

# Loss and Restoration of Word Final Vowels in Spanish

James M. Anderson

The process of apocope in Medieval Spanish offers a glimpse into the interaction of structural and sociological constraints on linguistic behavior.

## 1. The Problem

Of the word final unstressed vowels /e/, /o/ and /a/, the twelfth and thirteenth century Spanish /e/, and less often /o/ were effaced exposing new consonants and consonant clusters. Written documentation of the period clearly indicates the loss of the vowel in environments where Modern Spanish has sustained the loss and in others where it has not, cf. Latin panem > Old Spanish pan, Modern Spanish pan and Latin noctem > Old Spanish noch (in texts), Modern Spanish noche.

By the fifteenth century, apocoped vowels were restored except after dental consonants, i.e., /l, r, s, n, ć (>θ), d/. The loss and subsequent restoration of these vowels appears to reflect syntagmatic, sociological and paradigmatic aspects of language function. To what extent can these factors be isolated, and their relative influence examined?

## 2. Old Spanish Texts

In the texts of the period, such as the *Poema de Mio Cid* written circa the middle of the twelfth century, and the *Auto de los Reyes Magos* of about the same time, there was a marked tendency to drop /-e/ after dentals, but a good deal of vacillation occurred in other environments. In the *Primera Crónica General*, however, composed under the direction of Alfonso X about 1270, one notes a more consistent propensity to drop /-e/ (much less often /-o/) in other environments. The loss of the vowel gave rise to words such as duc < duque, trist < triste, calient < caliente, fuert < fuerte, noch < noche, and dond < donde. A few words ending in /-o/ were affected, e.g. Franc < Franco, Diag < Diago and com < como.

Nouns and adjectives ending in /-e/ were the most susceptible to the loss of the vowel while a few proper names and adverbs suffered the loss of /-o/. This introduced new final (-dental) consonants and consonant clusters. Pronouns in enclitic position also underwent effacement of /-e/, e.g., dím < dime, nol < no le, along with a small minority of verb forms, pued < puede, recib < recibe.

The first and early part of the *Crónica* shows the greatest proclivity for the loss of /-e/ to the extent that we find quemblo for que me lo and nimbla for ni me la with the insertion of an epenthetic /b/. King Alfonso X, among other things, appears to have proscribed the practice of dropping the final vowel and the section of the *Crónica* written later in his reign shows alternations again in which both forms were employed, for

example, mont/monte, pris/prise while the earlier reduction of me > m, te > t, le > l, etc. disappeared altogether.

### 3. Syntagmatic Factors

The syllabic history of Spanish can be characterized by a certain analogous or compatible behaviour between syllable final and word final consonants. Those that occurred in one position also occurred in the other, cf. canto and pan, caldo and mal where /n/ and /l/ in syllable final position are found also in word final position.<sup>1</sup>

The loss of a word final vowel in Old Spanish took place first, theoretically, in words of the type pan < pane, col < cole and mes < mese, angel < angelo, where the loss resulted in no new final consonants but simply broadened the distribution of final /n/, /s/ and /l/ etymologically in final position, to encompass more words, cf. en < in, miel < mel and menos < minus. Apocope was then extended to include other dentals, e.g., pared < parete, paz [paç] < pace and mar < mare.

While the consonants /d, r, ç/ had no etymological antecedents in this position they nevertheless were compatible to the system of consonantal distribution by virtue of their occurrence in syllable final position, cf. O.S. parte < partem, cadnado < cat(e)natu, and diezmo [dieçmo] < dec(i)mus.

Throughout the history of Spanish, syllable final and word final positions behave analogously. The loss of a vowel in these environments was perhaps governed by structural motivations to integrate syllable final consonants more firmly in the system through their extension to word final environments.

### 4. Sociological Factors

Further extension of apocope as seen in the written language of the period exposed new consonants and consonant clusters whose presence in word final position seems to have run counter to the distributional patterns inasmuch as they did not occur etymologically in syllable final position nor in word final position.

The documentation suggests that the loss of the final vowel, under these conditions, occurred among the upper classes of society (those people who could write) but the subsequent reintroduction of these word final vowels (except after dentals) indicates that generalization of apocope was not complete throughout the entire social hierarchy.

