

How a dead language can change a living one

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**lānguāgē
âcts and
worldmaking**

Preliminaries

1 Living and 'dead' languages

Latin is often represented as being a 'dead' language

- It has no native speakers
- It isn't spoken today
- It is 'fixed': its grammar is unchanging and its vocabulary is finite



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BUT that is really 'Classical' or literary Latin. For 'Latin' in a broader sense

- there is a continuous history of its 'popular' evolution into the modern Romance languages. These have different names to distinguish them (but compare 'Greek', 'Chinese', 'Arabic'?).
- another kind of 'cultured' evolution can be seen in Christian Latin and then Medieval Latin; 'Latin' (reinforced by these) remained known and used as a cultural, academic, religious and diplomatic *lingua franca* in western Europe.

Preliminaries

1 Living and 'dead' languages



Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) was brought up entirely in Latin to the age of 6



Jesuit schools continued to use Latin as the medium of instruction as late as the 18th century

Preliminaries

2 All living languages change

Some examples of change in English:

“We all like a good play. Have not I done well, mother?”

(Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, Chapter 22)

“Marianne is as steadfast as ever, you see," said Elinor, "she is not at all altered.”

“She is only grown a little more grave than she was.”

“Nay, Edward," said Marianne, "you need not reproach me. You are not very gay yourself.”

(Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, Chapter 17)

Preliminaries

2 All living languages change

Change often associated with ‘carelessness’, with features of colloquial usage or uneducated speech. This can be seen as CHANGE FROM BELOW.

Some examples:

- My friend and I / Me and my friend are going to town tomorrow
- Distinction between *where* / *wear*

Preliminaries

3 Kinds of language change: CONTACT-INDUCED CHANGE

We're going to concentrate on change due to CONTACT. Again, all living languages experience this.

French BORROWINGS in English:

café, restaurant, éclair; genre, fiancé; arcade, arch, terrace,...

English BORROWINGS in German:

(der) Cocktail, (das) Bodybuilding, (der) Pullover, (das) Hobby,...

Cultured ('learnèd) borrowings

In the languages of western Europe, one of the most important sources of BORROWING is Latin (and Greek through Latin). These words are traditionally known as 'learnèd words' / Fr. *mots savants* / Sp. *palabras cultas* or *cultismos* / It. *parole dotte*. I will refer to them as CULTURED BORROWINGS.

These are borrowings not from another living language, but from a 'dead' language.

Cultured ('learnèd) borrowings

Some similar scenarios?

Arabic

Qur'anic Arabic remains passively familiar to many speakers.

Greek

Katharevusa, the 19th-century written language, was an 'archaising' form which adopted some forms from Ancient Greek. Demotic Greek, which was adopted as standard in 1976, has taken some elements from Katharevusa.

Chinese

Classical Chinese was the basis of the standard written language until the early 20th century and its influence is still visible in some official language.

Sanskrit

Tatsama ('same as Sanskrit') borrowings are recognised in Bengali and Hindi, which are daughter languages of Sanskrit.

Cultured ('learnèd) borrowings

The Romance languages descend from Latin, but words which were inherited directly from Latin usually underwent many changes in their pronunciation and meaning. Sometimes the same Latin word was inherited but also later borrowed; the **cultured borrowing** looks much more like Latin and is clearly different from its **inherited** counterpart.

Latin	French		Spanish		Italian	
	popular	learnèd	popular	learnèd	popular	learnèd
FRĪGĪDU(S)	<i>froid</i>	<i>frigide</i>	<i>frío</i>	<i>frígido</i>	<i>freddo</i>	<i>frigido</i>

Cultured ('learnèd) borrowings

Romance historical linguists have not traditionally paid such words very much attention, because they obscure the 'spontaneous' development of Latin words inherited directly from Latin. But the extent of cultured borrowing is enormous, and cultured borrowings are interesting from a number of points of view.

Cultured ('learnèd) borrowings

1. Although they usually begin as belonging to the vocabulary of an educated élite, many have become extremely common, even in spoken language, and so illustrate a process of CHANGE FROM ABOVE.

Tengo una documentación bastante útil clasificada en una forma bien elemental, porque tampoco tengo espacio, pero quizás sea, digamos el prime, la primera semía de una futura biblioteca de servicio, ¿no? Ahora, aparte de esto, hago el trabajo de secretaria de... uno de los agregados comerciales. Y... bueno, todo lo que el secretariado implica lógicamente, tipear, tomar dictado, en fin, toesas pequeñas tareas despreciadas por los intelectuales.

'I've got very useful documentation classified in a very elementary fashion, because I haven't got room, but maybe it's the first, the first seed, let's say, of a future library service, mm? Now, besides that, I work as a secretary to one of the commercial attachés. And, well, all that being a secretary implies, of course: typing, taking dictation, in short, all those little jobs which are despised by intellectuals.

