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The Frequency of *ch* /tʃ/ in Contemporary Mexican Highland Spanish

Daniel Nappo
University of Tennessee at Martin

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That particular sounds are characteristic of different languages is widely understood. For example, studies of Amerindian languages of the Amazon basin have discovered sounds as unique as a “voiced, lateralized apical-alveolar/sublaminal-labial double flap with egressive lung air” [L,], exhibited only in Pirahã, an isolated language spoken by approximately one hundred people (Everett 92). English has an apparent proclivity for the phoneme /ʃ /, which, as Baugh and Cable point out, may be produced by twelve different spellings (14). This paper argues that the phoneme /tʃ /, represented exclusively in Spanish by the digraph *ch*, may be viewed as one of the most characteristic sounds of contemporary Mexican Spanish, which in terms of population is the most widely spoken variety of the language in the world.¹ This paper will investigate the sources of this phoneme in Mexican Spanish and offer some explanations for its ubiquity.

I. Prevalence. The voiceless, post-alveolar affricate /tʃ /, occasionally represented in Spanish phonetics textbooks by the symbols /č/ or /ĉ/, is the second most intense phoneme in Spanish with a normal articulation producing approximately 26.2 db (Albalá and Marrero 117).² While /tʃ / is one of the least common phonemes in the language,³ its frequency in Mexican Spanish is such that it has been the inspiration

¹ In some areas of northern Mexico, especially in Sonora and Chihuahua, /tʃ / tends to deaffricate to /ʃ /.

² For comparison, the most intense phoneme in Spanish is /s/ (28.68 db) and the weakest is the occlusive /č/ (4.80 db.) (Albalá and Marrero 117-20).

³ According to Carlos-Eduardo Piñeros, the phoneme /tʃ / has a frequency in Spanish of nearly 0.3% (2009, p. 327). Referring to other investigators, for example Tomás Navarro and Emilio Alarcos Llorach, Piñeros concludes a range of frequency between 0.3 and 0.4%. Carlos-Eduardo Piñeros, e-mail to the author, 21 Jan. 2009.

for popular music.⁴ A myriad of Mexican popular sayings also employ the phoneme.⁵ To the casual observer, on occasion it might seem that a Spanish speaker from Mexico, when faced with the decision to use a word featuring the digraph *ch* or a synonym without it, tends to choose the former. This often appears to be the case in highland Central Mexico, the most densely populated region of the country. Some representative examples, many of which are of colloquial usage, appear in the following table (Mexican Spanish words derived from the indigenous language Nahuatl, according to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española [DRAE]* or the Colegio de Lenguas y Literatura Indígenas' *Diccionario nauatl-español / español-nauatl*, are identified by the superscript ⁿ; usage distributions according to the CREA [*Corpus de referencia del español actual*]⁶ are provided where available; three periods [...] indicate that the Mexicanism is the standard Spanish word; the derivational suffixes '-ito/a' and '-cito/a', so common in Mexican Spanish, have been deliberately omitted here).

Mexican Spanish	Non-Mexican or Standard Spanish	English Translation
CREA distribution % by nation (Mexico / Other nations)	CREA distribution % by nation (Mexico / Other nations)	
acachautle ⁿ (--- / ---)	...	an adhesive made from sugar cane ('caña' [akatl])
achicalar ⁿ (--- / ---)	...	to prepare dry seed for animal feed
achichinle ⁿ (100% / 0%)	lameculos, lambiscón, lambiscona	an especially servile and adulating person

⁴ See the lyrics of the song "Chilango banda" by the Mexico City rock band Café Tacuba, from their album *Avalancha de éxitos*, Warner Music Latina, 1996. CD. The initial stanza of the song is: "Ya chole chango chilango / que chafa chamba te chutas / no checa andar de tacuche / y chale con la charola."

