ON THE LOSS OF /S/ IN "BLACK" SPANISH

One of the most noteworthy phonetic characteristics of Caribbean Spanish is the aspiration and deletion of /s/ in syllable- and word-final contexts. In the dialects of the Antilles, Venezuela, Panama and coastal Colombia, /s/ is severely weakened in these positions even among the most highly educated speakers. Needless to say, reduction of /s/ is not limited to this zone, for in Latin America, /s/ is also weakened, although to a lesser extent, in the Central American dialects of El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, and in South America, along the entire Pacific coast and in the Southern Cone nations, as well as being aspirated in much of coastal Mexico. Moreover, reduction of /s/ is not an exclusively Latin American phenomenon, for in Andalusia, Extremadura, and the Canary Islands, as well as in other areas of central and southeastern Spain, /s/ is reduced at a rate equal to or higher than that found in the Caribbean dialects.

Despite the weakening and loss of /s/ throughout the Spanish-speaking world, the occurrence of this process in Spanish America exhibits a noteworthy correlation with the presence of large numbers of African slaves during the colonial period, so much so that many investigators have suggested that these African speakers and their descendents may have influenced certain Latin American Spanish dialects in the direction of greater reduction of /s/. While it is true that virtually every area of Spanish America at one time contained significant proportions of African slaves, particularly during the 16th and 17th centuries, it was only in the Caribbean region that the slave trade continued unabated until the middle of the 19th century, due largely to the economic necessities stemming from commercialized plantation agriculture.

In present day Latin America, it is in general impossible to distinguish between black and non-black native Spanish speakers, although in some regions socioeconomic stratification may provide strong correlations between ethnic origin and social class, with the resulting implications for linguistic usage. In previous centuries, however, the same assertion could not always be made, for there exists a considerable body of evidence for the fact that slaves born in Africa (known as bozales) and often their descendents for several generations thereafter, spoke Spanish with a number of characteristic phonetic and grammatical distortions which when combined formed a distinctly identifiable "black" Spanish. While it is obvious that slaves born in Africa would speak Spanish with the deficiencies common to poor and illiterate immigrants throughout the world, the continued existence of bozal speech forms among American-born Afro-Hispanics must be predicated upon socioeconomic conditions which precluded complete penetration of the metropolitan linguistic standards. Despite considerable controversy, it has still not been definitively determined whether black slaves in colonial Spanish America spoke creolized...
dialects that were essentially identical (perhaps derived from creole Portuguese learned in Portuguese slaving stations or on shipboard during the middle passage), or whether each group of slaves employed locally generated adaptations of the Spanish language. One of the difficulties in assessing the nature of black Spanish of earlier centuries, and even of modern times, is the high level of racial prejudice, exaggeration and stereotyping which has always surrounded the description of black speakers of Spanish, and which attributes to all of them a wide range of defects and distortions that frequently are no more than an unrealistic social repudiation of this group. In more recent times, the linguistic characteristics attributed to black Spanish speakers have been simply those of the lower socioeconomic classes, and may even be found among the speech habits of more educated individuals, without any objective racial connotations. Even black writers, such as Nicolás Guillén, Candelario Obeso, Nicomedes Santa Cruz and Adalberto Ortiz, have employed such linguistic stereotypes as literary devices, while obviously not subscribing to the ethnocentric typecasting which is presupposed when the same techniques are used by non-black writers.

From the earliest literary and folkloric indications of bozal and criollo black Spanish, the reduction of /s/ has been an essential element, which underscores the interrelatedness of the sociocultural, racial and geographical factors that have affected the dialectal diversification of Spanish throughout the world. Careful comparison with other data regarding Afro-Hispanic language behavior, and closer scrutiny of the totality of earlier attestations of black Spanish, may offer new insights into the phonological reduction of /s/, and of its possible African connection.

