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NEAR-HOMONYMY AS A DETERMINANT OF LEXICAL RETENTION AND LOSS:
THE CASE OF HISPANO-ROMANCE despejar

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In a major study on the reconstruction of Hispano-Latin word families, published in 1954 in the University of California Publications in Linguistics, Professor Malkiel grappled with the vexing problem of the origin of Span. despejar '(a) to clear a space of obstacles', '(b) to uncloud, clear up' (in the meteorological sense), '(c) to overcome timidity, recover strength'. After surveying the various solutions advanced by earlier scholars,¹ Malkiel placed himself squarely in the camp of the great Colombian linguist Rufino José Cuervo (1893:1136f.), who, on chronological grounds, had judged the Spanish word to be of Portuguese origin. Malkiel differed with Cuervo, however, as regards the precise phonetic shape of the putative etymon. Whereas Cuervo saw the ultimate root of Ptg. despejar (j = [ʒ]) in Lat. PEDICA 'shackle, fetter, chain for the feet', a word with ample reflexes in other Romance languages (cf., e.g., Fr. piège 'trap'), Malkiel leaned toward *PEDIA, a hypothetical base of identical meaning and one clearly preferable on phonetic grounds that he had determined² was needed to account for a host of other Hispano-Romance lexemes.

While previous attempts to identify the origins of despejar had concentrated either on the phonetic or on the semantic facet of the problem, never successfully reconciling the two, Malkiel proposed a base not only perfect from the vantage of sound development, but also consistent with one of the verb's major semantic spheres, namely (c) above, which can quite plausibly be viewed as a metaphorical extension of the more concrete pristine meaning of 'to unfetter, free oneself from shackles'. But Malkiel, unlike his predecessors, was quick to notice that "the semantic analysis of despejar presents difficulties" (1954:139). In brief, how could a verb originally denoting 'to unfetter, free oneself from shackles' come eventually to suggest 'to clear (away), to clear up'?

My intention in this paper is to show that the semantic bifurcation of despejar is a direct result of its status as a blend of two Hispano-Romance verbs that were not only near-homonyms, but also near-antonyms. It will be argued that Span./Ptg. despejar is the product of a merger of a verbal derivative of *PEDIA, as suggested by Malkiel, and a descendant of a late spoken Latin *DISSPISSIARE, a reconstructed base whose existence is supported by numerous reflexes in neighboring Gallo-Romance.

Before attempting to reconstruct the events leading up to the collision in Hispano-Romance of *PEDIARE and *DISSPISSIARE, let us cast a glance at the behavior in recorded Latin of the latter verb's adjectival root SPISS- 'thick' and of its documented verbal derivatives. The English word thick, as we find by consulting Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, has six distinct meanings (leaving aside dialectal and slang uses), all more or less closely related. Latin SPISSUS corresponds by and

large to its English gloss chiefly in one of the latter's meanings, listed by Webster as (4) 'having the constituent elements arranged close together; dense; compact; abundant; specifically, a) filled or covered completely; dense; luxuriant: as, a thick head of hair, thick woods. b) great in number; abundant; crowded: as, a thick crowd. c) of great density or consistency; not very fluid; viscous; heavy: as, thick soup, thick smoke. d) not clear; turbid; muddy; foggy; close: as, the air was thick with fumes'. Objects to which the characterization of SPISSUS could be applied in Latin included hair, branches (Horace); trees (Pliny); sand, a field, twigs (Virgil); a tunic (thickly woven) (Plautus); shades (Virgil, Petronius); hail, blood or any liquid, air, and clouds (Ovid). Romance reflexes of SPISSUS, found in all major Romance languages save Rumanian, generally echo the semantic content of their ancestor.

In late spoken Latin there flourished a derivational process which produced factitive verbs by juxtaposing adjectival stems and a suffix -IARE.³ We know, both from documentary evidence and comparative reconstruction, that, at least in its early stages, this derivational schema operated only on adjectives of spatio-dimensional import. Thus, to cite a handful of examples, AMPLUS 'wide' yielded AMPLIARE 'to widen'; BREVIS 'short' gave BREVIARE 'to shorten'; ALTUS 'high' produced ALTIARE 'to raise'. Moreover, on evidence from a variety of Romance languages, one may confidently reconstruct *INGRASSIARE 'to fatten' (cf. CRASSUS 'fat'); *INGREVIARE 'to make heavy' (cf. GRAVIS ~ GREVIS 'heavy'); *BASSIARE 'to lower' (cf. *BASSUS 'low'). SPISS-, a monosyllabic adjectival root with clearly spatial overtones, constituted an ideal base for a verb in -IARE. *SPISSIARE, following the pattern of the verbs just enumerated, would undoubtedly have had the meaning 'to thicken' (in the precise senses of thick quoted above), while its antonym *DISSPISSIARE, formed regularly through prefixation of the negating particle DIS- 'un-', would have signified 'to unthicken, to thin out'.