⁵ Some examples provided by Herón Pérez Martínez include: "A quien le gustan chicarrones, de oír chillar un puerco se alegra" and "Entre los chinacos y los hachas, dejaron a la Iglesia sin hilachas" (2004, pp. 129, 132). Another popular manifestation of /tʃ/ worthy of investigation is the difference between hypocorisms in Mexican and Peninsular Spanish. In many examples, 'ch' seems to be something of a default phoneme: Chucho, Chuy (Jesús), Chayo/Charo (Rosario), Chela (Graciela), Chente (Vicente), Nacho (Ignacio), Chavela (Isabel), Chema (José María), etc. While many of these hypocorisms are the same in both Mexico and Spain, a few featuring /tʃ/ are predominantly Mexican, for example Chepa instead of Pepa or Pepita (Josefina), or Lucha instead of Mariluz (María de la Luz).

⁶ It is important to note that the CREA, an invaluable database that references a multitude of written and transcribed oral texts from 1975-2004 and permits inquiries for more than 160 million words (base words, derivatives, and short phrases), is comprised equally of texts from Spain and texts from the remaining Spanish-speaking countries of the world. This 50-50 distribution means, of course, that Spain's representation in the CREA is exaggerated *vis-à-vis* the actual numbers of Peninsular and American Spanish speakers in the world.

	(6.89% / 93.08%), (44.44% / 55.55%), (--- / ---)	
achicopalarse (100% / 0%)	desanimarse; acobardarse (6.00% / 94.00%); (21.42% / 78.56%)	to get sad, depressed; to be a coward
agacharse (3.6% / 96.4%)	doblarse (15.30% / 84.68%)	to bend over
apachar ⁿ (--- / ---)	magullar; aplastar (0% / 100%); (10.36% / 89.61%)	to bruise, to squash
apapachar; apapachos (100% / 0%); (83.33% / 16.66%)	mimar, acariciar; caricias (4.41% / 95.57%), (10.64% / 89.30%); (11.50% / 88.44%)	to spoil, to coddle; caresses
carcacha (33.33% / 66.65%)	cucaracha (13.01% / 86.94%)	an old jalopy
cempasúchil ⁿ (100% / 0%)	caléndula, maravilla (0% / 100%), (various definitions)	marigold
chabacano (32.55% / 67.41%)	albaricoque (6% / 94%)	apricot
chachalaca ⁿ (--- / ---)	parlanchín, parlanchina (7.24% / 92.68%), (9.52% / 90.46%)	chatterbox
chacuaco (50% / 50%)	chimenea (5.45% / 94.5%)	(factory) chimney
chafa	mal hecho, mal hecha	shoddy

(23.52% / 76.46%)	(11.90% / 88.05%), (5.17% / 94.78%)	
¡Chale! (exclamation) (81.81% / 18.18%)	¡No inventes! (8.65% / 91.28% --oral examples only)	No way!
chamaco, chamaca (73.77% / 26.18%), (83.33% / 16.66%)	niño, niña (4.12% / 95.83% --oral examples only), (3.32% / 96.63% --oral examples only)	child
chambear; chamba (from the Old Portuguese <i>chamba</i>) (100% / 0%); (71.87% / 28.1%)	trabajar; trabajo (8.70% / 91.27% --oral examples only); (12.25% / 87.70% --oral examples only)	to work; work, job
chambón, chambona (6.25% / 93.75%), (40% / 60%)	torpe (7.44% / 92.52%)	clumsy
chamorro (50% / 50%)	pantorrilla (15.62% / 84.35%)	calf (of leg)
chamuco (100% / 0%)	diablo (10.16% / 89.79%)	devil
chancla (80% / 20%)	sandalia (6.77% / 93.17%)	sandal, flip-flop
changarro (100% / 0%)	tienda pequeña (0% / 100%)	small store; or a display (often roadside) of goods for sale
chango (91.66% / 8.32%)	mono (various definitions)	monkey
chaparro, chaparra (57.44% / 42.53%), (63.63% / 36.36%)	bajo de estatura, baja de estatura (25% / 75%), (0% / 100%)	short, of small physical stature