Long before the establishment of African populations in the Americas, both Spain and Portugal contained significant groups of black slaves and freedmen, which by the end of the 15th century constituted nearly half of the population of Lisbon, and a significant proportion of the residents of Sevilla and other southern Spanish cities. Already in the 15th century, Portuguese literary documents give testimony to a unique pidginized Portuguese spoken by African natives in Portugal, which ultimately would be transferred nearly intact to Spain, where it would eventually turn into the habla de negros so common in the writings of Golden Age authors. Gil Vicente employed bozal Portuguese speech since before the middle of the 15th century, and is generally credited with establishing the literary tradition of bozal language in Portuguese literature. Many of the earliest Spanish documents that attempt to portray Africanized Spanish, such as Feliciano de Silva’s Segunda Celestina (1534), contain few of the features that later became associated with black Spanish, but rather use a highly reduced verbal system (largely consisting of uninflected infinitives) more reminiscent of Italian-based sabir or lingua franca, from the middle ages to the 19th century: “amí no estar tan bovo como tú penxar; tú penxar que no entender a mi ruindadex . . . ¿tú no querer andar? . . . ¿qué querer vox,
voixa mercê?" These phonetic deformations are also typical of those characterizing Arabic interference, and it has been suggested that the "black" characters Zambrán and Boruca were really north African Moors. By a few decades later, however, bozal Spanish was already well established, and appeared in the works of Lope de Rueda, Quiñones de Benavente, and later, Gonzaga, Lope de Vega and others. In addition to a number of clearly Portuguese incursions, including muyto, hai/vai, conhecer, etc., the above-mentioned Golden Age literary works contain the seeds of a distinctly Afro-Hispanic language, which over the next two centuries would continue to diverge from Afro-Portuguese speech and would evolve into 19th and early 20th century Caribbean bozal Spanish, the last remnants of Afro-Hispanic creole. A survey of the behavior of /s/ in these texts will clarify the development of the process of weakening of /s/ in bozal Spanish, and in other Hispanic dialects.

Among the earliest Portuguese literary texts to employ truly Africanized Portuguese, Antonio Ribeiro Chiado's Autos das Regateiras (ca. 1550), contains numerous characteristic Afro-Romance forms, including the subject pronoun amí, the use of infinitives lacking the final /r/, the formation of the verb sar (a blend of ser and estar), and the nearly total lack of nominal inflection. Examples include: "a mi cativar o judeu, nam querê c'a mim raza" (v. 20); "a mim frugá bosó matá, bosó sempre bradá . . ." (v. 24); "A bosó sempre sá graya" (v. 40); "a mi não cabá besí" (v. 50); "Prutugá santar diabó!" (v. 552). However, for the first indications of loss of /s/, we have to turn to Gil Vicente, where examples like the following are to be found: from "O clérigo da Beira": "Jesu!"; "Não vamos paraíso"; and lack of plural /s/: "a mi abre oio e ve"; "Deoso graça." From "Nao d'Amores," we have: "Eu chamar elle minha vira e elle chamo-mo cão," and in "Fragoa d'Amor," we find "tu sá home o sá riabo?" Alongside such examples, we find retention of word-internal and word-final /s/ in the representation of bozal Portuguese, in forms such as bos, Castilha, estai, Portugas, buscar, etc., all of which indicates that no wide-spread loss of /s/ was found in bozal Portuguese of this time, nor is this process common among African and Asian Portuguese creoles of later centuries. What is found, both in Golden Age Africanized Portuguese, and in contemporary Portuguese and creole dialects, is the loss of morphological /s/, in first person plural verbal forms, and the instability of plural /s/ in nouns and adjectives. The latter process is common to popular Portuguese throughout Brazil, in caipira and other dialects, occurs sporadically in Portugal, and in (non-creole) African Portuguese.

Turning to Spanish-language texts, examples of the literary habla de negros begin around the middle of the 16th century. Lope de Rueda employed a bozal Spanish, in which /s/ was largely maintained. We find occasional loss of /s/ for example in the "Comedia de los engañados:" "¿No barremo la casa? : no ponemos la oya? ¿No me manda señora Clavela que colamo la flor de la cucuceni?"; "Ya tenemos un prima mia." From the
“Coloquio de Tymbria,” we find “samo corrido,” and in the “Comedia llamada Eufemia,” “sa bon xemplos ál la ventana.”

Góngora introduced bozal language on several occasions, some of which present cases of loss of /s/: “Samo negra pecandora”: “Ay Jesús, como sa mu triste!”; “alcoholemo la cara e lavemonó la vista”; “mas tinta sudamo, Juana, que dos pruma de crivana.” Góngora’s texts also provide examples of retention of syllable- and word-final /s/, as in Corpus Christa, triste, etc. Quiñones de Benavente, in his “El negrito hablador y sin color anda la niña,”22 employs a somewhat fanciful habla de negros, in which a rather high degree of grammatical and lexical precision is combined with a ludicrous phonetic distortion. The most common phonetic device is the interchange of /l/ and /r/, in nearly all positions, but /s/ is retained, except in the expression lo bigoto rubio, which illustrates the partial neutralization of nominal inflection. At the same time, the negrito is frequently represented as pronouncing /s/ as z, that is as a dental affricate or fricative, which may indicate a weakening of /s/ in some cases, or merely a defective ceceo: “Otlos que con laz balonaz tanto nuez echan de fuera que, como en naris, ce pueden poner antojos en eyaz . . . .”