The vast majority of Latin verbs in -IARE were flanked by counterparts derived through the more conventional process of suffixation with -ARE or -ESCERE, and *SPISSIARE was hardly an exception, in the light of recorded SPISSARE and SPISSESCERE.⁴ The former verb, a favorite of Pliny the Elder, signified, as one might anticipate, 'to thicken, make thick, condense', and was predicated of such nouns as flour, milk, dew (Pliny), and clouds (Lucan). The latter verb was used in the same meanings to describe a thickening of clouds (Lucretius) and of liquids in general (Celsus).

The existence of *SPISSIARE in the late spoken Latin of the Western Empire is all but guaranteed by a wealth of Gallo-Romance descendants. Beginning with Old French, one finds espeiss(i)er (later espoissier),⁵ a verb displaying three major semantic ramifications: (a) 'to become more viscous' (typical subject: li brai 'the mud'); (b) 'to become more numerous' (typ. subj.: noz enemis 'our enemies'), 'to press around' (typ. subj.: Franceis 'Frenchmen'); (c) 'to thicken' (typ. subj.: la bröine 'the fog', l'airs 'the air'), 'to get dark' (typ. subj.: l'avesprée 'the evening', li ceus 'the sky', la nuis 'the night'). In the last acceptance, by far the most common, espeissier is often found in parallel constructions with such other verbs as oscurcir 'to become dark', nercir 'to turn

black', and anuitier 'to become night'.

In Old Provençal the emphasis was clearly on the atmospheric and meteorological side, with espeissar generally denoting the process whereby water is transformed into mist and thus causes a "thickening" of the air.⁶

In the modern Gallo-Romance dialects, reflexes of *SPISSIĀRE are widely attested in the North and East in a strip running from francophone Belgium through Switzerland down to the Italian border. In Wallonia (Belgium) the predominant meanings are 'to increase in viscosity' and 'to darken, cloud over'. In the more southerly districts the idea of viscosity seems to have prevailed over other meanings. Highly interesting in the present context is the existence, in the same group of dialects, of apparent reflexes of antonymous *DISSPISSIĀRE, usually in the meaning of 'to make thinner, thin out' (e.g. plants or vegetables in a field).

Having demonstrated (a) that *SPISSIĀRE, created by adding -IĀRE to the adjectival root SPISS-, is a highly plausible formation within the framework of late Latin verbal derivation processes, and (b) that such a base is required to explain a broadly documented family of cognates in Gallo-Romance, we are now in a position to reconstruct the trajectory of *SPISSIĀRE and its antonym in Hispano-Romance.

The status of *SPISSIĀRE and *DISSPISSIĀRE as antonyms, and as verbal derivatives of SPISSUS, while perfectly transparent in late spoken Latin, would necessarily have been blurred by the time of early Hispano-Romance, largely as a result of two developments. First, medial -SS- would by regular sound change have undergone palatalization induced by following yod (< -I-/V) which, in turn, would have been "absorbed" by the palatal consonant thus created. Since s → ʃ was anything but a common alternation,⁷ the effect of that sound law's operation must have been to obfuscate the derivational relationship of the two verbs (now pronounced [espeʃar]-[despeʃar]) to espeso 'thick' (< SPISSUS). The pair of antonyms was thus in a sense cut loose from its moorings in the lexical structure of the language.

Secondly, the operation of yet another phonetic law, namely insertion of a prothetic vowel e- before any impure s- (i.e. word-initial s followed directly by a consonant), characteristic of all of Western Romance, could only have resulted in a blurring of the antonymous relation of the two verbs. To understand why this was the case, we must remember that Hispano-Romance, which had preserved intact the Latin process of creating antonyms through the privative particle DIS- (transformed by regular sound change into Hisp.-Rom. des-), was characterized by vacillation in many lexemes between des- and es- from Lat. EX-, a wavering which is perhaps understandable given the fact that the latter prefix, whose primary acceptation was 'out' or 'forth', also occasionally served a privative function; cf. ACCŪSĀRE 'to accuse' vs. EXCŪSĀRE 'to excuse', ONERĀRE 'to load' vs. EXONERĀRE 'to unload'. In Spanish such interchangeable pairs as escabullirse-descabullirse 'to slip away', escarnar-descarnar 'to pull the flesh away' espabilar-despabilar 'to trim the wick of a candle' (cited by Malkiel 1954:164) are anything but rare.