chapopote ⁿ (95.83% / 4.16%)	asfalto (6.46% / 93.50%)	asphalt
chapulín ⁿ (77.77% / 22.20%)	saltamontes (6.49% / 93.44%)	grasshopper, locust
charamusca (100% / 0%)	confitura en forma de tirabuzón (--- / ---)	candy twist
charola (97.19% / 2.79%)	bandeja (3.22% / 96.73%)	tray (to serve food)
charro (49.65% / 50.33%)	vaquero, jinete (15.41% / 84.53%), (5.49% / 94.46%)	cowboy
chasco (4.58% / 95.38%)	engaño, decepción (11.97% / 88.00%), (5.98% / 93.96%)	deception that is often the very opposite of what one expects
chayote ⁿ (81.25% / 18.73%)	...	a fruit native to the Americas
chavo, chava (55.22% / 44.75%), (69.38% / 30.61%)	joven, mozo, moza (3.75% / 96.20% --oral examples only), (7.37% / 92.58%), (5.81% / 94.14%)	boy, girl
chela (feminine form of <i>chelo</i> , from the Maya <i>chel</i> [blonde]) (12.50% / 87.50%)	cerveza (11.53% / 88.42%)	beer
chícharos (69.31% / 30.65%)	guisantes (0.47% / 99.44%)	peas
chicharrón, chicarrones (32.25% / 67.69%), (20.54% / 79.37%)	...	pork rinds

chichicuilote ⁿ (100% / 0%)	andarríos (0% / 100%)	sandpiper
chichis ⁿ (95% / 5%)	tetas, mamas (8.58% / 91.37%), (2.40% / 97.54%)	tits, breasts
chicle ⁿ (22.25% / 77.70%)	goma de masticar (--- / ---)	chewing gum
chicotear (50% / 50%)	azotar (24.39% / 75.54%)	to whip, to flog
chido, chida (100% / 0%), (100% / 0%)	estupendo, estupenda (5.29% / 94.66%), (9.14% / 90.81%)	fantastic
chiflado, chiflada (8.94% / 91.0%), (14.28% / 85.66%)	loco, loca (7.24% / 92.70%), (10.47% / 89.47%)	crazy
chilango, chilanga (87.50% / 12.50%), (--- / ---)	defeño, defeña (100% / 0%), (100% / 0%)	a person from Mexico City
chimuelo, chimuela (100% / 0%), (100% / 0%)	desdentado, desdentada (10.52% / 89.44%), (12.22% / 87.74%)	toothless, missing teeth
chingadera (50.00% / 49.99%)	cosa (3.72% / 96.23% --oral examples only)	unspecified object
chingar (56.52% / 43.45%)	joder (5.32% / 94.62%)	to fuck; to fuck up
chípil ⁿ (--- / ---)	pegado a su mama, pegada a su mama, mimado, mimada	spoiled, seeking attention

	(0% / 100%), (--- / ---), (7.14% / 92.84%), (6.25% / 93.70%)	
chismear (0% / 100%)	cotillear (3.40% / 96.59%)	to gossip; to be nosey
chismoso, chismosa (22.44% / 77.53%), (19.35% / 80.60%)	chismoso, chismosa	gossipy, nosey
chocar; chocante (9.34% / 90.61%); (4.65% / 95.28%)	colisionar; impactante (1.66% / 98.31%) (11.53% / 88.43%)	to crash; jarring, moving
chones (100% / 0%)	calzones (31.81% / 68.14%)	underwear
chongo (75.75% / 24.24%)	moño (various definitions)	hair styled in a bun
chorcha (85.71% / 14.28%)	reunión de amigos (--- / 99.93%)	(unplanned) reunion or party of friends
chota (9.75% / 90.2%)	poli (2.76% / 97.2%)	cops
chuchuluco (100% / 0%)	tamal de frijol; golosina (--- / ---); (8.73% / 91.23%)	bean tamale; sweet morsel
chunche (20% / 80%)	chisme (17.72% / 82.24%)	gadget, thingamajig
cochino, cochina (12.16% / 87.81%)	sucio, sucia (9.83% / 90.10%), (9.12% / 90.82%)	dirty, filthy
enchilar (100% / 0%)	condimentar con chili; irritar (--- / ---); (6.29% / 93.64%)	to add chili or spice; to irritate
enchinchar (--- / ---)	molestar (7.22% / 92.73%)	to pester