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The ten commonest such words in Spanish have COGNATES in a number of other languages:

<i>Spanish</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>German</i>
momento	moment	moment	Moment
último	(ultime)	ultimate	(ultimativ)
problema	problème	problem	Problem
existir	exister	exist	existieren
único	unique	unique	(Unikum)
idea	idée	idea	Idee
permitir	permettre	permit	(permissiv)
situación	situation	situation	Situation
social	social	social	sozial
tema	thème	theme	Thema

We will follow through the history of one of these words in detail to try and see exactly what is involved in its adoption into a living language.

Problem, problema, problème

problem *noun* **1** a situation or matter that is difficult to understand or deal with · *a problem with the software* · *He's got a drink problem.* **2** someone or something that is difficult to deal with. **3** a puzzle or mathematical question set for solving. **4 as adj** **a** said of a child, etc: difficult to deal with, especially in being disruptive or anti-social; **b** said of a play, etc: dealing with a moral or social problem. **have a problem with something 1** to be unable or unwilling to associate with it or to understand it · *Do you have a problem with her gayness?* **2** to be troubled by it · *has a problem with gambling.* **no problem colloq 1** said in response to a request, or to thanks: it's a pleasure, no trouble, etc. **2** easily · *found our way, no problem.*

ETYMOLOGY: 14c: from Greek *problema* a thing put forward, from *proballein* to put forth.

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problema

Del lat. *problēma*, y este del gr. πρόβλημα *problēma*.

1. *m.* Cuestión que se trata de aclarar.
2. *m.* Proposición o dificultad de solución dudosa.
3. *m.* Conjunto de hechos o circunstancias que dificultan la consecución de algún fin.
4. *m.* Disgusto, preocupación. *U. m. en pl. Mi hijo solo da problemas.*
5. *m.* Planteamiento de una situación cuya respuesta desconocida debe obtenerse a través de métodos científicos.

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Problem, problema, problème

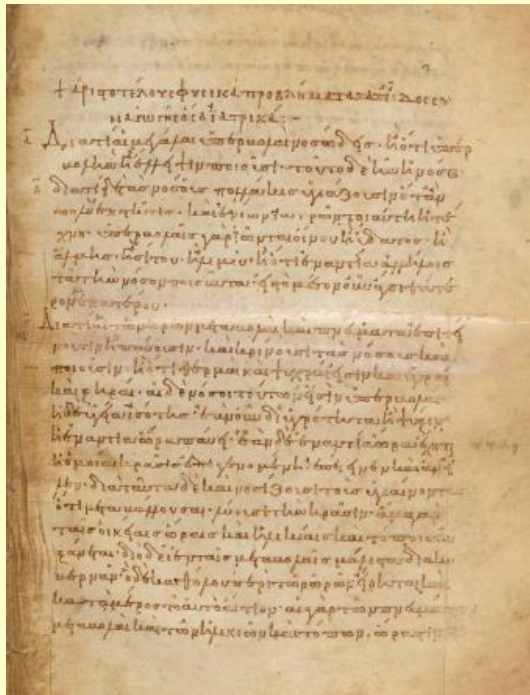
13th cent. Sicily, Italy. Bartolomeo da Messina, a translator at the court of King Manfred of Sicily (1258-1266) translated *Problemata Aristotelis* from Greek into Latin.



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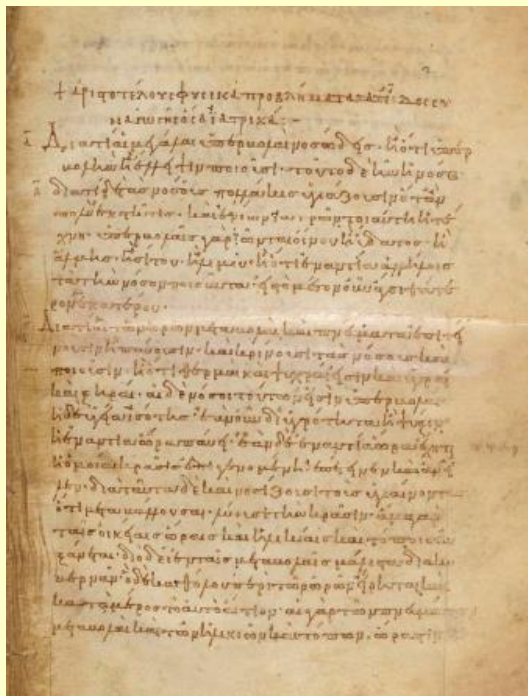
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difficult question

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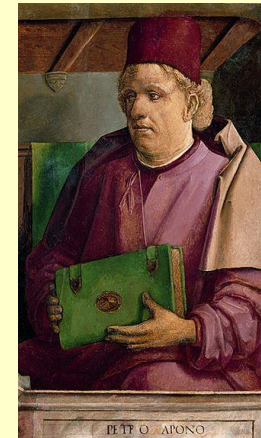


