aspiration and/or the loss of the initial *f* is common in certain Romanian varieties, such as Aromanian (Macedoromanian) and Meglenoromanian, on the one hand, and Moldavian, on the other hand. Below there is a table showing the treatment of the Latin initial *f* in several Romance varieties : (SDR = standard Daco-Romanian ; IR = Istroromanian ; AR = Aromanian ; MR = Meglenoromanian ; C = Castilian ; EA = eastern Asturian) :

SDR	IR	AR	MR	C	EA
fiu	fiľu	hilj	iľu	hijo	ḥíu, ḥiyo
fiică	fiľa	hilje	iľe	hija	ḥía, ḥiya
ficat	ficåt	hicat	-	hígado	ḥígadu, ḥégadu
fier	fľer	heru	ieru	hierro	ḥierro, ḥierru

So what is the explanation for such similarities between the Spanish and Romanian varieties in the absence of any form of direct contact or common history?

The Romanian idioms mentioned above are spoken in the Balkans (Greece, FYRM, and Albania) and, respectively, in the ancient region of the principality of Moldavia, which includes roughly the territory between the Carpathian Mountains and the Dniester River. Historically speaking, the circumstances of the language formation process are rather uncertain for Romanian, and a large number of theories have been launched about the territory and the substratum where Romanian occurred. As for the Romanian varieties we have mentioned, we can observe the following :

a. There are obvious similarities between them, concrete00 phonological phenomena that they share in common, but are absent from the intermediate varieties, such as Transylvanian and especially Wallachian. Some of them include, besides the velarization of the Latin initial *f*, our theme, the velarization and palatalization of initial *p*

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and *b* followed by *yod* (Lat. **pectu** > Arom. *cheptu*, Mrom. *kl'eptu*, Mold. *ch'ept* vs. Rom. *piept*, Lat. **bene** > Arom. *yini*, Mold. *gh'ini* vs. Rom. *bine*[2]), the palatalization of Latin *gn* followed by *yod* (Lat. **agnellu** > Arom. *njel*, Mrom. *m'iel*, Mold. *n'iel* vs. Rom. *miel*), the closing of final *e* to *i* (Lat. **bene** > Arom. *yini*, Mold. *ghini* vs. Rom. *bine*), the closing of the tonic *a* to *schwa* in final syllables (Lat. **vitellu** > Arom. *yitsâl*, Mrom. *viţâl*, Mold. *gh'iţăl* vs. Rom. *viţel*) ; the examples above show a striking resemblance between the forms in Moldavian and Aromanian.

In the spirit of our paper, the Moldavian variety changes the Latin initial *f* and *v* to an aspiration or to a sibilant palatal fricative : *hierbi* or *ş'erbi* vs. *fierbe*, *hiţăl* or *gh'iţăl* vs. *viţel*, *hulpi* vs. *vulpe*, etc. We will notice a tendency to pronounce the Latin initial *f* as an aspiration in Aromanian, followed by the h-dropping in Meglenoromanian.

b. Such similarities attest their common origin, justified historically by the migrations between the Eastern Carpathians, the Balkans and the Pindus Mountains, occurring with transhumance, as the main activity of the Romanian populations in the first millennium (and after) used to be shepherding. It is not hard to imagine that such a tradition was carried on for long periods of times, even before the Romanization of the Carpathians and Balkans. These idioms are spoken both north and south of the Jireček line, so migrations are the only explanation for the Romanian varieties in the Greek-speaking area. Nevertheless, before the Slavic migrations, the Balkan Peninsula above the Jireček line could have been the cradle of a linguistic *continuum*, as Dacian, Thracian and Illyrian[3] languages might have had a genetic relationship.

c. The Moldavian variety of Romanian appeared in a territory that was not Romanized or Latinized. Actually, the Roman province of Dacia consisted of less than a quarter of the Romanian-speaking area (even less if we include the Aromanian, Meglenoromanian and Istroromanian areas). Numerous theories have tried to explain this singular phenomenon, but this is not the time, nor the place, to analyze them. But if we insist on drawing a conclusion, it would be : none of them is satisfying or definitive, so the issue is still open to new discussions. The question, in our opinion, is : if we accept the common origin of the northern (Moldavian and perhaps Transylvanian) and southern (Aromanian and Meglenoromanian) varieties, then are the proto-Moldavians the ancestors of the proto-Aromanians[4] or vice versa? The first hypothesis makes more sense, as the Balkan substratum is better known linguistically and geographically and, very important, is quite uniform, Thracian and Illyrian, i. e. Indo-European. A different type of substratum in the Moldavian area would perhaps justify the transformations that we discuss here. But then the substratum of the Romanian language is in itself a problem. There is only one inscription that *could* be Dacian, a dubious list of plants and a list of about 150-200 Romanian words with a supposedly Dacian origin. That is, we really know very little about the Dacian language. Besides, the Moldavian area was inhabited by the *Bastarnae* (perhaps Germanic or Celts), *Costoboci* (maybe Celtized Dacians or of a different origin), *Tyragetae*

