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THE VAGARIES OF THE SPANISH “S”

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There is the story of the native Spanish teacher explaining to his class how to form the plural of nouns and adjectives. “It is very simple,” he said, “just add an s. For example: el fóforo > lo fóforo” (el fósforo > los fósforos). It reminds me of my school teacher in Chile, warning us: “no se coman lah ese” (‘no se coman las eses’).

I think that s is the most unpredictable, elusive, shifting, erratic and troublesome sound in the Spanish language. Several studies on Spanish phonology and dialects touch on this subject, so I shall recapitulate pertinent information which is already known, but I also propose to add, to elaborate, to correct, to disagree, and to theorize based on my own findings and observations.

There is a Castilian s, which is a voiceless, concave, apico-alveolar fricative: the tip of the tongue turned upward forms a narrow opening against the alveoli of the upper incisors. It resembles a faint /ʃ/ and is found throughout much of the northern half of Spain. And there is a convex, dorsal, dento-alveolar voiceless fricative s, found in the southern half, mainly in the Andalusian region. This “southern” s has two varieties: one in which the tip of the tongue is lowered until it leans against the inner side of the lower incisors: it is the s of Málaga, Seville and Cádiz; the other, less dorsal and less convex, is obtained by forming a narrow opening against the upper teeth and alveoli with the predorsal and ridge of the tongue. It is the s of Granada, Huelva, Cordova, Jaén and Almería.

The Latin American s resembles the “southern” s (Andalusian type), although slight variations can be noticed within a country or from one country to the other.

Navarro Tomás says that “la s apical de tipo castellano, con variantes también, se usa, según las pocas noticias que sobre esto tenemos, en parte de México, de Antillas y del Perú.” I have also heard it rather currently in Bogotá.

These are variations of the phoneme of s that have gained respectable acceptance in the exclusive club of the “habla culta,” and except for the readily noticeable difference between the “Castilian” and the Andalusian s’s their regional variations are not so pronounced as to constitute a major problem to understanding spoken Spanish. But that is not the case with the other variants, which for some strange reasons have been denied membership in such an elite club. I dare say that it is precisely in these more “democratic” ways of speech that the true sounds of s are really to be found. I have examined dozens of textbooks—including some of the finest and most popular—which explain the Spanish pronunciation, and I have yet to find one that goes much beyond the classic distinction between the so-called Castilian and Latin American pronunciation, by which is commonly meant that in Spain they differentiate between the sound of s /s/ on one hand and the sound of z /θ/ or c + e, i on the other, while in Latin America they do not.

We Spanish professors may have been conditioned to equate the classroom language to the living language, perhaps through the influence of the Spanish Academy and renowned scholars who advise us to use only the “lengua culta” and to look at other forms of speech as inferior.

Navarro Tomás, who is regarded as one of the most authoritative and respected Spanish phonologists, explains what is
meant by a correct Spanish pronunciation: “Señálase como norma general de buena pronunciación la que se usa corriente en Castilla en las conversaciones de las personas ilustradas, por ser la que más se aproxima a la escritura; su uso, sin embargo, no se reduce a esta sola región, sino que, recomendada por las personas doctas, difundida por las escuelas y cultivada artísticamente en la escena, en la tribuna y en la cátedra, se extiende más o menos por las demás regiones de lengua española... Esta pronunciación, pues, castellana sin vulgarismo, y culta sin afectación, estudiada especialmente en el ambiente universitario madrileño, es la que el presente libro pretende describir” (Manual, p.8). Of course he admits that there are considerable differences in pronunciation between “el habla popular de Castilla y la lengua culta española” (p.7), and like Bello-Cuervo for practical reasons, and the Spanish Academy for etymological considerations, Navarro Tomás seems to equate “español culto” with “lengua literaria” (p.5). Getting down to specifics, and after listing other “defects” of the pronunciation of s he says: “Recházase también como vulgarismo la pronunciación de la s final como simple aspiración, y así mismo su eliminación total en determinadas circunstancias, hechos corrientes, según es sabido, en el lenguaje popular de varias regiones de España y América: páhtu, por pasta—pástv; ehpésC, por espeso—espésC, ehtámC, por estamos—estámC; lah káso, por las casas—laskasus” (p. 110. Emphasis is mine).