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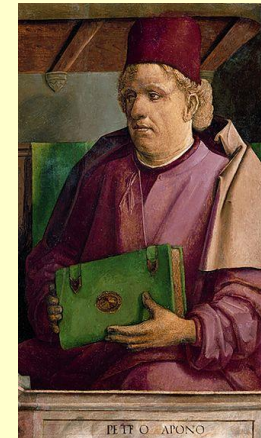
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'a difficult question containing something which is to be solved by disputation and appears to be a quagmire'

[Questio difficilis aliquod continens quod disputationes solvendum quod et voragine videtur]



Problem, problema, problème

difficult question

1380 France. Evrart de Conty translates Bartolomeo da Messina's translation and Pietro d'Abano's commentary into French.



Problem, problema, problème

difficult question

1380 France. Evrart de Conty translates Bartolomeo da Messina's translation and Pietro d'Abano's commentary into French.

Chi commence li livres des **problemes** de Aristote, c'est a dire des fortes questions, translates de latin en francois

'Here begins the book of the "problems" of Aristotle, that is to say, of the substantial questions, translated from Latin into French'



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Problem, problema, problème

riddle

c.1382 England. Chaucer uses *probleme* in *The Summoner's Tale*



Problem, problema, problème

riddle

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Problem, problema, problème

riddle

c.1382 England. Chaucer uses *probleme* in *The Summoner's Tale*

How hadde this cherl ymaginacioun
To shewe swich a **probleme** to the frere?



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Problem, problema, problème

riddle

Late 14th cent. England. In the Wycliffite Early Version of the Vulgate (Latin) Bible, *probleme* is used as an equivalent for Latin *problema*.



Problem, problema, problème

riddle

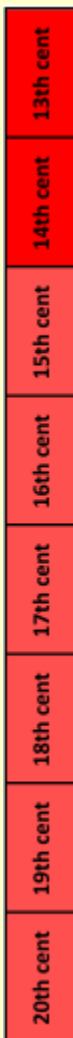
Late 14th cent. England. In the Wycliffite Early Version of the Vulgate (Latin) Bible, *probleme* is used as an equivalent for Latin *problema*.

Judges 14:15

blandire viro tuo et suade ei ut
indicet tibi quid significet
problema

Fage to þi man & moeue hym
þat he schewe to þee what
betokneþ þe **probleme**

‘Flatter your husband and persuade him to tell you what
the riddle means’



Problem, problema, problème

enigmatic expression, something difficult to understand

15th cent. Spain. Juan de Mena



Problem, problema, problème

enigmatic expression, something difficult to understand

15th cent. Spain. Juan de Mena makes a daring rhyme between a number of cultured borrowings: *poema*, *tema*, *problema* and *nema*.



Problem, problema, problème

enigmatic expression, something difficult to understand

15th cent. Spain. Juan de Mena makes a daring rhyme between a number of cultured borrowings: *poema*, *tema*, *problema* and *nema*.

Usemos de los poemas
tomando dellos lo bueno,
mas fuigan de nuestro seno
las sus fabulosas temas;
sus fiçiones y **problemas**
desechemos como espinas,
por aver las cosas dinas
ronpamos todas sus nemas.

Coplas de los pecados mortales, before 1456



'Let us use poems by taking good things from them; but their fantastic subjects must be banished from our bosoms; we should cast away like thorns their fictions and "problems", and break all their seals in order to possess the worthy things.'

Problem, problema, problème

question to which an answer is required

16th cent. France. Rabelais's *Gargantua* (1542)

—Me doibz je marier ou non?

—Par les ambles de mon mulet (respondit Rondibilis), je ne sçay que je doibve respondre à ce **probleme**.

‘Should I marry or not?’

‘By the steps of my mule,’ replied Rondibilis, ‘I don’t know what I should reply to this question.’



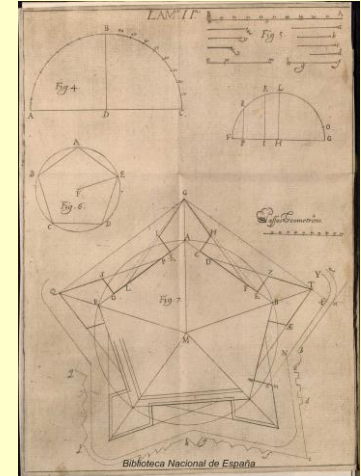
Problem, problema, problème

mathematical problem

17th cent. Spain.

y generalmente por esta práctica se medirán todas las distancias inaccesibles, que es **problema** universal, y escusa el individuar muchos casos particulares (José Zaragoza, *Fábrica y uso de varios instrumentos matemáticos*, 1675)

‘and generally by this practice all inaccessible distances will be measured, which is a general problem and makes it unnecessary to detail particular cases’