[2] Such a phenomenon is not unheard of in Spanish, where pronunciations such as *güey* instead of *buey* or *güeno* instead of *bueno* might occur in some regional varieties or in colloquial discourse.
[3] In Romanian linguistics it is customary to explain words with uncertain etymologies by similarities with the Albanian language ; certainly, many of those words might have a Latin origin to be demonstrated, but, then, it still suggests that Dacian and Illyrian share a common genealogy.
[4] I. e. if the Aromanian population appeared South of the Danube, but North of the Jireček line, before the Slavic migrations.

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(Getae) and *Carpi* (Dacian) ; once again, linguists have little to say about their genealogy, as they were classified as Dacian or Sarmatian (Iranian) or Celtic or Germanic by different ancient historians or modern linguists. No mention of a possible Ibero-Caucasian genealogy, though the geographical proximity to the migration routes does not exclude any hypothesis. An uncertain Celtic element was also present in the Carpathian and Danube region (northern parts of present day Romania, the Danube shores and the Black Sea coast), and also in the Balkans, where the southern Romanian dialects were born. Since Castilian and Asturian are both Romance varieties of a Celtic substratum, we could assume that it could have been responsible for the aspiration and/ or loss of the Latin initial *f*, which could explain the similar treatment in both lateral areas of ancient Romania. In British English, a Germanic language of a Celtic substratum, the h-dropping is almost generalized, and the same happens in some English varieties spoken in Ireland (Cork). Nevertheless, initial *f* is not affected and the loss of the aspiration is not a typical phenomenon in Celtic languages (besides, there are certain varieties of Scottish Gaelic that add an aspiration), so there is no evidence to support such a theory in which a common Celtic substratum would have determined the changes in the pronunciation of the Latin initial *f*. Furthermore, it is difficult to establish the moment when the aspiration of the initial *f* began in those Romanian varieties, as the oldest surviving documents in Romanian date back to the 16th century, so the action of the substratum is uncertain, as this phenomenon could have been a more recent one.

Another linguistic element the lateral areas share in common is the particular Latin stratum, originated in the center and south of the Italic Peninsula. The *Tarraconensis* and the Dacian provinces were colonized with Roman citizens from the lower half of the Italic Peninsula, albeit in different periods of time, so certain features of the central-southern variety of Latin were transmitted to the Romance varieties that appeared in Dacia and the northern half of the Iberian Peninsula. The aspiration of the Latin initial *f* is present in some regional varieties in Calabria : *hímmina*, *hierru*, *hicu*, from *femina*, *ferrum*, *ficus*, etc. Still, this is an isolated phenomenon in central and southern Italian dialects, so we cannot pin this transformation to the common stratum of the lateral areas.

A common adstratum for the linguistic varieties we focus on is another dead end. The only ethno-linguistic element Romanian, eastern Asturian and Castilian have in common, besides the Latin stratum, is an old Germanic one, i. e. the language spoken by the Visigoths, a people who was present in Dacia in the 4th century, and then settled in the *Gallia Aquitania* at the beginning of the 5th century, working their way down south to Toledo in the beginning of the next century. But then no evidence exists in Romanian of a real participation of an old Germanic adstratum, even though the Goths were apparently present in the lower Danube area up until the early 9th century. Besides, their language is fairly known (in comparison with other extinct languages) due to a quite large number of documents, s. a. the *Codex Argenteus* and other codices commissioned by Ulfilas (Wulfila), and it does not appear to manifest any instability in the pronunciation of the initial *f*.

So, in absence of relevant evidence, we have no choice but to accept, for now, that the similar treatment of the Latin initial *f* is purely coincidental in these idioms. Future research, perhaps accompanied by new epigraphic or paleographic findings in Romania, could provide more data on the origin of this phenomenon in the varieties we have analyzed, establishing once and for all whether it is a coincidence or an evolution determined by a common cause.

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