Here are a few examples of the standards of classification used by Navarro Tomás (p. 102):

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<th>ejemplos</th>
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<td>recado</td>
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<td>soldado</td>
<td>sóldádo</td>
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<td>abogado</td>
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I wonder where, in this very aristocratic classification, would such expressions as these fit in: Iahkáa, for ‘las casas’, aogáu, for ‘abogado’, to say nothing about much more colorful ones, like: yolávia for ‘Yugoslavia’, /ɜ̃jávía/. for ‘diario’, tútora for ‘¿tiene usted hora?’ péese uhté for ‘espérese Vd.’, or nwañmwanwa for ‘nos vamos a mojar’.

If the “lengua culta” demands such rigorous and high standards of pronunciation, then perhaps no more than four or five in a hundred would qualify as members.

As an ideal form of speech to strive for, the “habla culta” is very commendable, to be sure, although I am exceedingly dubious that it could ever be attained but by very few. Meanwhile the hard fact remains that those other modes of pronunciation which are somewhat disdainfully termed “habla popular,” or “vulgar” or “rústica” or something worse, are the spoken language, the living, everyday language, and we professors of Spanish should not brush them aside so cavalierly. On the contrary, not only do we need to recognize their existence but to make a conscious effort to explain them to our students. Failure to do so will most likely continue to result in their inability to understand the average native Spanish speaker, however good they may have become in the other skills.

The use of tape recordings, with master voices whose dictions are invariably impeccable, exquisitely pure, further compounds the problem by widening the gap between the “habla literaria” and what the student will likely hear in a Spanish-speaking country.

The desire to liken the spoken to the literary language has led us to the naive belief that Spanish sounds very much as
it is written. Yet the disparity between the two has become so great that the question may arise again—however academic—whether Spanish should be written as it is spoken, or whether it should be spoken as it is written. Neither solution, of course, is very likely.

The letters that appear most frequently in any Spanish written text are a, e, o and s respectively. These four symbols represent 40% of the total phonetic material in an average text: a with 13%, e with 11.75% o with 8.9% and s with 8.5%. If to s we add the seseo (z, c + e, i = /s/) of large portions of Andalucia and Hispano-America, this percentage should rise above o, to 10.53%. For good measure we could throw x in, which also tends to sound as s before another consonant.6

If there were a closer relation between the literary and the spoken language, Spanish should be considered a highly sibilant tongue, and, to be sure, some consider it so. Others, with equally good reasons, deny that it is. “Es cierto que la frecuencia de la s está contrarrestada en general por la debilitación que este sonido experimenta en posición final de sílaba, debilitación que, como es sabido, en las regiones de seseo, más que en las que distinguen la z, llega en el habla corriente hasta la simple aspiración” (Navarro Tomás, Fonología, p. 26).

If s were consistently pronounced as an aspirate h at the end of syllables and words, as it is normally done throughout Hispano-America, the frequency of the sound /s/ would drop about 53% in countries where the seseo prevails. In Spain, in those places where they distinguish between /s/ and /θ/, the sound /s/ would drop close to 70% if the aspiration of s were as consistent as in Latin America. We know that that is not the case, but nor should we conclude that it is regularly preserved as /s/.7 An aspirate h, even in Madrid, is very common in those positions also; I would venture to say that this is so no less than 50% of the time.

The “cultured” Spanish s has a relatively wide range of variations according to their points of articulation, both in Spain and in Latin America, but essentially it is a short and soft sound. Yet the phoneme is rendered by an impressive array of allophones, some of which are quite far removed from /s/, thereby greatly complicating its study and understanding by foreign students trying to learn Spanish. We have already listed aspirate h as the most frequent of them all. S also becomes voiced /z/ before another voiced consonant: azno < ‘asno’, mismo < ‘mismo’. It may be assimilated completely to the following consonant: fóforo for ‘fósforo’, mismmo for ‘mismo’, disfrazarse for ‘disfrazarse’, or the assimilation may only be partial, resulting in sounds that neither resemble /s/ nor the consonant following, except in a very vague sort of way: the most common is the change of /s/ into /ɾ/ before a voiced consonant, especially d: lordanmos for ‘los domingos’, alardó for ‘a las dos’. It can produce a backward assimilation by attracting the immediately following voiced consonant to its own voicelessness, and then fuse with it: ‘resbalar’ > resfalar > refalar; ‘rasgar’ > rajar; or it can cause the loss of the entire syllable that contains it, especially at the beginning of a breath group: tabién < ‘está bien’, taluego < ‘hasta luego’, talahquierda eh la hália de Alfonso Trée < ‘ésta, a la izquierda, es la sala de Alfonso XIII’ (actually heard in Madrid).