Bozal Spanish appears in some of Lope de Vega’s plays, although in several other works, African slaves speak normal Spanish; among the latter are “El negro del mejor amo,” “El arenal de Sevilla,” “Los melindres de Belisa” and “Amar, servir y esperar.” Loss of /s/ is found23 in “El santo negro Rosambuco,” in examples such as: “deseano bosamesé, no queremos que sabé lo que somo bata fuera”; “pues como samo lindo hoy en samo malo de ojo”; “decimo logo a la niegra si samo de Monicongo.” In “La madre de la mejor,” we find “Samo tan regocijara de ver lo sielo tan beyo, que non podemos hablar dey, siendo negro y ellan crara.” The latter case is significant, since for the first time we find repeated loss of /s/ in an environment which does not include the verbal desinence -mos, although what is found is partial neutralization of nominal inflection, using loss of /s/ as one strategy in this process. “El santo negro Rosambuco” also contains a few examples of loss of word-internal /s/, as in no me reponde, an vito and epojo. Documenting incipient Latin American bozal Spanish, Gabriel de Santillana (1688) offers the following examples from Mexico:24 Flasico (Francisco) and lo Mastine, while Sor Juana25 transcribed the by now famous line “aunque neglo gente somo.”

Later examples of bozal Spanish, nearly all from Latin America, include loss of /s/, not only in word-final position but also, increasingly, in word-internal position. However, it should be noted that the aspiration and loss of /s/ in the Caribbean Spanish dialects is already attested for non-black speakers from the beginning of the 18th century and conceivably much earlier,26 and probably was in effect even before this, so that later representations of bozal language may simply represent exaggerations of phonetic traits already existent in local Spanish dialects. From Morelia, Mexico (1723)27 comes “Al Dioso que sa na siro, con sonsonete que alegla,
contamo la gente negla.” Cuban *cants de cabildo* dating from the 18th century include examples such as:28 “Bamo llorá, muetto pobre.” From early 19th century Uruguay, we have:29 “Semo nenglo lindo, semo vetela-nu,” and from Argentina, at the same time period, comes30 “Hacemi favol, ño Pancho, de apical mi tu papeli ... yo quisiera uté me diga ...” An imitation of 19th century Peruvian bozal Spanish31 includes “negria Casilda no moletá” and “neguito no rirá ni cantará ma.”

In comparing these examples of bozal Spanish, spanning three centuries and more than 300 years, we notice that loss of /s/ is most frequently confined to the verbal morpheme -mos, where erosion of /s/ is nearly categorical in bozal language. The second most frequent case, which appears somewhat later chronologically, is loss of /s/ as a redundant plural morpheme in noun phrases, such as in *lo bigoto, lo Mastine, samo neglo*, etc. In neither of these cases is loss of /s/ necessarily a phonetic phenomenon, but rather represents the instability of the Spanish morphological system among Africa speakers, and illustrates a common tendency among Spanish- and Portuguese-based creoles throughout the world, including African and Asian Portuguese creoles, Philippine creole Spanish, Papamenti, Colombian *pelenquero*, and the vestigial creole language of the Valle del Chota, Ecuador.32 Loss of word-internal implosive /s/, which has no morphological value (and which carries a low functional load), does not appear in Spanish literature until well into the last part of the 17th century, nearly 100 years after the first attestations of bozal Spanish, and does not become common in representations of black Spanish until the second half of the 18th century, generally in areas where loss of /s/ is already documented for non-African speakers. These data suggest that loss of /s/ in bozal Spanish did not follow the path of a regular phonetic evolution, but rather began as a manifestation of morphological instability, the elimination of redundant word-final /s/, and later included loss of word-internal /s/ as bozal Spanish interacted with Spanish dialects in which reduction of /s/ was becoming common, at least among the lower socioeconomic classes with which black slaves and servants would have frequent contact. The data from Chota, Ecuador, support this conclusion, since this is a highland dialect of black Spanish, in a region where /s/ is normally conserved in all positions. Choteño Spanish similarly retains /s/, being perhaps the only black Spanish dialect in Latin America to do so, but /s/ is rather frequently lost in the verbal desinence -mos, and occasionally in redundant noun phrases. In this sense, the Chota dialect differs from neighboring highland Ecuadoran dialects, spoken by Indians and mestizos, who never drop /s/ even in redundant positions. Another black dialect which confirms the findings from bozal language of earlier centuries is the Spanish of Equatorial Guinea, the only Spanish-speaking area in black Africa.33 Unlike the Caribbean region, where Andalusian and Canary Island linguistic influences were strong, Guinean Spanish was largely formed through contact with Castillian and Catalan dialects of Spanish, and is characterized by a nearly
categorical retention of /s/, by (unstable) use of the interdental phoneme \( \theta \), by the alveolar pronunciation of word-final /n/, by the lack of neutralization /l/ and /r/, and by other features not normally associated with black or bozal Spanish. Careful quantitative analysis of Guinean Spanish reveals that while /s/ is hardly ever aspirated, it is rather frequently deleted from word-final position, in a fashion strongly correlated with the morphological value of the /s/. For example, whereas phrase-final lexical /s/ is deleted only about 6% of the time, when /s/ forms part of the verbal desinence -mos, the deletion rate rises to nearly 16%, and when the following word begins with a consonant, loss of /s/ in -mos rises to more than 28%. On the other hand, the rate of loss of word-internal /s/ in Guinean Spanish is only about 3%, a figure not much higher than in the phonologically most conservative dialects of Spain and Latin America. A similar behavior pattern for /s/ has been reported for the Chocó region of Colombia, another area of significant African presence.34

