

Doublets, Cultismos, and Their Relation in
Castilian Spanish

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1. Introduction

The traditional explanations for differences in the phonological shape of doublets and repeated by most texts on the history of the Spanish language, revolve around the notion that one of the pair evolved normally in the speech habits of the lower classes while the other in its pristine form can either be attributed to a direct borrowing from an older stage of the language, or was preserved among the conservative speech of the upper classes of society.

While this view has certain merit, as there are indeed double forms in Spanish that can only be attributed to cultismos, such as artejo 'knuckle', and artículo 'article, joint', etc. in which the latter remains nearly unchanged from its Latin original articulum, the notion has been generalized to encompass all doublets including those in which little evidence supports the learned/non learned dichotomy.

2. Development of Doublets

One prolific source of doublets in Spanish derives from both the modification of the word-initial cluster /pl/ in medieval Spanish on the one hand, and its retention on the other. The change of /pl/ to /λ/ has been considered as the popular and regular course of events for this sequence. Forms containing /pl/ are equated with cultismos.

plenum	lleno 'full, plenty'	plaga	llage 'wound'
	pleno 'joint session, full'		plaga 'plague, affliction'
pluvia	lluvia 'rain, shower, abundance'	planu	llano 'plain, flat'
	pluvia 'rain' (poetic form)		plano 'plan, design'
plicare	llegar 'to arrive'	planta	llanta 'a type of cabbage'
	plegar 'to fold'		planta 'plant' ¹

A number of /pl-/ words which did not become /λ/, however, can only with difficulty be considered cultismos as they appear in the language at the time of the earliest vernacular documentation in the 10th and 11th centuries, and are not words that would be restricted to a particular class of society.

placer < placēre	'pleasure'	pluma < plūma	'feather'
playa < plagia	'beach'	plomo < plumbu	'lead'
plaza < platea	'town square'	plural < plūrālis	'plural'
plazo < placitus	'term' 'space of time'	plañir < plangēre	'to grieve'

Similarly, lexical forms containing initial /kl-/ display a set of doublets in which one member has become /λ/.

clave > llave	'key'	clamare > llamar	'to call, name'	
	clave	'keystone, code'	clamar	'to call, whine, demand'

There remains a body of words that appear in the earliest literature, however, containing /kl-/ and which by only a long stretch of the imagination could be considered learned forms. Compare claro 'clear,' clavo 'nail,' and clima 'climate' from Latin clarus, clavus, clima.²

Equated with /pl-/ and /kl-/ is the initial cluster /fl-/ which is also supposed to have had a 'regular' development into /λ/ but out of the approximately six original Latin /fl-/ words that survived directly into medieval Spanish, four have preserved /fl-/.

flaco < flaccum	'lean'	flojo < flūxus	'lax'	
fleco < flueco	< flōccum	'fringe'	flor < florem	'flower'

One developed into a doublet:

flamman > llama	'flame, blaze, violent passion'	
	flama	'flame, excessive ardor' ³

and one reduced /fl-/ to /l/ lacio < flaccidum 'flaccid' (Var. llacio) alongside a learned doublet fláccido.

It is, of course, difficult to imagine that common words such as flor, flojo and flaco were vocabulary items restricted to only the upper classes. It is equally inconceivable that these words were not present in all phases of the language since they have undergone all the 'normal' changes except the one in question which palatalized /fl-/ to /λ-/ as in flamma > llama.⁴

In most cases where /p,k,f/ plus /l/ became /λ/, doublets arose, c.f. planu > plano/llano but, contrary to standard treatments of the subject, this development need not imply that one form was used by the lower echelons of society (llano) and the other was preserved only among the speech habits of the privileged classes (plano). This mutually exclusive view of these words suggests that the two forms in question had the same meaning which was often not the case. Similarly, the retention of the clusters in a number of common words (flor, claro, plaza) clearly indicates a tendency to preserve them among all classes.

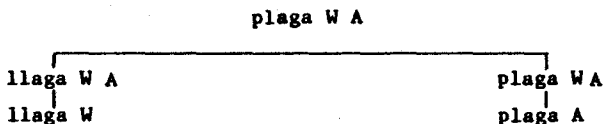
Perhaps the question to be asked, apart from obvious learned forms, is not why these initial clusters remained, but in fact why they palatalized in some words. Nor does it seem simply a matter of time before the change catches up with the unpalatalized forms, that is, a change still in progress, since the modifications appear to have been completed by the fourteenth century.