Now recalling that typical sets of antonyms in early (as in modern) Hispano-Romance conformed to the schema VERB vs. (d)es + VERB, one readily understands why, to the etymologically naïve speaker (i.e. all speakers of the period), *espešar and *despešar must have appeared not like an antonymous pair, but, rather, like variants of the same word.⁸ Furthermore, in view of the rampant fluctuation between prefixal des- and es- characteristic of many verbs, speakers must on occasion have felt a strong temptation to use *espešar as a mere variant of *despešar, misinterpreting initial es- as the negative prefix, interchangeable with des-. Given the verbs' occasional interchangeability due to prefixal wavering and the lack of any clear derivational link to espeso 'thick', speakers must have experienced considerable confusion as to which of the two verbs meant 'to thicken' and which 'to thin out'. As language can hardly be expected to succeed in its communicative function when one and the same lexeme can signify opposing concepts, some sort of therapeutic action was all but inevitable. Let us now proceed to observe how different conditions in the two daughter languages determined the fate of *(d)espešar in each.

Spanish, in typically radical fashion, appears simply to have discarded the verbs in question (though retaining their ultimate root espeso), substituting for them such other readily available lexemes of like semantic ambit as espear 'to thicken' (newly derived from espeso, or a direct descendant of SPISSARE?), anublar 'to cloud over', aclarar 'to clear', and vaciar 'to clear out'. At least that is what one is forced to conclude from the absence of any trace of either verb in medieval Spanish. Spanish, we should not fail to note, had a further reason for abandoning *espešar, namely uncomfortable near-homonymy with espear 'to look in a mirror; to clean, polish' (cf. Span. espejo 'mirror'),⁹ a complicating factor nonexistent in Portuguese, whose cognate was espelhar (cf. Ptg. espelho 'mirror').

In Portuguese, a far more interesting sequence of events was set in motion. Malkiel, we recall, projected onto Hispano-Latin a noun *PEDIA 'fetter', which, in turn, served as the base of a verb that, through regular phonetic evolution, yielded Ptg. pejar, signifying 'to hinder, impede, obstruct', denotations which it retains to this day. Relying chiefly on the Latin and Gallo-Romance evidence adduced above, we have here posited an early Hisp.-Rom. *despešar (< *DISSPISSIARE) with roughly the following meanings: (a) 'to become less viscous'; (b) 'to uncrowd, clear away'; (c) 'to clear up' (weather).¹⁰ Now while pejar was well-integrated into the Portuguese lexicon by virtue of its manifest relationship to numerous other members of the family of *PEDIA, *despešar, its connection to espeso having been severed as a consequence of regular sound evolution, was, I repeat, a word with no discernible affiliation to any other Portuguese word.

I believe that lexical isolation opened up the likelihood of *despešar's reanalysis by speakers as a compound of the negating prefix des- and a theoretical positive base verb. Such a reinterpretation, a latent possibility on Spanish soil as well, was never carried out there owing to the want of a suitable base verb.¹¹ In Portuguese, by contrast, speakers turned to pre-existent pejar,

a lexeme almost, but not quite, perfect from both the phonological and the semantic points of view. On the phonological side, pejar differed from the newly-perceived lexical root of *despešar by only one feature, namely the voice quality of the medial palatal spirant. Semantically, pejar 'to hinder, impede, obstruct' was a near-antonym of *despešar, at least in the latter verb's meaning (b) (as above) 'to uncrowd, clear away'.

What influence did the two verbs, etymologically unrelated, exert on each other in the period immediately subsequent to their presumed pairing off? First, pejar, now viewed as the primitive of *despešar, exerted a phonological pressure on its adopted antonym occasioning the voicing of medial š to ž. On the semantic side, influence was mutual. Pejar, while retaining its traditional denotation, developed the secondary meaning 'to occupy' (i.e. the opposite of 'to clear away'); while despejar sprouted a new semantic branch 'to get rid of an impediment, free oneself'. It is interesting to observe that Portuguese lexica regularly reflect this mutual semantic influence by according dual listings to both verbs. I believe that an understanding of despejar's apparently hybrid nature goes a long way toward resolving the difficulties in semantic analysis identified by Malkiel twenty-eight years ago. We may now charge despejar's meanings 'to clear, clear away, clear up (weather)' to *DISSPISSIARE, while interpreting its other denotations, namely 'to overcome timidity, recover strength', as representing slight metaphorical extensions of a pristine meaning 'to free (oneself) from fetters'.