In large portions of Andalucía and Extremadura, where ceceo prevails, the s, as it is well known, is an interdental voiceless fricative, like the z or c + e, i in Castile.

Phonologists have repeatedly called attention to practices involving the use of ceceo and seseo, but I have not run across anyone who discusses what I shall call,
for lack of a better word, ceseo, or seceo, whichever you prefer. It is an absolutely chaotic way of mixing up the sounds of /s/ and /θ/ for any s or z or c + e, i, in whichever form it strikes the fancy of the speaker first. In talking to a worker in Torremolinos who had been born in Zaragoza but lived most of his life around Málaga, I heard him use the name of his hometown no less than half a dozen times in the space of a few minutes, and I remember how delighted I was because he never said it the same way twice in succession. It was: Óraróca, and Saragóca, and Órarosa and Saragosa. The tourist guide from Toledo showing us the Monumento a los Caídos referred to it sometimes as la Basílica and sometimes as la Basílica. Here are typical examples of common renderings of s, z or c + e, i in Andalucía: it can be corásôn as well as corasón; it can be Óiudá(d) or iudá(d); it can be las coteas or laçoetah or laho-
cosa, etc.

Aurelio M. Espinosa (padre) speaks of an s in New Mexican Spanish which when followed by /k/ in an intervocalic group, especially after a, sometimes changes its alveolar articulation to a palatal ʃ /ʃ/: 'mascar' > mazkar; 'cascara' > káskara, 'mosca' > moška.

Canfield points out that “En la sierra ecuatoriana, salvo en el extremo norte (Tulcán), se oye un fenómeno único, por lo visto, en América. La s se manifiesta con sonoridad en fin de palabra ante vocal en la próxima, siendo también sonora en las condiciones ‘normales’ castellanas” (La pronunciación, p. 81). This phenomenon is not unique to the Ecuatorian sierra; I have heard it repeatedly in Monterrey (Mexico), not only at the end of the word before a following vowel, mazzalá < ‘más allá’, but also when s is in an absolute final position: ‘tráigame unos tacos’ > tráigame unotzáco. What is even more startling in Monterrey is the deliberate and prolonged voicing of s even when the next word begins by a voiceless sound: mazkáfé for ‘más café’...
Cuervo disposes of the subject in one sentence: “Rara vez alcanza entre nosotros esta afectación /s > h/ a la s intervocálica y en algunas partes llaman mahato a lo que en otras masato” (p. 576). Neither Cuervo nor Flórez mentions the existence of this phenomenon in any other Hispano-American country, as they usually do with other practices when such is the case.

Aurelio M. Espinosa (padre) says that “Ante consonante velar, en posición intervocálica o cuando es inicial de grupo fonético, la s puede convertirse corriente en la x nuevomejicana: dice > dihe, examinar esaminar o ehaminar, pasar > pahir” (Estudios, p. 186).9

In a study of the preservation of voiced s and z in Cáceres, Salamanca and surrounding regions Espinosa (hijo) tells us: “dentro de palabra, o en posición inicial absoluta, en cambio, la aspiración de s es un fenómeno mucho más raro. Parece tener gran extensión en los dialectos andaluces. En los hispanoamericanos, con excepción del chileno y del nuevomejicano, la reducción de la s inicial aparece sólo esporádicamente”.10

The hesitations, denials, uncertainties, cautions and disagreements inherent in the statements of these distinguished scholars are understandable at least for two reasons: the first is the scarcity of available studies, especially those of a comprehensive nature, on which to base their affirmations at the time when they were made. The second, I am convinced, is that we are dealing with a recent phenomenon. Although its sporadic and localized existence was registered long ago, the range and speed at which it is traveling is relatively new. I have been able to notice its extraordinarily rapid spread during my periodic travels throughout Spain and Latin America these last fifteen years. The practice is making deep inroads into all social classes and, although not consistently, it does alternate regularly with the “formas cultas.” It is no longer merely a regional phenomenon, nor is it strictly sporadic, nor peculiar to rustic speech: it is a movement of major proportions, comparable only to yeismo in magnitude, and perhaps even more important if for no other reason but because yeismo is—Navarro Tomás notwithstanding—in fact already very firmly established in the urban centers.11

