

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*.



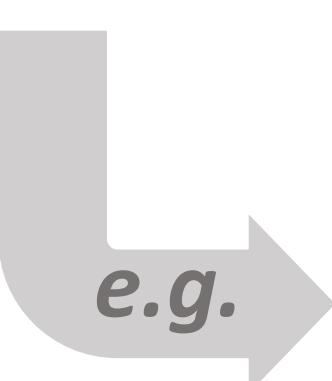
plants & produce

alcachofa “artichoke”; *alhucema* “lavender, Spanish sage”; *aldíza* “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.



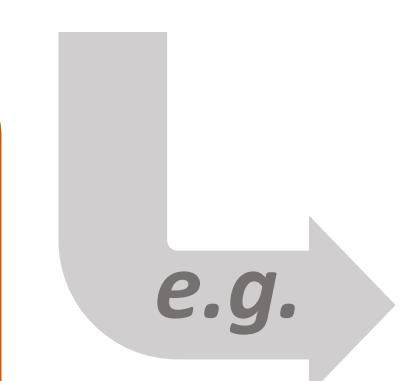
plants

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

architecture

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

/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/.



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.



plants

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

architecture

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

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-*.



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. *acinos* → OSp. **acino* → Sp. *alcino* “wild basil”
- Grk. *amýgdalo* → Lat. *amyndūla* (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. *aşsíbr* → Sp. *acíbar* → Mexican Sp. *alcíbar* “aloe”
- Ar. *ağulgulín* → *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. *mūrdīcus* “biting” → OSp. **mórdego* → OSp. *mórdago* → Sp. *muérdago* → regional Sp. *almuérдago* “mistletoe”
- Ar. *manārah* → Turkish *minare* → Fr. *minaret* → Sp. **minar(e)* → Sp. *alminar* “minaret”

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