To sum up, we have seen how a pair of words (*espešar-*despešar) whose relation to their derivational base and to each other was rendered opaque by sound change and by prefixal vacillation succumbed in one of the Hispanic languages, while surviving in the other. Proto-Spanish (d)espešar, suffering from the added handicap of irksome near-homonymy with espejar 'to look in a mirror' came to be avoided, eventually falling into complete desuetude. In Portuguese, however, *despešar was incorporated into the thriving lexical family of pejar, an etymologically unrelated verb that happened to be both a near-homonym of the newly-perceived lexical base of *despešar and a near-antonym of the entire verb. The fate of *despešar in Hispano-Romance, then, may be taken as a dramatic illustration of the principle that well-integrated words are more likely to survive and flourish than those with weak roots in the lexical structure of a language.

Having attempted to reconstruct in some detail the trajectory of *(DIS)SPISSIARE in Hispania, let us consider very briefly its fate in other neo-Latin domains. First, the lack of any vestige of either verb in Sardinian or Rumanian is consistent with the total absence and weak representation, respectively, of -IARE verbs in those corners of the Empire. The vogue of deriving verbs from adjectival bases through use of -IARE was characteristic of the spoken Latin of a period subsequent to the severance of communication lines connecting those outlying provinces to the metropolis.¹² More puzzling is *(DIS)SPISSIARE's failure to strike root in Italian soil, until one considers what the verbs' outcome by regular phonetic development would have been. First we note that, like Hispano-Romance, Italian tended to merge DIS- and EX-, with s- representing the outcome of

both. There too, the erstwhile antonyms may well have ended up with an identical phonetic form, namely *spisciare (-sci- = [ʃʃ]). Now if speakers of early Italian, like their cousins in Portugal, had cast about for a new positive stem for that hypothetical verb through reanalysis into g- + VERB, they would have hit upon pisciare, a verb which, like its English cognate, serves to denote, in vulgar fashion, a certain bodily function. And since Ital. s-, though predominantly a negating prefix, can on occasion have the value of an intensive, one easily sees why speakers may have opted to avoid confusion — and perhaps even embarrassment — by simply not using the word in question.¹³

Gallo-Romance, we recall, provided the most fertile ground for *(DIS)SPISSIĀRE, due to circumstances specific to that sub-group. Firstly, prefixal wavering between reflexes of DIS- and EX- was far less common there than in Hispano- or Italo-Romance. Secondly, the phonetic modification produced there by yod, namely metathesis (*SPISSIĀRE > OFr. espeiss(i)er), was not radical enough to sever the link to espes 'thick' (< SPISSUS). Lastly, starting from espeiss(i)er (later espoissier), speakers extracted a new adjectival base espeis (later espois), which they then proceeded to use interchangeably with espes, in addition to an abstract noun espeisse (later espoisse) 'thickness'. Thus at no point was espeissier cut off from its roots in the lexical structure of French.¹⁴

I would like to conclude by asking the question why *(DIS)-SPISSIĀRE's possible role as a major component of Hisp.-Rom. despejar was overlooked by so many generations of etymologists. It has, after all, been over three hundred years since the first attempt to identify the word's origins was made. Had the solution offered here been put forth before 1954, critics would have argued, with absolute justification, that a Latin -SS- + yod cluster could have produced only a voiceless, never a voiced, palatal fricative in Hispano-Romance. A hypothetical *(DIS)SPISSIĀRE, they would have contended, while entirely plausible as a late Latin form, simply could not underlie despejar, owing to the latter's voiced palatal fricative. It is only by invoking a blend with Malkiel's *PEDIA, whose -D- + yod sequence regularly yielded a voiced palatal fricative in Portuguese, that *(DIS)SPISSIĀRE becomes a conceivable co-etymon for despejar.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Cf. Malkiel 1954:33 for a critical evaluation of those earlier conjectures. The most widely accepted etyma were EXPEDĪRE 'to disengage, extricate, set free' and SPECULĀRI (cf. SPECULUM 'mirror'). The former base is unacceptable for morphological reasons, -ĪRE > -ĪĀRE representing an unprecedented shift of conjugation class; while the latter must be rejected on semantic grounds.

² PEDICA, had it survived into Portuguese, should have produced either *peiga, showing the expected loss of intervocalic -D-; or, had syncope preceded voiced stop deletion, *pelga (cf. Leonese pielga, and Ptg. julgar 'to judge' < JUDICĀRE). Under no conceivable set of circumstances could PEDICA have yielded Ptg. peja.

