

Is /tʃ/ a Phonaesteme in Mexican Spanish? Origins and Phonosemantic Fields

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Mexican Spanish is one of the major Hispanic dialects, both in number of speakers and mass media presence throughout the American continent. Besides its own definitory linguistic characteristics, Mexican Spanish is well known in the Hispanosphere for its regionalisms and slang words, many of them containing the phoneme /tʃ/, represented orthographically as {ch}: *chido* ‘cool/great’, *chinga-* ‘to screw/to annoy’, *chale* ‘Oh no!’, *cheve* “beer”, *chavo* “kiddo”, etc.

The genesis of the phoneme /tʃ/ in patrimonial Spanish words came from the evolution of Latin intervocalic consonant groups /kt/ and nasal+obstruent+liquid, like *nocte-*, → *noche* ‘night’, *octo-* → *ocio* ‘eight’, *ampliu-* → *ancho* ‘wide’, *conc(u)la-* → *concha* ‘shell’, *infla-* → *hincha-* ‘to inflate’. It is noteworthy the fact that there are no word-initial groups containing /tʃ/ in those patrimonial words.

However, pre-Romanic Iberian language's influence, especially Basque, provided Spanish with words with initial /tʃ/: *chaparro* ‘short person’, *chueco* ‘bend’, *chatarra* ‘scrap metal’. In the same vein, phonosymbolic mechanisms have been proposed to explain some etymologies with initial /tʃ/, like *chorro* ‘flow/a lot’, *churro* ‘churro’ or *chispa* ‘spark’, all related to both sizzling or sparkling sounds, or the case of some patrimonial words that show /tʃ/ instead of an expected /s/ due to phonosymbolic motivations (Lara, 2019b; Malkiel, 1990): *cimice-* → *chinche* (vs. expected **cince*) ‘bedbug’, *sibila-* → *chifla-* ‘to whistle’ (vs. Latinism *silba-*) or *fistula-/cistula-* → *chilla-* ‘to screech/to cry’. Other sources for /tʃ/ initial words came from other romance languages, especially Iberian ones, e.g., *chicharo* ‘pea’ from Mozarabic, *choza* ‘shack’ from Galician-Portuguese, or *chuleta* ‘chop’ from Catalan.

All those words are part of the everyday lexicon in essentially all Spanish dialects, however, since most specialized terminology came from Latin and classical Greek, languages without /tʃ/, there is an association between non-colloquial lexicon and the absence of /tʃ/. This association is like the /ts, dz/ correlation to colloquiality in Dimotiki vs. Katharevousa words in Modern Greek as described by Joseph (1994).

This association between colloquiality and /tʃ/ was further enhanced due to the introduction of words from Caló language, a mixed Romani-Iberian language from Roma people living in the Iberian Peninsula. In Mexico, most of these terms were associated with the slang used by thieves and countercultural movements in the early XX century (Lara, 2019b, 2019a): *chavo* ‘youngster’ (from *chavó* ‘boy’), *choro* ‘lip service’ (from *choro* ‘thief’), or *chinga-* ‘to screw/to annoy’ (from *chingarar* ‘to fight’).

Native Mexican languages, especially Nahuatl, have provided a lot of words with /tʃ/ (Lope Blanch, 1969): *chile* ‘chili’, *huarache* ‘sandal’, *chicle* ‘chewing gum’, *chapulín* ‘grasshopper’, or *chamaco* ‘kiddo’. Most of these words are associated with rural or colloquial lexical fields, a lot of them used in the same registers than Caló derived terms: *chte* ‘house’ (from Nahuatl *chantli*), *cholo* ‘Cholo’ (from Nahuatl *xolo*) or *chichi* ‘breasts’ (from Nahuatl *chichi* ‘to suck’).

All those factors contribute to a perceived colloquialism of words containing /tʃ/, causing most terms with this phoneme to be replaced by other words without it in formal or standardized settings, especially in international dubbing directed to Hispanic America, like *sandalia* ‘sandal’ for the more usual *chancla*, *joven* ‘youngster’ for *muchacho* or *chavo* or *mono* ‘monkey’ for *chango*.

/tʃ/ phoneme is also used in *motherese* and *baby talk* as a correspondent of /s/: *chi* ‘yes’ (*sí*), *cheñol* ‘sir’ (*señor*), *chabocco* ‘tasty’ (*sabroso*). This endearment use is extended to the traditional

formation of hypocoristics in Mexico (Estrada, 2015; Lara, 2019b): *Chucho* for *Jesús*, *Checo* for *Sergio*, *Güicho* for *Luis*, *Charo* for *Rosario*, *Chero* for *Lucero*, or *Lucha* for *Lucía*.

Thus, there is a continuous association between /tʃ/ and the lexical fields of colloquiality, rurality, thieves' jargon, expressivity, endearment, and childishness in Mexican Spanish. These associations are confirmable by observing the use of /tʃ/ both in the creation of onomatopoeic words, like *chaz chaz* ‘to pay cash’, *chaca chaca* ‘the sound of a washing machine/intercourse’, *fuchi/guáchala* ‘ew!’, or, the modification of existent words by adding them /tʃ/ and effectively making them sound colloquial: *chesco* for *refresco* ‘soda’, *cheve/chela* for *cerveza* ‘beer’, *chemo* for *cemento* ‘inhalant drugs’, *chon(es)* for *calzón(es)* ‘underwear’, *vocho* for *Volkswagen*, etc. The perceived colloquiality of /tʃ/ is also attestable in the variation of /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ in loanwords coming primarily from English, being the ones realized with /tʃ/ perceived as colloquial or unsophisticated and the ones with /ʃ/ as sophisticated or prestigious: *chor(t)/short* for ‘short’, *champú/shampú* for ‘shampoo’, or *champaña/shampán* from ‘Champagne’.

Last, but not least, it is worth mentioning that in Central Mexican dialects /tʃ/ is realized as an aspirated fricative [tʃʰ]. Both the fricative portion and the aspiration can be especially prominent in emphatic uses of colloquial interjections with initial /tʃ/, like *¡chale!*, *¡chin!* or *¡chinga!*, in which an extra-palatalization could also be added (Figure 1). It will be proposed that this emphatic realization of /tʃ/ is correlated to the perceived colloquiality of it.

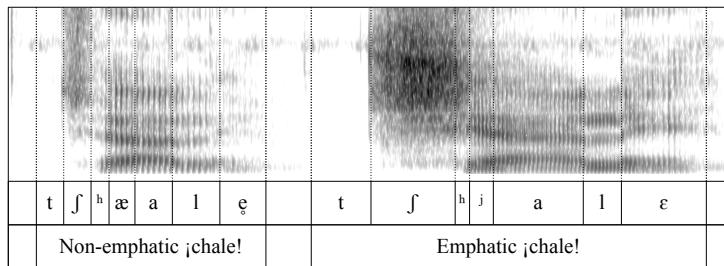


Figure 1. Non-emphatic and emphatic realization of *¡chale!*

Some of this evidence seems to suggest the possibility of /tʃ/ as a phonaesteme at least in some subsets of the lexical fields mentioned above. Those groups will be tested using Kwon and Round's (2015) criteria for the canonicity of phonaesthemes to determine if /tʃ/ could be analyzed as a phonaestheme associated with some well-defined or recurrent pairings of sound and meaning or not.

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