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Problem, problema, problème

difficulty to be overcome

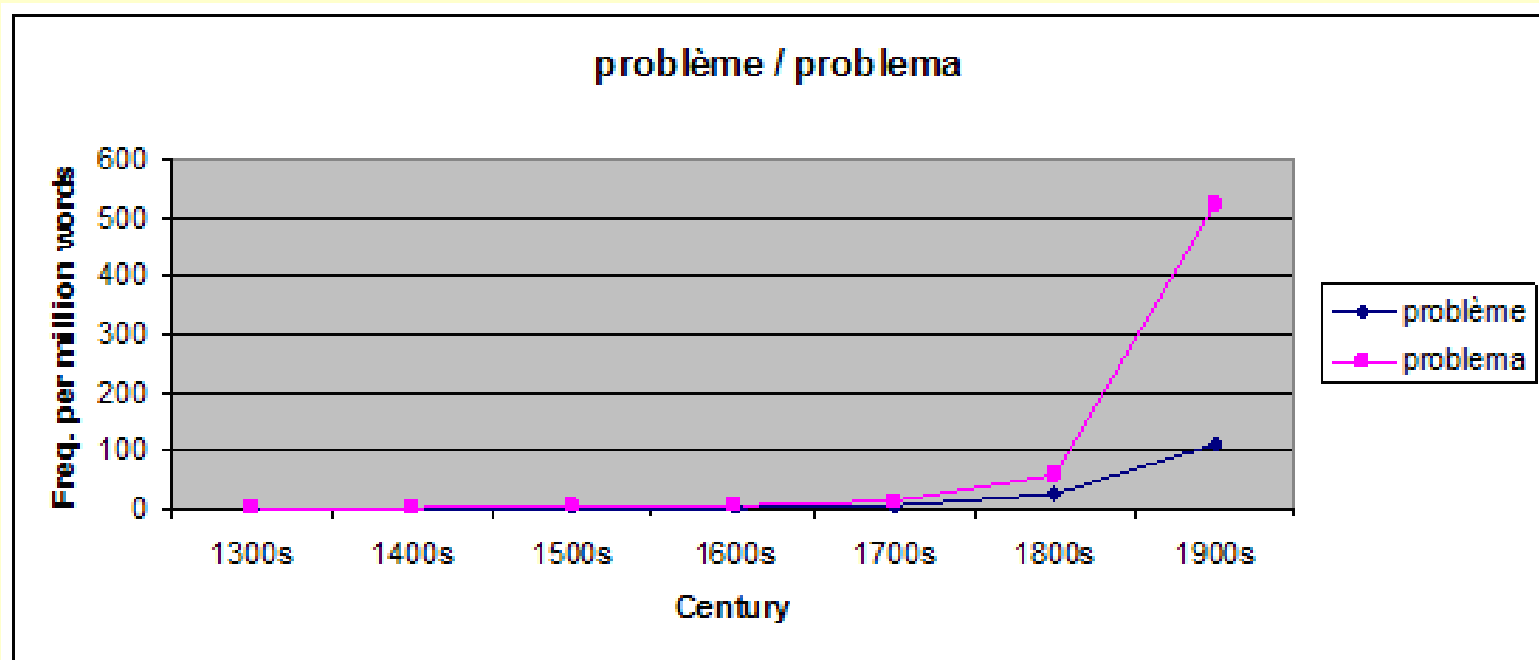
18th cent. England.

The grand political **problem** in all ages has been to invent the best combination or distribution of the supreme powers of legislation and execution (J. Otis, 1764)



difficulty

19th-20th cents. Dramatic increase in frequency of Fr. *problème*,
Sp. *problema*.



(Statistics based on FRANTEXT and the Corpus del español)

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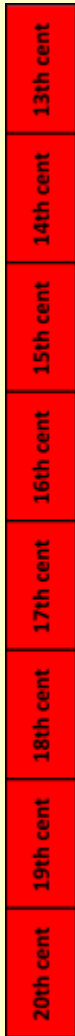
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Problème is the 188th most frequent word in modern French.

Problema is the 169th most frequent word in modern Spanish.

Problem, problema, problème



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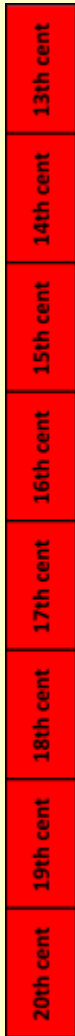
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Widening of meaning

Increase in collocational possibilities

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Widening of meaning

Increase in collocational possibilities on the basis of English models?

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Widening of meaning

Increase in collocational possibilities on the basis of English models?

That's not your problem

No problem

She's got problems

The terrorist problem

Problem, problema, problème

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	1200s	1300s	1400s	1500s	1600s	1700s	1800s	1900s
poss + <i>problema</i>	0	0	0	0	0	1	14	143
es + poss + <i>problema</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17
<i>sin problema</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
<i>tener + problemas</i>	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	334
<i>problema</i> + adj	0	0	0	2	0	12	71	528

Spanish collocations with *problema*

Problem, problema, problème

Conclusions

- *Problema*, etc., enters the language as an unfamiliar word with a specific meaning and is originally restricted to an educated élite. We can only really say that it ‘arrives’ (becomes **embedded**) in general usage in the 19th-20th centuries.
- It undergoes semantic broadening: favouring factor or symptom?
- It begins to occur in a number of set phrases: evidence of borrowing from other living languages?