If we reject the cultismo hypothesis for the development of some doublets, such as the forms discussed above, it would be expected that at some point in time the original etymon gave rise to two competing forms in free variation, one, say, containing /pl-/ and the other /λ/, for example flor/llor irrespective of social class. One form simply lost out to the other, or they both persisted, c.f. plaga and llaga. Those that continued as doublets carried two meanings for each word, one of which disappeared in favour of the other, c.f.

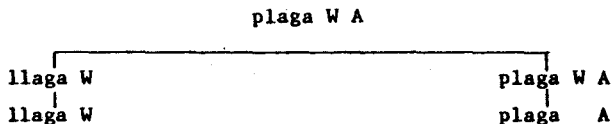
plicare 'arrive' (A) > llegal (A) (B) > llegal (A)
 'fold sails' (B) > plegal (A) (B) > plegal (B)

Latin plaga encompassed the meanings (1) blow, wound, injury, misfortune; (2) plague, pestilence, infection, affliction, annoyance. Both plaga and llaga were used in the 13th century to mean 'wound,' but by the beginning of the 17th century, llaga had taken over the meaning of 'wound' exclusively and plaga was reserved for 'affliction.'

The situation may have been somewhat as follows: (W = wound, A = affliction).



For this word and others, however, the historical documentation is at best ambiguous with regard to free variation of the forms. Plaga was employed by Berceo⁵ with one of its Latin meanings, i.e., 'wound.' Presumably it could also mean for him 'affliction, plague, etc.' A little later in the same century we find llaga for 'wound.' Did the authors of these later documents reserve plaga for 'affliction,' etc.?



If this were the case free variation was not a factor.

3. Conclusion

In recent decades an impressive body of evidence has accrued which amply demonstrates that diachronic phonological changes do not necessarily depend on phonetic factors but are sometimes motivated by other considerations. One of these non-phonetic inducements to change may relate to the underlying polysemous characteristics of a word in which diverging semantic properties invite phonetic modifications.

The original etyma of those words that underwent the modification had two meanings in Latin or later in Hispano-Romance and semantic considerations may have prompted a modification in form to differentiate them in a clear and unambiguous manner.⁶

The extended meanings were no doubt at first simply metaphorical but as the semantic pressure mounted to clearly separate them, a phonological change took place. In words such as flor which did not develop doublets, metaphorical aspects of the word (el flor de su juventud) are still closely associated with the original meaning.

Certainly a broad range of particularly underlying doublets in Spanish and other languages (cf. English person/parson), need further elaboration before authoritative etiological statements enter the literature on language change.⁷

Footnotes

- ¹ According to Corominas:

'el tratamiento de pl- indica que ha de ser cultismo, aunque muy antiguo y pronto generalizado.'

A similar view is taken with regard to all forms containing /pl-/.

- ² Clearly learned are forms such as clausa from Latin clausam alongside llosa in which au regularly became o.
- ³ Both forms were recorded in the middle of the 13th century and in spite of a good deal of semantic overlap, they need not be considered in free variation but rather as stylistic variants appropriate to specific contexts. Cf. also pluvia and lluvia.
- ⁴ The evolution of flojo from fluxum involved such changes as /-m/ > /ø/, /-u/ > /-o/, /ú/ > /ó/, /ks/ > /ys/, /ys/ > /š/, /š/ > /x/. It is difficult to accept the idea that learned influence affected only the initial cluster of the word.

Some words which contain and maintain the consonant cluster in question are clearly learned or borrowed and have not undergone the normal phonological modifications, e.g., clausa in which /au/ did not monophthongize as it did, for example, in causa > cosa. Others are borrowed words such as flanco from French flanc (which replaced lado from Latin latu) and others appear in the language for the first time in recent times, e.g., fleo from Greek phleōs first recorded in Spanish in 1925.

No doubt some modifications of /p k f/ plus /l/ to /λ/ have been influenced by analogy as perhaps was plövere > llover.

- ⁵ The period of Berceo's literary output was between 1220-1250. For plaga with the meaning of 'wound,' c.f. "Como Don Cristo sovo, sedie crucificado: con grandes clavos preso, grand plaga al costado." (Milagros de Nuestra Senora.)
- ⁶ Sometimes homonymic differentiation is consciously achieved in the orthography of a language as was the case with Spanish barón 'baron' and varón 'male' > Germanic baro- 'noble male.' Compare also English flour and flower.
- ⁷ Semantic inducements may also, to some degree be responsible for differences in form such as la mañana 'morning' and el mañana 'tomorrow.'

Many of the phonological changes that led to doublets in Castilian appear to have begun in the northwest of the Hispanic peninsula and also affected Portuguese, c.f. plano/chão.

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