# A Note on Slavic Loans in Romanian:  [l] Revisited

Brian D. Joseph

The Ohio State University

It is my great pleasure to offer this small piece in recognition of the fine scholarship through which Marius Sala has contributed to our understanding of Romanian, Judeo-Spanish, and the Balkan linguistic situation more generally.  My topic concerns a detail of contact phonology in the Balkans specifically involving Slavic and Romanian and focuses ultimately on the development of one word.  It is thus a minor contribution, to be sure, dwarfed by the voluminous work of Professor Sala, but it is nevertheless offered in a spirit of respect and admiration.

As is well-known (and one can consult a work such as Sala 1998:152 for confirmation of the basic facts), the regular and most general outcome in Romanian of a Latin single (i.e., nongeminate) intervocalic [l] is [r].  This development is shown by such cases as Lat. *basilica* > Rmn. *biserică* 'church', *caelum* > *cer* 'sky', *dolere* > *durea* 'hurt, *exvolāre* > *zbura* 'soar', *qualem* > *care* 'which', and *solem* > *soare* 'sun', among many others. In initial position or before consonants, Latin [l] is regularly retained, though adjacent vowels can determine other outcomes; relevant examples include Lat. *laudāre* > Rmn. *lavda* 'praise', *lingua* > *limbă* 'language', or *saltare* > *sălta* 'hop. These treatments of Latin [l] have all the hallmarks of language-internal Neogrammarian-style sound change, including regularity and the presence of phonetic conditioning, but nonetheless the claim has been put forth that there is a contact-related dimension to one aspect of this complex of changes involving [l].

In particular, Hamp (2002: 245) has suggested that what he calls an "Albanian substratum" may have played a role in the development of Latin [l] into Romanian. For Hamp, as noted in Hamp 1989 for instance, the emergence of Romanian as a distinct language was the result of a portion of an "Albanoid" population in the Balkans (the precursor to attested Albanian) shifting to Latin and thus creating Romanian. Drawing then on the fact that Romanian alters earlier [l] systematically only in intervocalic position, and further that in intervocalic position, Albanian shows its own special development of early [l], changing it to the "velarized lateral now written in the standard orthography as *ll*" (Hamp 2002:245), Hamp suggests that the "Albanoid" speakers who shifted to Latin and thereby created Romanian brought to the language shift their own characteristic treatment of intervocalic [l]; that treatment, in his view, carried over into their pronunciation of their adopted Latin and ultimately led to the Romanian [r] in that position. The shared restriction of a particular outcome of a lateral in intervocalic position is the key in his account to understanding the relationship between the Albanian development and the Romanian one. The Albanian velar [ł] gives a wide range of reflexes in regional Albanian dialects, so it is conceivable that one such outcome could have led eventually to [r], especially since perhaps as much as a millennium, or even more, passed from the time of the presumed shift of Albanoid speakers to Latin up to the first attestations of Romanian (16th century).

On the face of it, given other ancient parallels between Albanian and Romanian,[1] Hamp's proposal is intriguing and worthy of consideration; Sala (1998: 152) does express some doubts

---

[1] I have in mind here the 70 or so old shared vocabulary items between Albanian and Romanian, e.g. Alb. *mal* 'mountain' / Romn. *mal* 'mountain, river bank', Alb. *sorrë* /Romn. *cioarą* 'blackbird', Alb. *moshë* 'age' Romn. *moş* 'old man' (cf. Katičić 1976:152, Sala 1998:81), though Hamp 1989 has drawn attention to parallels in stress rules, and Joseph 1999 discusses parallels in the syntax of the preposition 'with' (Alb. *me* / Romn.. *cu*, both requiring an unmodified object to be in the definite form).

about the role of language contact in the [l] > [r] change, though not focused on Hamp's particular proposal.[2]    Still, whatever the assessment of Hamp's hypothesis, there is another aspect to the development of *l* in Romanian where language contact of a different sort is involved but where some details remain to be explained.  It is one such detail that I hope to illuminate here.

Romanian experienced contact with speakers of Slavic at a period after the developments with Latin [l] had run their course.  The dating of this contact is shown by several considerations, but among them is the fact that [l] is retained in Slavic loanwords into Romanian, even in intervocalic position.  Examples that show this retention include *lopata* > *lopată* 'shovel', *kobyla* > *cobilă* 'plow line', and *pola* > *poală* 'lap', among others.  Following Petrucci (1999), one can note a single apparent exception to this otherwise simple adoption by Romanian of Slavic [l] without alteration, namely *măgură* 'hillock', borrowed from Proto-Slavic *magula 'hillock'.  It is often assumed, as noted by Petrucci, that this word may have been borrowed at an earlier stage than the other Slavic words in Romanian, at a time when the *l* > *r* change was still alive or even before it happened.  Such a hypothesis certainly gives the right results for this word, although it might be hard to reconcile it with Hamp's view of why Latin intervocalic [l] was altered, since in his account it is not necessarily the case that the Slavic intervocalic [l] would have been phonetically identical with what the Latin sound had become in proto-Romanian.  Moreover, assuming 'hillock' to be an early loan word is a rather *ad hoc* assumption, without independent support, and raises the question of why this word alone should have been borrowed so early. Another approach, then, to an explanation of *măgură* would be to look to a different source for it

---

[2] Sala is somewhat skeptical, as he says "Nici în acest caz nu este nevoie să se explice transformarea lui –*l*- în *r* prin influența substratului traco-dac".

or for a different set of influences on its development. It is this latter approach, suggesting that there is a different story behind *măgură*, that is pursued here.

