

The Nature of Obstruent loss in Basque Borrowings with Initial OR Clusters

The majority of work on tauto-syllabic consonant clusters explains a cross-linguistic preference for obstruent-sonorant onset clusters over other cluster types in terms of the sonority hierarchy (Sievers 1881; Steriade 1982; Clements 1990; Blevins 1995; Berent 2013). Obstruent-sonorant (OR) clusters have a steep rising sonority profile and this profile is claimed to be favored over more gradual rises, or plateaus due to the universal role of the sonority hierarchy in determining syllable structure. Phonetic principles have also been invoked to arrive at deeper explanations for the same patterns: release cues of obstruents that provide information on place of articulation and laryngeal features may be strongest when a sonorant follows, providing some rationale for this seemingly preferred sound pattern (Steriade 1999; Blevins 2004). The same types of explanations account for cross-linguistic patterns in cluster resolution: when languages without consonant clusters borrow words with initial OR-onsets, an epenthetic vowel is inserted between the two consonants, due to the vowel-like nature of the OR transition, while in sO clusters, the epenthetic vowel precedes the sibilant (Fleischacker 2005; Berent 2013; Broselow 2014).

Given this general background, the apparent loss of initial obstruents in the Basque borrowings from Romance in (1) is striking. While Proto-Basque is generally reconstructed as lacking initial clusters (Michelena 1977; Egurtzegi 2013), the expected repair in loan words, based on the typological, phonetic, and experimental work cited above, is copy-vowel epenthesis, not obstruent loss. Indeed, there is evidence for just such a vowel copy process in Basque in other loans with OR clusters, as illustrated in (2). At the same time, some words with possible Celtic, Germanic, and Romance sources are borrowed with initial OR clusters intact, as illustrated in (3), including Aquitanian forms.

In this paper we suggest that initial obstruent loss in (1) is related to Romance developments in the Basque-speaking region. In particular, the loss of obstruents before /l/ but not /r/ illustrated in (1) is a consequence of early Castillian influence. In Castillian Latin /fl/, /pl/, /bl/, /kl/ and /gl/ all show evidence of neutralization to /ʎ/ word-initially as in *llano* ‘plane’ (cf. Lat. *planum*), *llama* ‘flame’ (cf. Lat. *flamma*), and *llave* ‘key’ (cf. Lat. *claviem*) (Lausberg 1965; Penny 2006). Taking into account this sound change in Romance, we hypothesize that obstruent loss in (1) reflects contact influence from local Romance languages. In contrast, the vowel-copy process in (2) was the norm initially and medially conforming to Basque syllable structure, while initial OR clusters may have been borrowed intact (3) under conditions of intense contact and bilingualism. In sum, the data in (1) do not provide counter-evidence to universal patterns of sonority-based cluster resolution. On the contrary, the history of Basque shows a remarkable adherence to sonority-based syllable structure constraints, with the normal exception of /s/ which occurs as a final appendix.

Selected References

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(1) Initial obstruent loss in Basque borrowings from Romance

Cluster	Latin	Basque	gloss
/pl/	placet	laket	it is pleasing/pleasing
	planu(m)	lau(n) < *lanu	flat, plain
	plūma	luma	feather
/fl/	flamma	lama	flame
	flore(m)	lore	flower
/kl/	claustru(m)	laustro	cloister
	Claudiānu(m)	Laudio	(proper name)
/gl/	gloria	loria	glory

(2) Vowel-copy in Basque borrowings from Romance

Cluster	Latin	Basque	gloss
/kr/	cruce(m)	gurutze	cross
	lucru(m)	lukuru	profit, gain
/br/	libru(m)	liburu	book
/gr/	granu(m)	garau(n) < *garanu	grain

(3) Initial OR clusters borrowed intact

Cluster	Aquitanian	gloss	Compare:
/br/	BRITTEX, BRITTVLA	proper name	Britto, Britta (I-E)
/kl/	CLOEPIVS, CLOEPIAE	proper name	
/tr/	TROCCI	proper name	Troccius (Gaulish)
Cluster	Basque	gloss	Compare:
/pr/	premia, premiña	importance, necessity	Lat. <i>praemine</i> 'surpass, excel'
/br/	branka	proW, front of boat	pCeltic *bran-jo 'proW'
/pl/	plen	abundant, full	Lat. <i>plenus</i> 'full'
/bl/	bleta	chard	pGmc *bladaz 'leaf'
/kr/	kristiaāi, kristiñau	Christian	Lat. <i>christianus</i>
/gr/	grimu	cooked mistletoe berries	pGmc *grim- 'smear'
/kl/	kloska	clog, wooden shoe	Middle English <i>clogs</i>
/gl/	gloria	glory; delight, pleasure	Lat. <i>gloria</i> 'glory'
/tr/	trebe	familiar, informal, private	Lat. <i>tribus</i> 'tribe; masses'
/dr/	dringa, dringez	drink awkwardly	pGmc *drenkan 'drink'