

Language Contact and the Romance Diasystem: Revisiting the question of Uvular [ʀ]

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Though the standard French rhotic is uvular today, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the apical “rolled” [r] inherited from Latin could still be found in Normandy (Girard & Lyche, 2003), in Canada, and in other non-standard dialects. While many historical phoneticians, Bourciez (1967, §167), Pope (1952, §498) et Martinet (1962, p. 201) maintain that uvular [ʀ] appeared only as of the 17th century, the Breton dialectologist François Falc’hun (1972) made the claim that the coexistence of an apical [r] and a dorsal [ʀ] had its origin in a much earlier state of Galloromance, an argument which he made based on the treatment of Breton uvular fricatives as French rhotics in numerous toponyms, ex. Bret. /nɛχ/ ‘elevation’ represented with a final ⟨r⟩ in numerous modern toponyms:

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|-----|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| (1) | <i>Nermont</i> (Saint-Coulomb) | (3) | <i>Pêne Nère</i> (Haute-Pyrénées) |
| (2) | <i>Nerville-la-Forêt</i> (Val-d'Oise) | (4) | <i>Ners</i> (Gard) |

If Falc’hun’s hypothesis never gained traction, it is because his old-school dialectological approach could not stand up to the expectations of 70s generative phonology put in place by Chomsky & Halle (1968) and others. Falc’hun’s 1972 article provides no attempt of a synchronic analysis of presumed [r] and [ʀ] distribution in French and its historical varieties. This presentation therefore provides a synchronic analysis of *r* like phones and their phonological mapping in later Gallo-Romance.

It is a well-known fact of classical Latin and of many of its Romance descendants that singleton /r/ and geminate /r:/ contrasted phonemically in intervocalic position, ex. Span. *pero* /pero/ ‘but’ vs. *perro* /per:o/ ‘dog’. In the Romance languages, this length contrast has generally evolved into a quality contrast (cf. Bosson, 2008, p. 283). While lenis *[r] vs. fortis *[r:] are in near complementary distribution, they contrast in intervocalic position, which can be presented as follows:

Figure 1.	#__V	__C	V__V	.C__V	__#
Italian	[r:]	[r]	[r]/[r:]	[r]	[r]
Castilian	[r:]	[r]	[r]/[r:]	[r]	[r]
Portuguese	[ʁ:]	[r]	[r]/[ʁ:]	[r]	[r]
Old French	[χ:]	[r]	[r]/[χ:]	[r]	[χ:]
Latin Etymon	RARO	ORDO	RARUM / CARRUM	GRANDIS	PER

As shown in Figure 1, the distribution of allophones in Old French is very close to that of modern Portuguese and the other Romance languages, with the exception of one position: Coda. Coincidentally Old French (and arguable Modern French in its resonants) was affected by synchronic rule of voicing neutralization in final position. Furthermore, the specific dorsal pronunciation of fortis *[r:] in Galloromance is best explained by clear synchronic voicing and place assimilation rules proper to both adstratal Celtic and Germanic languages. Finally, Falc’hun’s schematic hypothesis is supported by modern phonetic data (International Phonetic Association, 1999, p. 78-81) which clearly shows an allophonic distribution of voiced [ʁ] and voiceless [χ] presenting the possibility for confusion with Breton [χ]. Ultimately, phonetic detail, phonemic considerations from the Romance diasystem and historical sociolinguistics are required to make sense of Falc’hun’s initial claim that dorsal [ʀ] should be dated to Gallo-Romance.

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