In particular, it turns out that there is a Latin word that has an appropriate shape and meaning to have provided some relevant input affecting Romanian *măgură*. This word is *magalia*, glossed in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Glare 1968, *s.v.*) as 'huts, tents'; it appears to be a Punic word, and quite possibly is related to another Punic loanword into Latin, *mapalia*, also meaning 'huts'. This latter Punic word is said to be cognate with a Hebrew form *mappalah* meaning 'ruins'. Taking all this together, it seems reasonable to suppose that underlying this etymon there could well have been a form with a meaning of something like 'heaps'. If such a form, especially if the Hebrew ending *–ah* is taken as basic, had been brought over into Latin and had led to a (presumably plural) *\*magala*, from which *magalia* could have been derived, then the elements needed for an account of Romanian *măgură* are present. In particular, this presumed Latin *\*magala*, with an original meaning of *\**'heaps' (from which the denotation 'huts' and then 'tents' could easily have developed), would be expected to have produced a Romanian form *\*măgar-* (or the like).[3] Given an assumption of an original sense of 'heaps', this word can be said to have had 'mound'-like semantics, and as such, it could well have impinged on or influenced the form that the semantically and formally similar Slavic *\*magula* took in Romanian. That is, a cross of a *\*măgar-* 'heap, mound', from the presumed Latin *\*magala*, with *\*măgulă* 'hillock', from Slavic *\*magula*, could well have yielded the attested Romanian *măgură* 'hillock'. This form was thus a loanword from Slavic but not an early loan; rather, it was a loanword reshaped by the influence of a native word.

---

[3] The presumed *\*magala offers a better source for the accentuation of *măgură*. I thank Dr. Catalin Anghelina of The Ohio State University for help with details of the historical phonology involved here.

My specific suggestion, then, for explaining the *–r-* in *măgură* is that Romanian borrowed Slavic *\*magula* in the usual way for Slavic words, giving Romanian *\*măgulă*, but that this form was blended with (crossed with or "contaminated" by) *\*măgar-*, the outcome of the predecessor to attested Latin *magalia*, aided by the fact that *magalia* was a word with similar semantics and a similar phonic form. This semantically and phonically based blending thus yielded *măgură* 'hillock'.[4]

The account offered here is admittedly somewhat speculative, based really on circumstantial evidence rather than on directly attested developments.[5] Still, by way of enhancing the plausibility of such an account, let me conclude by mentioning a possible parallel for the sort of mixing envisioned here in which there is interaction between a word inherited from Latin and a loan word. That is, the long-standing problematic outcome *negură*, ostensibly from Latin *nebula* 'cloud', where the *–g-* is unexpected,[6] may well reflect influence from Slavic *mъgla* 'fog', a word in a similar semantic sphere that has as well a medial *–g-* and a liquid; that is, attracted by the similar semantics and phonic shape, a Latinate *\*nebură* in Romanian and a Slavic borrowing *\*măgla-* could well have crossed, yielding *negură*.

---

[4] Under the view that analogy represents the influence of one form over another, such a blend or contamination would be a type of analogy. Note also Jeffers & Lehiste 1979, who treat contamination as leveling within a semantic paradigm.

[5] It is perhaps no more speculative than the suggestion of Cioranescu 1966: s.v. that *măgură* is a "creación expresiva"; Cioranescu also reviews some of the other suggestions made in the literature for the etymology of *măgură*, and finds none of them wholly satisfactory.

[6] Sala (1998:82) includes *negură* as among the words that some scholars see as deriving from a pre-Romanian substrate but that others see as a Latinate form.

While an account such as this cannot be proven, it rests on well-known processes of language change (borrowing and contamination) and thus, I would argue, it cannot be dismissed out of hand. That it provides an explanation for this otherwise difficult detail about the outcome of Slavic [l] in Romanian is a welcome side-benefit.

## References

Cioranescu, Alejandro. 1966. *Diccionario etimologico rumano*. Tenerife: Biblioteca Filologica.

Glare, P. G. W. 1968ff. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. New York : Oxford University Press.

Hamp, Eric P. 1989. Yugoslavia — A Crossroads of Sprachbunde. *Zeitschrift für Balkanologie* 25.1.44-47.

Hamp, Eric P. 2002. On Serbo-Croatian's Historic Laterals. *Of All the Slavs My Favorites: Studies in Honor of Howard I Aronson on the Occasion of his 66th Birthday*, ed. by Don Dyer, et al. (= *Indiana Slavic Studies*, 12.) Bloomington, IN: Slavica, pp. 243-50.

Jeffers, Robert & Ilse Lehiste. 1979. *Principles and methods for historical linguistics*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Joseph, Brian D. 1999. Romanian and the Balkans: Some Comparative Perspectives. *The Emergence of the Modern Language Sciences. Studies on the Transition from Historical-Comparative to Structural Linguistics in Honour of E. F. K. Koerner. Volume 2: Methodological Perspectives and Applications*, ed. by S. Embleton, J. Joseph, & H.-J. Niederehe. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 218-235.

Katičić, Radoslav. 1976. *The Ancient Languages of the Balkans*. The Hague: Mouton.

Petrucci, Peter R. 1999. *Slavic features in the history of Romanian*. Munich: LINCOM Europa (LINCOM Studies in Romance Linguistics 8).

Sala, Marius. 1998. *De la latină la română*. Bucureşti: Univers Enciclopedic.

**Author's address:**

Department of Linguistics

The Ohio State University

Columbus, Ohio USA 43210-1298

**e-mail**: joseph.1@osu.edu