



Add Arabic and Simmer for Eight Centuries

By Tony Beckwith

The strength of a language does not lie in rejecting what is foreign but in assimilating it.

—Goethe

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Language is history.

Words have been our constant companions on the long journey of human evolution, capturing the prosaic and the sublime, conveying the tangible and the ephemeral, expressing the essence of our existence. In the natural order of things, words are assimilated and discarded as times change, people move, and cultures overlap. Like us, our languages are organic; like us, our languages evolve or die.

Sometimes the assimilation involves just a word or two; a convenient expression crosses a linguistic frontier to take root in a different language and, after a period of time, loses its “foreign-ness” and is granted “native” status. Words like paparazzi, glasnost, and geisha come to mind.

In other cases, a whole collection of words is borrowed when a new technology of some kind is introduced from one culture to another, as we have recently seen with the migration

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of computer-related terms from English to other languages. Something similar occurred many years ago when the French brought their cuisine to Great Britain, enriching the English language with words like au gratin, canapé, and roux.

And then there are loans and transfers on a massive scale that influence a language and give it a breadth of expression and depth of nuance that it never had before. One example of this was the Norman conquest of Britain in 1066.¹ Another was the Moorish invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 A.D. Who were the Moors? Where were they from? Before answering those questions, let us very briefly review the history of the land they conquered.

Neanderthals, of course, roamed the

Iberian Peninsula about 32,000 years ago, long before our story begins. Far closer in time to our period, the area was inhabited by Iberians, Celts, Celtiberians, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Greeks, among others. The region was called Hispania when it became a province of the Roman Empire, and the language spoken there during that period was a variation of the Vulgar Latin imposed by the Romans over existing local dialects. The Empire collapsed around 476 and Hispania was subsequently taken over by the Visigoths—Germanic tribes that ruled the Peninsula until they were defeated by the Moors.

These Moorish invaders were nomadic Muslims who crossed the western Mediterranean at its narrowest point, the Straits of Gibraltar,

then swept across the rugged Iberian terrain in wave after conquering wave that carried them as far as the Ebro River in the north. They were mainly Berbers and Arabs from North Africa, but their inspiration was the Islamic faith, which had been born almost a century earlier many miles to the east in Mecca. During the late 7th century, the Muslim empire rippled out from the desert kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula to hold sway over a vast territory that stretched from India in the east to the Pyrenees in the west. Arab horsemen rode as far west as they could across Northern Africa, converting those in their path to Islam, and then turned north. In 711, they landed in Gibraltar and were soon masters of this southwestern tip of Europe, which they controlled for the next 800 years. They brought with them a refined sense of art and architecture, a profound respect for learning, and their language: Arabic.

The Moors established many centers of trade, civil administration, and scholarship in their new territory, most notably in the cities of Córdoba, Toledo, Granada, and Sevilla. Córdoba, the ancient city on the banks of the Guadalquivir River that had been an Iberian settlement and an important metropolis in Roman and Visigoth times, became the capital of the Islamic Caliphate that ruled Al-Andalus (known today as Andalucía), the Moorish domain in the southern portion of the Iberian Peninsula. By the 10th century, Córdoba was considered the most populous city in the world, and was also the intellectual capital of Europe. It was a widely acknowledged center of learning, where scholars flocked to study and translate documents dealing with science, philosophy, mathematics, astrology, medicine, and education. This was truly a golden age of translation! Here, as in Damascus

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and Baghdad—the other great centers of the Muslim empire—classical and canonical Greek and Roman texts were translated into Arabic and preserved for posterity, providing a link to past knowledge that was all but lost when Europe slipped into the Dark Ages.

The Arabic that flourished in medieval Spain belonged to the Semitic subgroup of the Afro-Asiatic family of languages. It was closely related to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Phoenician, and was thus directly linked to the earliest languages spoken by mankind. Over the course of many centuries it had evolved into an eloquent, poetic language with a vast vocabulary, making it ideally suited to the task of transforming the Romance dialects of southern Europe into the flowering languages of the Renaissance.