facha (14.22% / 85.74%)	aspecto físico (4.82% / 95.13%)	look, appearance
¡Fuchi! (exclamation) (72.72% / 27.27%)	¡Puaj! (0% / 100%)	Ug! Pee-yoo!
gacho, gacha (48.93% / 51.03%), (various definitions)	malo, mala, feo, fea, desagradable (2.28% / 97.65% --oral examples only), (5.51% / 94.44% --oral examples only), (14.30% / 85.64%), (9.33% / 90.61%), (7.42% / 92.53%)	terrible, awful
garrocha (13.48% / 86.46%)	vara (11.59% / 88.37%)	pole, prod
gabacho (22.22% / 77.77%)	estadounidense, americano (43.75% / 56.24%), (5.28% / 94.68% --oral examples only)	American
guarache (from the Tarascan <i>kuarache</i>) (100% / 0%)	sandalia de cuero (--- / ---)	leather sandal
hilachas (6.25% / 93.75%)	hilos (16.20% / 83.74%)	threads
jarocho, jarocho (86.66% / 13.32%), (70% / 30%)	veracruzano, veracruzana (93.65% / 6.34%), (96.72% / 3.26%)	a person from Veracruz
machero (50% / 50%)	corral, caballeriza (10.20% / 89.75%), (13.92% / 86.04%)	corral, stables
malinchista ⁿ (85.71% / 14.28%)	...	pejorative term for someone who favors foreign things
metiche (82.35% / 14.28%)	entrometido, entrometida (10.71% / 89.26%), (18.18% / 81.78%)	meddling, nosy

mocho, mocha (10% / 90%), (33.33% / 66.64%)	mojigato, mojigata, santurrón, santurrona (5.88% / 94.10%), (16.66% / 83.31%), (26.31% / 73.66%), (16.66% / 83.32%)	prudish
pachanga (44.92% / 55.00%)	fiesta desordenada , alboroto (--- / ---), (9.80% / 90.16%)	raucous party
pachorra (8.69% / 91.27%)	tardanza, indolencia (11.86% / 88.10%), (13.72% / 86.21%)	sluggishness, slowness
panocha (11.42% / 88.5%) ⁷	coño (1.81% / 98.14%)	vagina, pussy
pinche (64.93% / 35.03%)	maldito, maldita, mezquino, mezquina (9.95% / 89.99%), (9.65% / 90.29%), (7.50% / 92.45%), (7.65% / 92.30%)	damned, cursed, lousy
planchar (11.00% / 88.55%)	aplstar (10.36% / 89.61%)	to flatten
tiliche	tela	tile
titipuchal ⁿ (100% / 0%)	muchedumbre (10.63% / 89.31%)	much / many, a lot
tlachique ⁿ	aguamiel	liquid taken from the maguey cactus,

⁷ Of the 88.55% cited for countries other than Mexico, 51.42% of occurrence is attributed to the United States.

(--- / ---)	(60% / 40%)	unfermented pulque
tlacuache ⁿ	zarigüeya, oposum	opossum
(100% / 0%)	(50% / 50%), (--- / ---)	

II. The Peninsular Sources of /tʃ/. Before examining American sources of /tʃ/ that led to many of the words listed in the preceding table, it would be useful to review the peninsular sources. The digraph *CH* occurred naturally in Latin, as evidenced in such words as *MĀCHĪNA*. However, in Vulgar Latin these letters produced a sound distinct from /tʃ/, and in all likelihood more like the Old Spanish velar fricative /x/ or the velar occlusive /k/. This being the case, the popular transmission of the phoneme /tʃ/ into Spanish from Vulgar Latin has, generally speaking, three sources.