Juan Corominas (1954), writing in the same year as Malkiel,

posited a Vulgar Latin *PEDEA without bothering to justify such a formation within the framework of late Latin derivational processes. Malkiel, (1954:35ff.), in contrast, believed *PEDIA (a derivative of PES, PEDIS 'foot') to have been coined by symmetry (lexical polarization) to *MANIA 'bunch, bundle' (cf. MANUS 'hand'), an adaptation of classical MANUA also necessary to explain other Romance words (especially in dialects of northwestern Italy).

³ My Berkeley doctoral dissertation (in progress) treats the lexical and geographical diffusion of the verbal suffix -IARE from its origins in the 1st century B.C., through the period of its greatest vitality (late Empire), and into the modern Romance vernaculars.

⁴ Leumann 1977:545-52 provides a concise description of Latin verbal derivation with -ARE; while Allen 1980 traces the development of inchoative -ESCERE from Latin to the Romance languages.

⁵ The palatal glides preceding and (optionally) following -ss- compel the assumption of a base *SPISSIARE rather than SPISSARE, cf., e.g., OFr. baissier 'to lower' < (*BASSIARE), engraissier 'to fatten' (< *INGRASSIARE), as against passer 'to pass' < PASSARE, cesser 'to cease' < CESSARE. Precisely the same observation holds for OProv. espeissar.

⁶ Note the near-antonymy to Span. despejar in the latter's meteorological acceptance.

⁷ In those few instances where such an alternation arose through sound change, speakers took remedial action. Thus *BASSUS, which should have produced OSpan./Ptg. *basso, shows from the earliest documents a medial palatal (baixo, OSpan.-Ptg. x = [ʃ]) due to pressure from the verb ba(i)xar (< BASSIARE). In the case of CRASSUS 'fat'-INGRASSIARE 'to fatten', Spanish discarded the verb (replacing it with engordar) while Portuguese reshaped the adjective on the model of baixo (cf. Ptg. graxo).

⁸ I know of only one other antonymous pair of the form es-VERB vs. des-VERB, namely Optg. esperar 'to hope' vs. desperar 'to lose hope'. But in that case speakers altered the negative verb to conform with the schema just given. Thus we find in Mod. Portuguese, as in Mod. Spanish, esperar vs. desesperar.

⁹ Both Malkiel and Corominas doubt that espejar ever had either of the last two meanings, and suspect misinterpretation on the part of earlier lexicographers.

¹⁰ I shall from here on speak only of *despešar, assuming that *espešar, unattested even in the earliest Old Portuguese, either merged into its former antonym or simply fell out of currency for reasons of a semantic nature sketched above.

¹¹ One is reminded in what follows of the extraction in French through false analysis of pouiller 'to put on' from dépouiller 'to pull off, plunder' (< DE+SPOLIARE).

¹² Sardinian, generally the most archaic of all the Romance languages, fails to show traces of many early innovations characteristic of all other Romance varieties. To cite two examples at random, Sardinian

maintains the contrast between Latin I and Ī, lost everywhere else (except in a small and almost equally archaic zone of southern Italy), and continues to use DOMUS 'house', a word replaced in all other vernaculars by CASA or, less commonly, MANSIO.

The Roman province of Dacia (modern Rumania), cut off from the Empire in the middle of the 3rd century A.D., was not affected by linguistic vogues originating in the late Empire.

¹³ Cf., e.g., Ital. biscia 'snake' < BESTIA. It is not unusual when two words, one of which has vulgar connotations, become homonymous for the non-vulgar one to be discarded. Cf. the replacement in Mod. American (though not British) English of ass and cock by donkey and rooster.

¹⁴ Romanists have generally viewed such Old French abstract nouns as groisse, graisse 'fatness', estrece (cf. Mod. Fr. détresse) 'narrowness', laize 'width' as reflexes of *GROSSIA, *STRICTIA, *LATIA, resulting from the spread of the suffix -IA (cf. MODESTIA 'modesty'). But given the fact that no convincing motive has been unearthed for the spread of -IA to these specific bases, I believe it preferable to view such nouns as post-verbals from *INGROSSIARE, *INGRASSIARE, *(AL)LATIARE, etc., verbs whose creation is well-motivated within the derivational framework of late spoken Latin. The post-verbal status of OFr. espeisse ~ espoisse is supported further by the existence of post-verbal adjectives espeis ~ espois. This problem is treated in greater detail in my forthcoming dissertation.

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