Deeper levels of borrowing

The influence of Latin is not limited to words. The vast majority of Spanish prefixes are cultured borrowings:

a- (*acéfalo, amoral, atemporal*)

a- (*acallar*)

an- (*anarquía, anaeróbico*)

ana- (*anacronismo*)

ante- (*anteanoche, antebrazo*)

anti- (*antiaéreo*)

archi- (*archiconocido*)

auto- (*autocrítica*)

bi- (*bisexual*)

bien- (*bienhablado*)

circun- (*circunferencia*)

co- (*cofundar*)

con- (*convivir*)

contra- (*contrataque*)

cuasi- (*cuasidelito*)

cuatri- (*cuatrimotor*)

des- (*desenchufar, desencuadernar, deshacer, desobedecer, desoir*)

dia- (*diacrónico*)

dis- (*disconforme*)

endo- (*endovenoso*)

entre- (*entreabrir, entreacto, entrepiso, entreplanta*)

ex (*ex ministro*)

exo- (*exoesqueleto*)

extra- (*extracorpóreo, extrasuave*)

hiper- (*hiperactivo*)

in- (*imposible, ineficaz*)

infra- (*infradotar, infravalorar, infraescrito, infrahumano*)

inter- (*interdental, interdiario*)

intra- (*intramuscular*)

mal- (*maleducado*)

medio- (*medio derruido*)

mili- (*milímetro*)

mini- (*minibar*)

mono- (*monoplaza*)

multi- (*multitarea*)

neo- (*neogótico*)

paleo- (*paleocristiano*)

per- (*perdurar*)

peri- (*pericardio*)

pluri- (*pluriempleado*)

poli- (*polifacético*)

pos(t)- (*posmoderno, posparto, posindustrial*)

pre- (*predemocrático*)

pro- / **pro** (*proamericano, pronuclear, pro derechos humanos*)

pseudo- (*pseudociencia*)

re- (*rebotica, rebuscar, refluir, reintentar, reinterpretar, resituar*)

requete- (*requetebién*)

retro- (*retrovisor*)

semi- (*semicírculo, semiculto*)

sobre- (*sobrealimentar, sobrecargar, sobrevolar*)

sub- (*subalimentar, subdesarrollo, subestima, subcutáneo, subsuelo, subteniente*)

super- (*superatractivo, superpoblación, superponer*)

tele- (*telecomunicación*)

tetra- (*tetralogía*)

tra(n)s- (*trascorrir, transferir*)

tras- (*trastienda*)

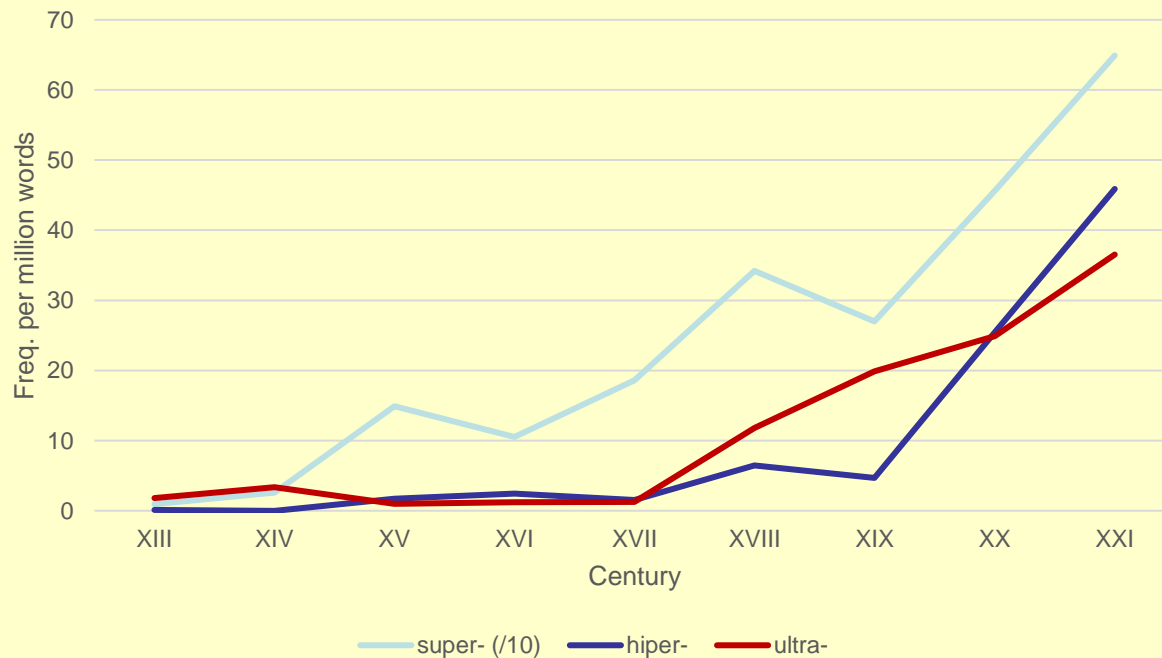
tri- (*trifásico*)

ultra- (*ultraizquierda, ultracorrección, ultraligero, ultratumba*)

vice- (*vicealmirante*)