The first source is the sound associated with the sequence of letters *CT*, which evolved into many contemporary Spanish words featuring /tʃ/. For example: *NOCTE* > ‘noche’; *ŌCTŌ* > ‘ocho’; *FACTUS* > ‘hecho’; *STRĪCTU* > ‘estrecho’; etc. The second source is the sound produced by the sequence of letters *C’L*, following a consonant, where the apostrophe represents the disappearance of an unstressed vowel. Examples of this phonological process include *MANCŪLA* > ‘mancha’; *CONCHŪLA* > ‘concha’; *MASCŪLUS* > ‘macho’; etc. The third source of popular transmission is the combination *ŪLT*. This sequence of letters and its sound lead to the vocalization of *L* > *i*, which eventually produces the affricate /tʃ/ and, orthographically, the digraph *ch*. Examples of this transmission include *CŪLTĒLLU* > ‘cuchillo’; *MŪLTU* > ‘mucho’; *AUSCŪLTĀRE* > ‘escuchar’; etc. Students of phonological change need look no further than English words as common as ‘culture’ (/kŭl: tʃər/) or ‘agriculture’ (/əg: rī kŭl: tʃər/) for examples of this process at work.

One other possible source of the digraph *ch* and its accompanying phoneme is Basque, the only pre-Romanic language still spoken in the Iberian Peninsula, and one of only four non-Indo-European languages in all of Europe (Penny 3). As is the case with all pre-Romanic languages, there are questions about whether a modern Spanish word believed to be inherited from Basque was transmitted first through Vulgar Latin, thus demonstrating the expected phonological changes; furthermore, due to Basque’s endurance into the present day, it is difficult to ascertain when or if it contributed a word to Spanish, or vice-versa. A potentially productive source of the phoneme /tʃ/ is the Basque sound represented by the digraph *TX*. Some examples include ‘cachorro’ (< *katxorro*, although the *DRAE* provides the Latinism *CATŪLUS* as its etymon), ‘chaparro’ (< *txaparro*), ‘chamorro’ (< *txamorro*), ‘charco’ (< *txarko*, but “voz onomatopéyica” according to the *DRAE*), and ‘pincho’ (< *pintxo*), the Basque version of tapas. Even the common word ‘chico’ has a counterpart in Basque, *txiko*, although according to the *DRAE* its etymon is the Latinism *CICCUM*. In general, recent editions of the *DRAE* feature fewer words attributed to Basque, and the investigation of R. L. Trask rejected Basque origins for all words except ‘izquierdo’ (418). Even if all these words were

proven to have come from Basque, the total number would be so small in comparison to the previously mentioned Latin sources they would be virtually insignificant. The same may also be said of possible contributions from Greek, Germanic, and most other languages that provided loanwords prior to the introduction of Spanish in the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century. For example, the *DRAE* (1992) includes only thirteen words with initial *ch* derived from Arabic,⁸ a language that contributed a myriad of loanwords to the Spanish lexicon over the course of nearly eight centuries.⁹ From Italian, which provided most of its loans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Penny 281), Spanish received ‘capricho’ (< *capriccio*), ‘pichón’ (< *picciōn*), ‘salchicha’ (< *salciccía*), and ‘superchería’ (< *superchiería*), among others. From Old Genoese comes ‘chusma’ (< *ciüsma*). Like Italian, French provided most of its loanwords to Spanish in the centuries following the conquest of Mexico (Penny 274), thus diminishing its importance as a source of the phoneme /tʃ/. It may also be noted that contemporary standard French does not utilize this phoneme.

III. The American Sources of /tʃ/. Nahuatl (also Náhuatl, Nauatl), the Uto-Aztecan language spoken by the Mexica people of central highland Mexico, as well as by several indigenous groups of Mesoamerica, is second only to Vulgar Latin as a source of /tʃ/ in modern Spanish. It is because of the many Nahua contributions to Spanish that the Mexican dialect appears to exhibit the previously described tendency for words featuring /tʃ/.