Coinciding with the period of apocope, French influence in Spain was strong and French prestige in courtly circles particularly high. Royal alliances, French knights fighting in the Holy War of Reconquest against the Moors and the industrious and esteemed Monks of Cluny all contributed to this Gallic prestige.<sup>2</sup> French was widely spoken in the upper circles of society.

During this period also a number of French words were incorporated in Old Spanish almost intact, that is, without the final vowel characteristic of Spanish but which had already been lost in Old French, cf. ardiment, arlot, tost, duc and franc, introducing new final consonants and consonant clusters into the language of the upper classes.

The Spanish aristocratic class appears not only to have been familiar with French and borrowed a number of French lexical items, but tended to apocope final vowels which would tend to make Spanish words more like those of French, e.g., Old French [sɛt] and Old Spanish [siet] < Latin sēptem, Modern Spanish [siete], imparting a French quality to Spanish.

Social factors seem to have overridden syntagmatic features of the language for a time, at least among the upper classes of Old Spanish society, resulting in new distribution patterns hitherto alien to the language.

With waning French influence on the peninsula toward the fifteenth century, many of the lexical items borrowed from Gallic sources were replaced by Spanish forms and most final vowels, lost through apocope, were restored.

## 5. Paradigmatic Constraints

Among verbal paradigms in which final vowels functioned as grammatical markers indicating person, tense and mood, e.g., canto, canta, cante, apocope had little effect. The loss of /-e/ was generalized only among infinitive forms, cantar < cantare, where paradigmatic oppositions were not applicable.<sup>3</sup>

The effacement of /-e/, affecting invariable nouns, adjectives, and pronouns also had little impact on the grammatical features of the language. Where the loss of a final vowel, as in tío 'uncle' and tía 'aunt' might lead to ambiguity through the loss of the gender morpheme, the disappearance of /-e/ in a word such as noche raised no such problems.

Apocope of /-o/ in phonologically incompatible environments appears restricted to proper names, and a few adjectives and adverbs in which grammatical categories were left little affected. The effacement of this vowel seems to have occurred infrequently, if at all, among variable nouns where it marks masculine gender or among verbs where it marks first person, e.g., canto.

The vowel /-a/ which marks feminine gender among nouns and adjectives and person, tense, and mood among verbs, was always retained except in a few pre-nominal qualifiers.

## 6. Conclusion

Apocope in Medieval Spanish appears to have been restricted among the lower classes in conformity to syntagmatic (distributional) arrangements of the phonological system but was extended to include many more

environments among the upper echelons of society who consciously modified their speech in accordance with prestigious French models thus overriding syntagmatic restraints.

Grammatical categories of the language expressed in paradigmatic oppositions among nouns, verbs and adjectives acted as restraints on the extension of apocope to final vowels and all environments. The vowel least inhibited by these restraints, i.e., /e/, underwent the furthest extension of effacement.

With the decline of French as the model for apocope in incompatible environments, final vowels were restored indicating that the loss was not complete throughout the various strata of society.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>There are examples where this compatibility does not appear to hold up as in the word campo as there is no final /-m/ in the language. However, in these positions neutralization occurred which, in this case, neutralized the feature of labiality, i.e., /kaNpo/. Compare the alternate forms in Old Spanish catem and caten.

<sup>2</sup>From Cluny, France, these monks (Benedictines) established monasteries in Spain, helped transform the Spanish Church and society, and were instrumental in changing the alphabet from the Gothic script to the Carolingian.

<sup>3</sup>In a few sporadic cases in texts of the period final /-e/ was omitted among verb forms where the loss could be tolerated without much disruption of the grammatical signals, e.g., puedo, puedes, pued (< puede).

#### References

- Alarcos Llorach, A. 1965. *Fonología Española*. Madrid: Gredos.
- Elcock, W. D. 1960. *The Romance Languages*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gifford, D. J., y Hodgecroft, F. W. 1966. *Textos Lingüísticos del Medievo Español*. Oxford: Dolphin.
- Lapesa, R. 1959. *Historia de la Lengua Española*. Madrid: Escelicer.
- Menendez-Pidal, R. 1926. *Orígenes del Español*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe.
- Menendez-Pidal, R. 1962. *Manuel de Gramática Histórica Española*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe.
- Menendez-Pidal, R. 1960. *Poema de Mio Cid*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe.