Deeper levels of borrowing

The case of the (Spanish) intensifying prefixes *super-*, *hiper-* and *ultra-*.



Deeper levels of borrowing

Of these, *super-* has achieved the highest degree of **embedding** in Spanish (the **inherited** development is *sobre*).

🕒 There may have been ongoing awareness of Lat. preposition *super*, since it is a very common word in Latin.

🕒 By the 18th century, a number of cultured borrowings beginning in *super-* had appeared in Spanish:

Entries in the *Diccionario de autoridades* (1739):

superar, superable, superante, superado, superabundante, superabundancia, superabundantissimo, superabundantemente, superabundar, superadito, superano, superavit, superbo, superbissimo, superchería, superchero, supererogación, superfetación, superficie, superficial, superficialmente, superfluo, superfluamente, superfluidad, superhumeral, superintendente, superintendencia, superior, superiorato, superioridad, superiormente, superlativo, superno, supernumerario, superpaciente, superparticular, supersólido, superstición, supersticiosamente, supersticioso, supersubstantial, supervenir, superveniente, supervención.

All the basic words and those with no listed derivatives can be considered as cultured borrowings from (Classical or Medieval) Latin.

Deeper levels of borrowing

🕒 First suggestion of **productive** use of *super-* is in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Super- has a separate entry as a prefix from the 1884 *DRAE*.

19th-century words recovered from CDEGH not included in *DRAE*:

superangelical, superarcaico, supercirujano, supercomprensión, superdesarrollado, superexcitado, superfosfato, superhombre, superhumano, supernaturalidad, supernutrir, superplanetario, superpoblación, supertono, supervisión

Deeper levels of borrowing

🕒 In the 20th century many neologisms in *super-* are morphological CALQUES, most obviously from English

supermercado ‘supermarket’, *superbombardeo* ‘superbomber’,
supermodelo ‘supermodel’

or ‘international’ technical terms

superfosfato, *superconductividad*, *superdominante*

Super- also **calques** Eng. *over-*

superpoblado ‘over-populated’

Deeper levels of borrowing

Of these, *super-* has achieved the highest degree of embedding in Spanish.

🕒 By the 21st century *super-* has become highly productive as an intensifying prefix leading to its grammaticalisation as an adjective modifier equivalent to *muy* or *-ísimo*.

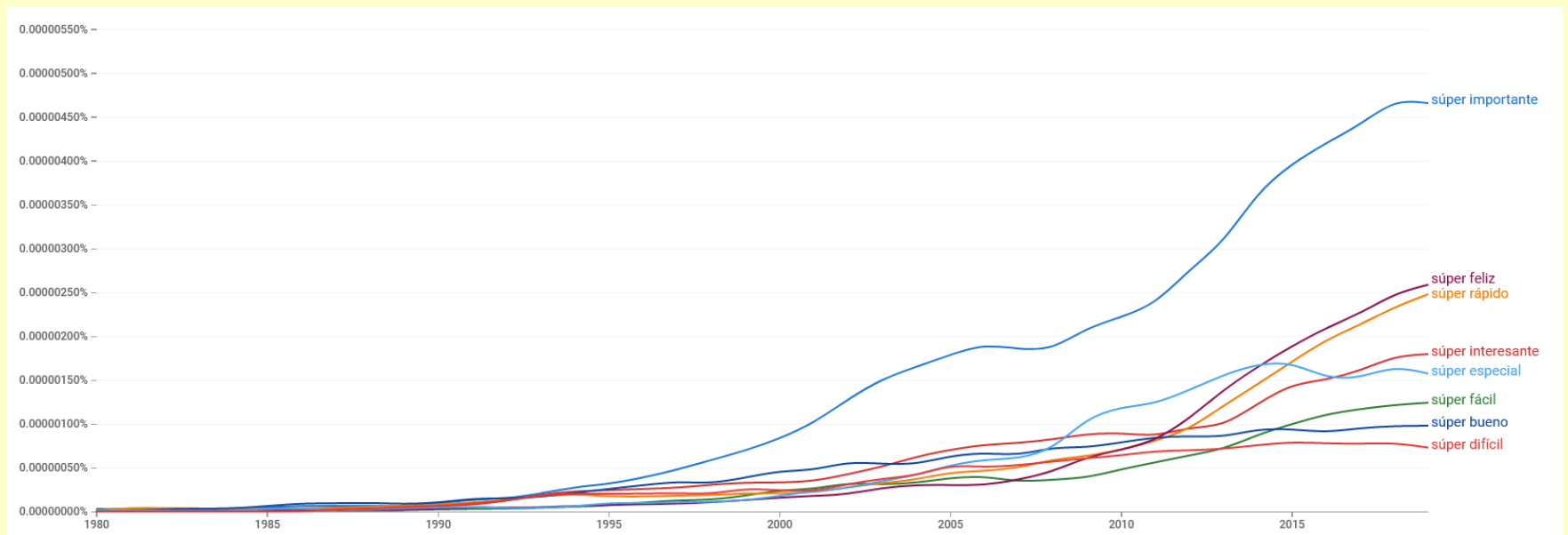
In the written language *super-* is often represented as an independent word (*súper*).