Sixteenth century Nahuatl had several phonemes among its phonemic inventory that, because of the Conquest and its historical remoteness from contemporary usage, are only speculative. For example, the name of the reigning Mexica emperor at the time of the Spanish invasion, Moctezuma II, has been spelled in countless ways: ‘Montezuma’, ‘Moctesuma’, ‘Motekujtsoma’, etc. Nahuatl, however, is a living language that continues to produce new words for things that did not exist in the pre-Conquest era. With a semantics based on the combination of different elements, many of which are mono- or disyllabic, Nahuatl has proven to be adaptable. To describe hot asphalt, for example, the language has generated ‘chapopote’, a shortened and Hispanicized form of *chapopotl*, which in turn comes from *tsakuapopochtli*. The individual elements of this word are *tsakua* (“sticky”), *popoch* (“incense”), and *tli* (a substantive article); in combination, they mean a “sticky, smelly substance.” The use of Mexicano, a hybrid language formed of Spanish and Nahuatl in the region west of the Malinche volcano in Central Mexico, demonstrates the adaptability and persistence of the pre-Colombian language.

⁸ According to Leiva (1999), these words are ‘chafariz’, ‘chafarote’, ‘chaleco’, ‘charape’, ‘charrán’, ‘cherva’, ‘chifla’, ‘chiísmo’, ‘chilaba’, ‘chirivía’, ‘chisme’, ‘chivo’ y ‘chupa’ (197). None of these words is particular to Mexican Spanish.

⁹ According to Rafael Lapesa (1968), Arabic has contributed more than 4,000 words to the Spanish language (p. 162).

Two Nahuatl phonemes, represented by the digraphs *CH* and *TS* in modern orthography, have been especially productive in contributing words featuring /tʃ/ into modern Spanish. Unlike its Latin counterpart, the Nahuatl *CH* corresponded with the voiceless palatal affricate /tʃ/ (Flores Farfán 115). On the other hand, the digraph *TS* (sometimes represented by *TZ*) was associated with a phoneme unlike any existing in sixteenth century Spanish and, accommodating itself to Spanish phonotactics, became /tʃ/, evolving from perhaps a dental or alveolar-dental affricate to the prepalatal affricate phoneme.¹⁰ As most histories of the Spanish language explain, the initial contributions of Nahuatl were mostly names for the flora, fauna, and specific, man-made items in the Americas that the Spanish had never encountered before (Buesa 326-27; Lapesa 347; Mejías 22-24; Penny 276-77; etc.). Some examples that derive from the Nahuatl digraphs *CH* and *TS* include 'chayote' (< *chayotl*), 'chili' (< *chilli*), chachalaca (< *chachalaka*), cempasúchil (< *senpoalli xochitl*), 'chicle' (< *tsiktli*), 'chomite' (< *tsomitl*, cited in Mejías 77), and 'Malinche' (< *malintzin*). While examples of flora and fauna are most common, many Nahuatl loanwords used in Mexican Spanish also refer to human interactions, for example 'apapachar' (< *papachos* < *papatzoa*)¹¹ and 'achichinle' or 'achichinque' (< *achiichiktli*). The Nahuatl *X* and its accompanying phoneme have also produced a very well-known example of *ch* with 'chocolate' (< *xokolatl*), but in most other instances the predictable result has occurred: the velar fricative /x/, as in 'mexicano' or 'mejicano' (< *mexikatl*, later accommodated to the Spanish gender system), jitomate (< *xiktomatl*), jocote (< *xokotl*), etc.¹²

Given the Nahuatl influence described above, Mexican Spanish has evolved with an additional source of the phoneme /tʃ/, creating a linguistic environment where the higher frequency of its articulation produces a general affinity for it among speakers. Due to the fact that Spanish was imposed from above (as well as from without) upon a densely populated area where Nahuatl had been the language of commerce, government, literature, and all manner of human interaction, the increased frequency of /tʃ/ must have been considerable, especially in the formative period of American Spanish in the sixteenth century. The imposition of Spanish in Central Mexico following the Conquest is a case of language shift comparable to that of Latin in the Iberian

¹⁰ According to Flores Farfán, the phoneme corresponding to *TS* does not exist in Spanish and identifies it as an affricate [tʃ] (116).