No comprehensive studies have been made, to my knowledge, of this aspiration and even total loss of the phoneme /s/ in intervocalic position, either for Spain or for Hispanoamerica. Yet I have heard it very frequently in all the major cities of Spain: Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Bilbao, Santander, Valencia, Santiago de Compostela, Valladolid, Málaga, Zaragoza, León, Granada, Cordova, etc., and not just in the “habla popular” but even in the topmost layers of the “gente culta”: university professors and students, lawyers, doctors, scientists, radio and TV announcers and commentators, industrial executives, government officials, including one of Franco’s Cabinet members during a formal speech. As for Spanish America, I have heard it used by people of all social classes, including the Dean of the Law School at the University of Lima (Perú), everywhere, except Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay.12

If there ever was anything to the theory that the aspiration of s operates only on the Castilian s but not on the s “seseada” of z, ce, ci, it is no longer true today: no distinctive effort is made to aspirate the s or to drop it, whatever its origin, s, ce, ci, or z, either in Latin America or in Andalucía, and frequently in the rest of Spain: parehe < ‘parece’, nehesario < ‘necesario’, conohco < ‘conozco’, ehta < ‘esta’, de veh en cuando < ‘de vez en cuando,’ ehpu < ‘esposo’; not even when it comes from x: ‘exacto’ > exacto > ehacto; ‘exigente’ > esigente > ehigente eigente.13 In regions of Spain which distinguish s from ce, ci or z, this phenome-
non also occurs, because not only s but z / θ / undergoes the same changes: me parehe or me paree < ‘me parece’, nehesito or neesito < ‘necesito’, corahón < ‘corazón’. The same can be said for those regions where ceceo prevails.

SUMMING UP, we find that the phoneme of s weakens and has a strong tendency to disappear when it stands at the end of words, at the end of a syllable, in absolute final position, at the end of a word in a phrase where the next word begins by a vowel, sometimes in absolute initial position, in two successive syllables—nehehario, neehario, neeario < ‘necesario’, —sometimes with the rest of the syllable at the beginning of a breath group, and even at the beginning of a syllable in the middle of the word shielded by a preceding consonant: al prinhipio < ‘al principio’, enonhe < ‘entonces’. In other words, s is an exceptionally vulnerable phoneme practically everywhere in the word. Someone more cynical might say that s even sounds like /s/ sometimes!

When one considers how s can weaken and disappear even in some of its strongest positions, it is difficult not to believe that Spanish, far from being a sibilant language, shows a certain aversion to the sound of /s/, comparable and perhaps even stronger than French, Italian or Portuguese. In Chilean schools, as well as elsewhere, I am sure they still advise the students: “no se coman las eses,” but that does not keep them from doing it. In fact, although not admitted, in Chile it is actually looked upon as affectation to pronounce the s as /s/ instead of /h/ at the end of syllables and words.

The aspiration of s at the end of a syllable is considerably more widespread than Canfield’s linguistic map indicates for this phenomenon, particularly in Mexico, Columbia and Peru. (See his La pronunciación del español en América, Mapa IV, “Aspiración o pérdida de s final de sílaba”).

On no less than three occasions I have witnessed groups of three or four Spaniards engaged in jolly, carefree conversations where no sound of /s/ was heard at all. They were Andalusians, to be sure, but in Madrid!

One can well sympathize with the average undergraduate Spanish student who is suddenly confronted with the natural and spontaneous sounds of the living language. We need to warn them about s’s erratic behavior and fancy antics. An open admission of the vagaries of the Spanish s both in textbooks and in class is in order and long overdue. Explanations of such allophones from the earliest stages of Spanish learning, followed by practice, could take us a long way, even if restricted to the most common ones. It would not be much different from what is normally done in teaching the pronunciation of English s to Spanish speaking students.

We also urgently need “follow through” studies on the phonological consequences which result in the word after the loss of s and other sounds. Consonants are like the backbone of a word: if they begin to erode, the process of disintegration that follows is much more rapid and that is exactly what has been happening to the Spanish language: phonological changes have kept going on completely oblivious of phonologists.

Let three expressions used previously in this study serve us as examples: Yokávia for ‘Yugoslavia’, nwámwanwá for ‘nos vamos a mojar’, and ¿tutóra? for ¿tiene usted hora? One can only imagine the stages they must have gone through before arriving at these forms. Perhaps something like these, without denying a few others in between:

‘Yugoslavia’ > Yúghlávia > Yúohlávia > Yúolávia > Ywolávia > Yolávia.