These data contrast sharply with most accounts of the reductions of /s/ in Spanish, where it is normally assumed that aspiration and later deletion occurred virtually simultaneously in all implosive positions. It has even been suggested35 that /s/ may have been reduced first in word-internal implosive position, and that this reduction was later extended across word boundaries. Finally, aspiration and loss of /s/ in word-final preverbal positions (as in los amigos) is a later development, based on a drive for morphological regularity, the reduction of allomorphic variation. While most current Spanish dialects in which /s/ is reduced have carried this process so far that it is impossible to gain any insight into its initial stages, there are a number of dialects, particularly in Central America, the Southern Cone nations, and central Spain, where reduction of /s/ is largely confined to implosive positions; in nearly all of these dialects, the rate of reduction is significantly higher in word-final preconsonantal position than in word-internal implosive position.36 These comparative data suggest that reduction of /s/ spread from word-final preconsonantal position, especially in redundant syntags such as todos los and todas las, to gradually encompass all implosive positions, and thus to become a phonologically motivated rule. Among contemporary (non-Africanized) dialects of Spanish, there is no preferential reduction of /s/ in the verbal desinence -mos, and it is debatable whether in most dialects the morphological value of word-final /s/ has any effect at all on the reduction process,37 although an /s/ may be deliberately restored when the speaker becomes aware of an occurring or impending confusion. The quantitative differential between word-internal and word-final contexts remains, however, and points to the complex interaction between morphological, lexical and purely phonological factors.

In tying together the observations on the behavior of /s/ in bozal Spanish and in modern non-creolized Spanish dialects, significant differences emerge. Reduction of /s/ in bozal language is seen to be the natural
concomitant of imperfect learning of the Spanish language, as manifested by morphological instability and the elimination of redundant elements. This was apparently more of a determining factor than the phonotactic limitations posed by the fact that the majority of African languages spoken by slaves in previous centuries made little use of implosive and word-final consonants. Reduction of /s/ in non-creolized Spanish, despite its evident origin as a phenomenon occurring only across word boundaries, gives no indication of having arisen through the elimination of morphological redundancy, but rather is a manifestation of a general phonological restructuring of closed syllables that has affected the entire Romance language family. The partial intersection between current dialect areas where /s/ is strongly reduced and the presence of large groups of African slaves in colonial times should not be taken as a completely fortuitous coincidence, since *bozal* speakers may have had an influence in extending an already existing process of reduction, especially in the direction of complete elision, rather than mere aspiration of /s/. However, the qualitative differences between loss of /s/ in early *bozal* Spanish and in contemporary non-Africanized Spanish dialects strongly militate against a purely African origin for the reduction of /s/ in Latin American Spanish.

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Notes


16. *Obra de Gil Vicente* (Coimbra: França Amado, 1907), t. I.


19. For an excellent example, see Orlando Mendes, *Portuguese* (Porto: Notícias da Beira, 1965), illustrating the Africanized Portuguese of Mozambique.

20. Real Academia Española, *Obra de Lope de Vega* (Madrid: Librería de los Sucesores de Hernando, 1908), t. I.


25. Ibid.


35. For example, Tracy Terrell, “Final /s/ in Cuban Spanish.” *Hispania* 62 (1979), 599-612 [p. 610].


37. The most extensive study to date to demonstrate the lack of conclusive relationships between morphological values of /s/ and phonetic reduction is Barbara Lafford, “Dynamic structuring in the Spanish of Cartagena, Colombia: the influence of linguistic, stylistic and social factors on the retention, aspiration and deletion of syllable- and word-final /s/.” Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1980.