¹¹ Note the Latin prefix *AD* > *a* included at the front of the verb. This normally occurs, according to Penny, as a means of creating new verbs from nouns and adjectives, for example 'abrazar' (< *AD BRACCHIUM*) (285).

¹² The Nahuatl *X* and its phoneme have also produced the sibilant phonemes /s/ and /ʃ/, as in the toponym 'Xochimilco' (/so tʃ i mil: ko/) and 'Xola' (/ʃ o: la/). It does not appear, however, that this second example was originally a Nahuatl word. The Colegio de Lenguas y Literaturas Indígenas states that the Nahuatl grapheme *X* corresponds to "el fonema... **sha**"(16).

Peninsula following the Roman conquest in the third and second centuries B.C. (Pharies 36). John Lipski observes that Nahuatl was used as a “lingua franca” by Spaniards throughout Mexico and Central America (79). As many Spanish men had children with Native American women—and these women, either as mothers or nannies, tended to raise the children—, a “symbiotic relation between Spanish and Nahuatl” was fostered in Mexico (Lipski 79). Consequently, the wider usage of /tʃ/ in Mexican Spanish may be viewed as a mild hypercorrection when there was doubt about the pronunciation of a Nahua loanword (e.g., ‘chayote’), or newly coined word (e.g., ‘chapopote’). In the sixteenth century, and to a diminishing extent thereafter, Nahuatl exerted much influence on the superstratum language of Spanish. Today, on a wider, largely unconscious level, there is an apparent affinity for the sound due to the particular socio-historical factors which developed in the region.

For a relatively recent example of the seeming predilection for *ch* in Mexican Spanish, we need look no farther than the word ‘mariachi.’ Since this word denotes a group of elaborately dressed musicians from Jalisco, there are very few words in Spanish as Mexican as ‘mariachi.’ However, the source of ‘mariachi’ is the French word *mariage* (marriage), and its historical introduction into Spanish can be said with much certainty to be the French occupation of Mexico from 1862 to 1867. During this period, wealthy French families often hired Mexican musicians to perform at their weddings and other social functions. Since the French living in Mexico tended to continue speaking their language, the word ‘mariachi’ undoubtedly developed among Spanish speakers, with the French consonantal sound of the last syllable replaced by the impingement of /tʃ/.

It is interesting to observe, however, that French *-age* nouns (from the Latin *ĀTICU* > ‘-age’) introduced into Spanish normally developed into ‘-aje’. For example, there is an extensive history of such Gallicisms (including Old French and Provençal) and Occitanisms being incorporated into Spanish when, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, large numbers of French pilgrims crossed the Pyrenees to travel the westward road to Santiago de Compostela, the Galician city where the remains of Saint James had been discovered at the beginning of the ninth century. According to Lapesa, the ninth to eleventh centuries saw the introduction of dozens of new loanwords to Spanish from across the Pyrenees (119-21). Some of these words include ‘hereje’ (< *eretge*, Prov.), ‘homenaje’ (< *hommage*), ‘linaje’ (< *linhatge*, Prov.), ‘mensaje’ (< *messatge*, Prov.), ‘ultraje’ (< *outrage*, Old French), etc. Later Gallicisms include *paje* (< *page*), ‘camuflaje’ (< *camouflage*), ‘doblaje’ (< *doublage*), ‘espionaje’ (< *espionnage*), ‘menaje’ (< *ménage*), ‘personaje’ (< *personnage*), ‘sabotaje’ (< *sabotage*), *tatuaje* (< *tatouage*), *garaje* (< *garage*), etc. Nevertheless, when a similar French word (*mariage*) was introduced in central Mexico several centuries later, the expected product of Spanish phonotactics (-aje) did not occur, but instead produced the ubiquitous ‘-chi’ (/tʃi/). Central Mexico has become a linguistic environment where the increased occurrence of the phoneme /tʃ/, due to the popular transmission of it from Latin as well as from Nahuatl, has led to an affinity for it among Spanish speakers of that region.

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