Deeper levels of borrowing

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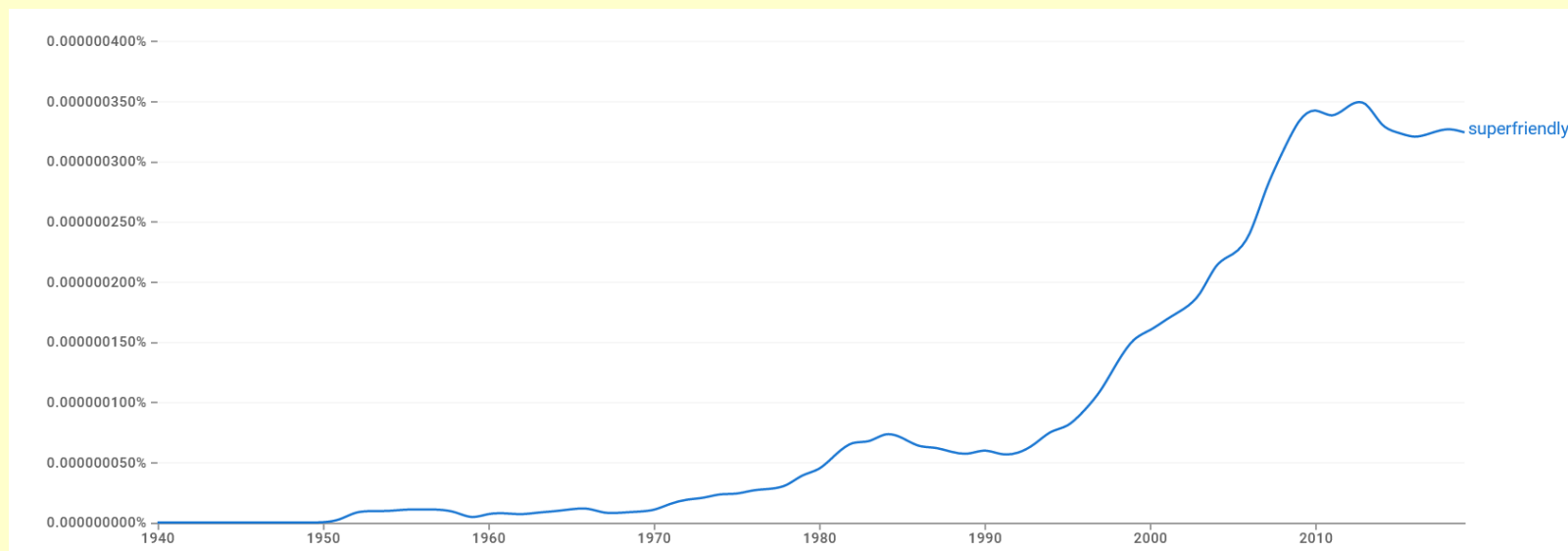


Growth in the frequency of *super* + ADJ, 1980-2019 (Google n-gram viewer)

Deeper levels of borrowing

Of these, *super-* has achieved the highest degree of embedding in Spanish.

Notice again the CONVERGENCE of western European languages (despite some important differences) in this phenomenon.

