

Spread of “Arabic *al-*” in Spanish

Background

Previous Commentary: Several overviews of the linguistic history of Spanish (e.g. Lapesa 1980; Penny 2009; Pharies 2015) describe noun-initial *al-* as simply a segment appearing in many words of Arabic origin. Diachronic accounts of the formal development and occurrence in Spanish of individual words in *al-* have been published (e.g. Corriente 2008; Giménez 2011; Dworkin 2012), but studies on the historical distribution of the *al-* element itself are lacking.

Research Questions: What evidence is there for reanalysis of *al-* as a noun prefix in Spanish? What are the origins of this form, the means of its proliferation in Spanish, and the motivations for this spread?

Methodology: The etymologies of 767 words beginning in /al/ culled from the 2017 online edition of the *Diccionario de la lengua española (DLE)* were investigated and shared attributes/developments in use identified.

Findings: Borrowing and Analogical Spread of *al-*

Immediate Borrowings in *al-* from Arabic & Mozarabic: More than half of the words examined reflect sequences copied into Spanish directly from Arabic or from heavily Arabic-influenced “Mozarabic” varieties of Romance. In the case of most such items, word-initial /al/ reflects a bleached borrowing of the Arabic definite marker. Many Arabisms of this form intuitively group together in large semantic sets like *plant types* or *architectural terms*.

e.g.

plants & produce

alcachofa “artichoke”; *alhucema* “lavender, Spanish sage”; *aldiza* “cornflower”; *algodón* “cotton”; *almea* “marshy starfruit”; *alazor* “safflower”; etc.

architecture & construction work

alarife “architect”; *alfarjía* “wooden beam for a window/door frame”; *albarrada* “drystone wall”; *alféizar* “windowsill”; *albañil* “mason”; etc.

Other Borrowings in *al-*: A smaller number of /al/-initial items entered Spanish via other languages. Many of these words, though not all, are ultimately Arabic in origin. Many also fall into one of the semantic sets mentioned above.

/a/-Prothesis Yielding *al-*: Some Spanish nouns in *al-*, including words that historically and currently take masculine agreement, reflect well-attested etyma beginning in /l/ or /r/.

e.g.

plants

alberge “apricot”; *alforfón* “buckwheat”; *alacate* “calabash”; etc.

architecture

alacet “building foundation”; *alquitrabe* “epistyle”; etc.

e.g.

plants

Lat. *ligustrum* → Sp. *aligustre* “henna tree”; etc.

architecture

(o)*lambrilla* → *alambrilla* “decorative tile”; etc.

/l/-Epenthesis Yielding *al-*: Regular rules of sound change fail to account for many instances in which /l/ follows word-initial /a/, especially in nouns belonging to expected semantic sets.

Attachment of *al-* to New Bases: In some cases, /al/ has been prefixed to nouns that did not historically bear this segment. Most items displaying this development pertain to semantic sets comprising many other words in *al-*.

e.g.

plants

(d)*amacena* “of Damascus” → *almacena* “type of plum”; etc.

architecture

ajarafe → *aljarafe* “tableland, terrace”; etc.

e.g.

plants

Ar. *zanbú'* → Cat. (z)*ambor* → Sp. **ambor* → *alambor* “citron”; etc.

architecture

Lat. *mina* → OSp. *mena* → Sp. *almena* “battlement”; etc.

Probable Hypercorrections to *al-*: Some More Examples

- Lat. *acīnos* → OSp. **acino* → Sp. *alcino* “wild basil”
- Grk. *amýgdalo* → Lat. *amyndŭla* (cf. Classical Lat. *amygdala*) → OSp. **amendra* → Sp. *almendra* “almond”
- Lat. *amārus* “bitter” → Ar. *amayrún* → OSp. **amirón* → Sp. *almirón* “dandelion”
- Lat. *avellāna* “hazelnut” → Sp. *avellano* “hazel” → Andalusian Sp. *albellanino* “dogwood”
- Ar. *aṣṣíbr* → Sp. *acíbar* → Mexican Sp. *alcíbar* “aloe”
- Ar. *ağğulgulín* → *OSp. *ajonjolín* → Sp. *ajonje* → regional Sp. *aljonje* “wild yellow daisy”

Probable Cases of *al-* Prefixation: Some More Examples

- Lat. *mortua* “dead” → Moz. **morta* → OSp. **morta* → Sp. *almorta* “red pea, grass pea”
- Grk. *mâron* → Lat. *mārum* → Sp. *maro* → regional Sp. *almaro* “clary sage, water mint”
- Lat. *mŭrdīcus* “biting” → OSp. **mórdego* → OSp. *mórdago* → Sp. *muérdago* → regional Sp. *almuérdago* “mistletoe”
- Ar. *manārah* → Turkish *minare* → Fr. *minaret* → Sp. **minar(e)* → Sp. *alminar* “minaret”

Selected Bibliography

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