‘Nos vamos a mojar’ > nònvámojájár nòňvàmwanóá > nònvàmwanwjá > nòňvàmwanwá > nwámwanwá.

¿Tiene usted hora?’ > tíeneneuhtéóra >
tiénihótora > tiúhtóra > tiútóra > tu-tóra? (These are expressions I have actually heard).

The phonological material in these phrases has been reduced by 30%, 40% and 55%, respectively! Little wonder if the American student with two or even three years of Spanish cannot make much sense out of what he is hearing. Yet these changes are in perfect keeping with the pattern and laws of changes that have been operating on Spanish throughout its entire history. They would not be difficult to explain to our students at the elementary and intermediate levels, and we should do so as an integral part of their courses. Given this awareness they would be in a much better position to understand what is missing or what has changed, rather than be stumped by a string of sounds which have a very vague resemblance to what they would look like in the proper written form.

Phonologists are falling behind these changes, but we professors are trailing way behind the phonologists.

\[
\begin{array}{llllll}
a & a & en & padre & i & i & en & peine \\
å & a & en & mal & i & i & en & rápido \\
v & a & en & orador & j & i & en & nieto \\
b & b & en & tumba & k & c & en & casa \\
ò & b & en & haba & l & l & en & luna \\
ô & b & en & dial. esbelto & l & l & en & alzar \\
ê & ch & en & mucho & l & l & en & falda \\
ô & z & en & moso & l & l & en & castillo \\
d & d & en & conde & m & m & en & amar \\
d & d & en & rueda & m & n & en & confuso \\
f & d & en & abogado & m & n & en & comover \\
ô & d & en & virtud & n & n & en & mano \\
e & e & en & canté & n & n & en & onza \\
ê & e & en & perro & n & n & en & moute \\
es & e & en & amenaza & n & n & en & cinco \\
f & f & en & fácil & ñ & ñ & en & año \\
g & g & en & manga & o & o & en & cantó \\
g & g & en & rogar & o & o & en & amor \\
i & i & en & pide & o & o & en & adorar \\
j & i & en & gentil & p & p & en & padre
\end{array}
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NOTES

1 The materials and information used for this study have been gathered during two extended stays in Spain for a total of a year and four months (1953-54 and 1969), and two sabbaticals in Latin America for about ten months (1958, 1964). I have been all over Spain and all over Latin America except Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Paraguay, but I have heard modes of speech of people from these countries.

2 R. Menéndez Pidal, Manual de gramática histórica española (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., phonetic equivalents of letters in question are 1944), pp. 103-04. Except in direct quotations, given in International Phonetic Alphabet symbols in brackets throughout my work. For practical considerations, within a word or phrase, IPA symbols are used for the sounds in question and the rest is simply rendered as the word is or might be written in Spanish.

3 See D. Lincoln Canfield, La pronunciación del español en América (Bogotá, 1962, pp. 79-80). See also Luis Flórez, La pronunciación del español en Bogotá (Bogotá, 1951), pp. 183-89.


437. It also "condena el abuso de los que convierten $x > s$ con el cual, sin necesidad ni utilidad, se infringe la ley etimológica, se priva a la lengua de armonioso y grato sonido, desvirtuándola y afeaminándola, y se da ocasión a que se confundan palabras distintas, como los verbos expiar y espiar que significan cosas muy diversas" (Ibid., p. 478).


8See Navarro Tomás, "Vulgarismos en el habla madrileña," Hispania, 50 (Sept., 1967), 544-45. Surprised and skeptical first, the author ends up by accepting rather grudgingly Luis Flórez’s findings of creeping "vulgarismos," including the aspiratin of $s$, which have become of common use by "la gente culta" of Madrid. See also Eloy L. Placer, "So, You Speak Real Castilian." Hispania, 46 (Dec. 1963), 780.


12The weakening of $s$ in initial and intervocalic positions that R. Lenz found among the Chilinan "huasos" is strictly a rustic pronunciation. Although born and raised in Chile, I am not aware of its practice even by the "roto," the urban counterpart of "el huaso," much less by the more educated, except in a few set phrases: hepa $Día < 's$epa Dios', no $nór < 'n$o señor'. See Rodolfo Lenz, "El Español de Chile," Biblioteca de dialectología hispanoamericana, (Buenos Aires, 1940), pp. 90, 252, 254. Vladimir Honsa makes no reference to the aspiration or loss of $s$ in intervocalic position in any of the six Argentinean dialects he studied (op. cit., pp. 257-83).


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