This Arabic was the language that percolated throughout the Iberian Peninsula during the eight centuries of Muslim rule. It was spoken mainly by those living in the southern region of Al-Andalus, and was learned by the many European scholars who came to do research in the libraries and universities established in Toledo and Córdoba. Over time, it seeped into the Latin dialects that were still spoken among Christian populations living in northern Spain. How, precisely, did that happen?

The Christian monarchs of the old Spanish kingdoms, of course, had never accepted the Muslim conquest and, ever since the Moorish invasion, had been fighting to reconquer the lands they had lost—a campaign that

lasted for centuries and was known as *La Reconquista*. Toledo was taken in 1085 by Alfonso VI, the king of León and Castilla. Córdoba fell to Ferdinand III of Castilla in 1236. Málaga was taken in 1487 after being besieged by the armies of a recently united Christian Spain following the marriage of Isabella I of Castilla and Ferdinand II of Aragón, the Catholic Monarchs. And finally Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in Al-Andalus, surrendered in 1492, and an extraordinary period in history came to an end.

During the *Reconquista*, as the Christian forces moved gradually south, towns and cities that had been under Moorish rule for generations were flooded with northerners who spoke a variety of Romance dialects, the most durable of which was Castilian. Christians living in Moorish territory had, by and large, developed hybrid dialects such as Mozarabic, a combination of Romance languages and Arabic. These dialects were quickly absorbed and replaced by Castilian, which in turn embarked on a massive borrowing spree, assimilating Arabic grammar and vocabulary and transforming itself into the forerunner of the Spanish that is spoken today. As a result of this dual Latin and Arabic influence, the “language of Cervantes” became rich in synonyms. Spanish speakers can thus refer to the olive in their martini with an Arabic word, *aceituna*, or a Latin one, *oliva*. Similarly, to warn of a lurking scorpion they can say *alacrán* or *escorpión*. When arranging ►

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appointments they can consult their *almanaque* or *calendario*, both of which mean calendar. It helps to remember that most Spanish nouns that begin with *al-* (the Arabic definite article) were borrowed from the Moors.

The list of Arabic words that migrated into Spanish during that period is far too long to include here. But, as a matter of interest, let us look at just a few examples, grouped in categories for ease of reference. Many of these words ultimately found their way into other European languages as well, including English.

- **Civil Administration:** *alcalde* (mayor); *barrio* (neighborhood); *aduana* (customs).
- **Home Furnishings:** *alfombra* (carpet); *almohada* (pillow); *sofá* (sofa).
- **Food and Beverages:** *azúcar* (sugar); *limón* (lemon); *café* (coffee); *azafrán* (saffron).

- **Building and Architecture:** *alcoba* (bedroom); *adoquín* (paving stone); *azulejo* (tile).
- **Mathematics:** *cero* (zero); *álgebra* (algebra); *cenit* (zenith).

As the *Reconquista* inexorably advanced, Castilian advanced with it to become the lingua franca of Spain—a Romance language generously seasoned with Arabic. King Alfonso X of Castilla, known as Alfonso el Sabio (Alfonso the Wise), prompted the creation of a standardized form of written Castilian in the 13th century by assembling a group of scribes at his court to transcribe an extensive collection of works on history, astronomy, the law, and other fields of knowledge.

The Spanish Royal Academy was founded in 1713, essentially for the purpose of preserving the “purity” of the language. The Academy published its first dictionary in six volumes between 1726 and 1739, and its first grammar book in 1771.

Spanish is now the official language of 21 countries. When the United Nations was established in 1945, Spanish was one of the five official languages, along with Chinese, English, French, and Russian. Interestingly, Arabic became the sixth official language of the UN in 1973.

Spain finally shook off eight centuries of Moorish rule with the *Reconquista* of Granada in 1492. Later that same year, Christopher Columbus was commissioned by Queen Isabella to set sail westward, and his voyage not only changed the world—it opened up a whole new chapter in the evolution of the Spanish language. But that is another story.

Notes

1. See “My Mother Tongue” by Tony Beckwith, published in *Source* (No. 48, Summer 2010), 31.

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