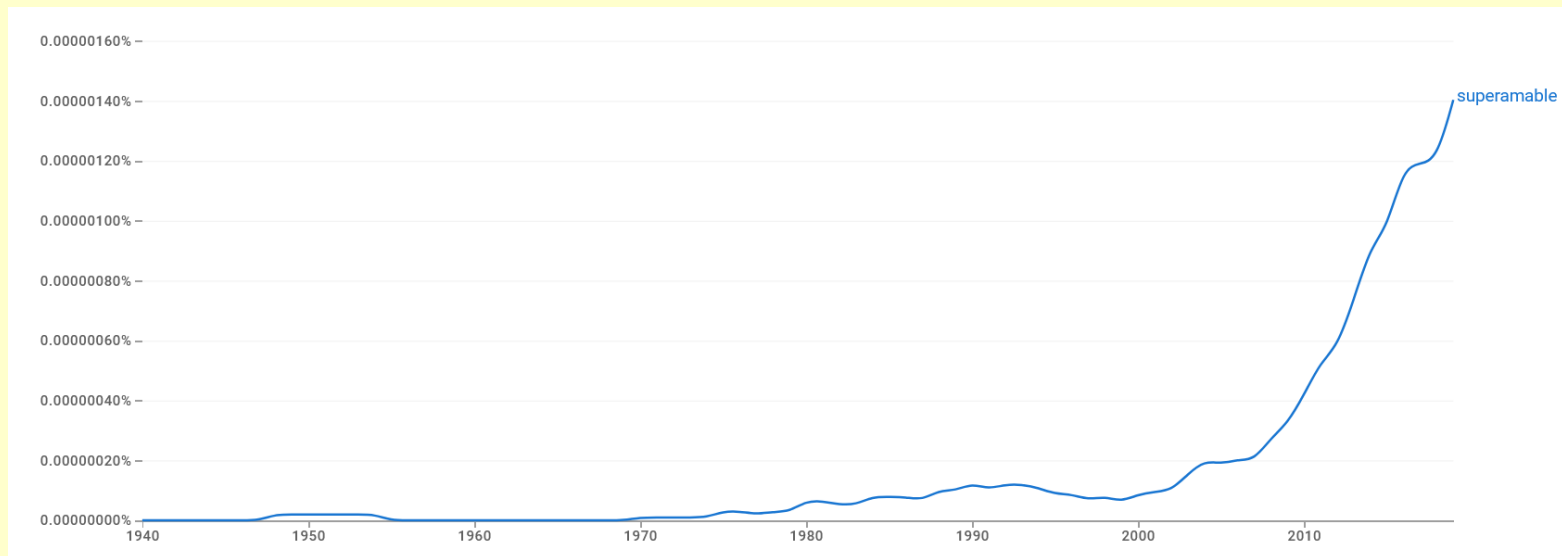


Eng. *superfriendly* in Google ngram viewer

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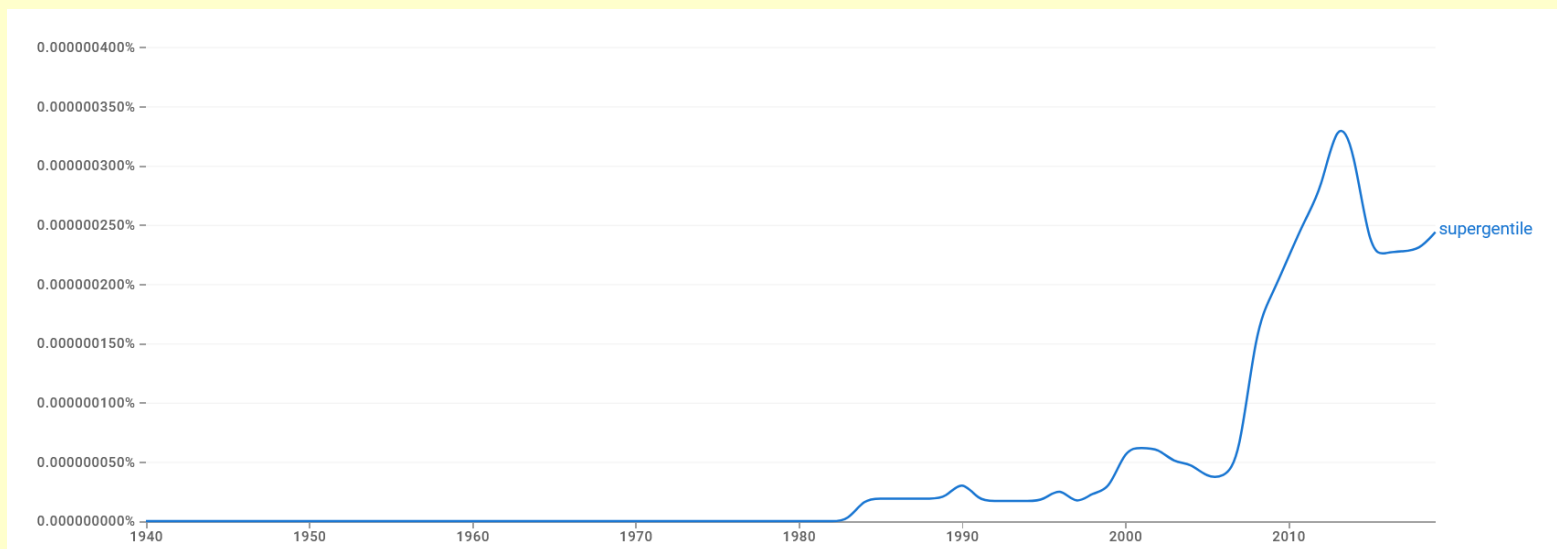


Sp. *superamable* in Google ngram viewer

Deeper levels of borrowing

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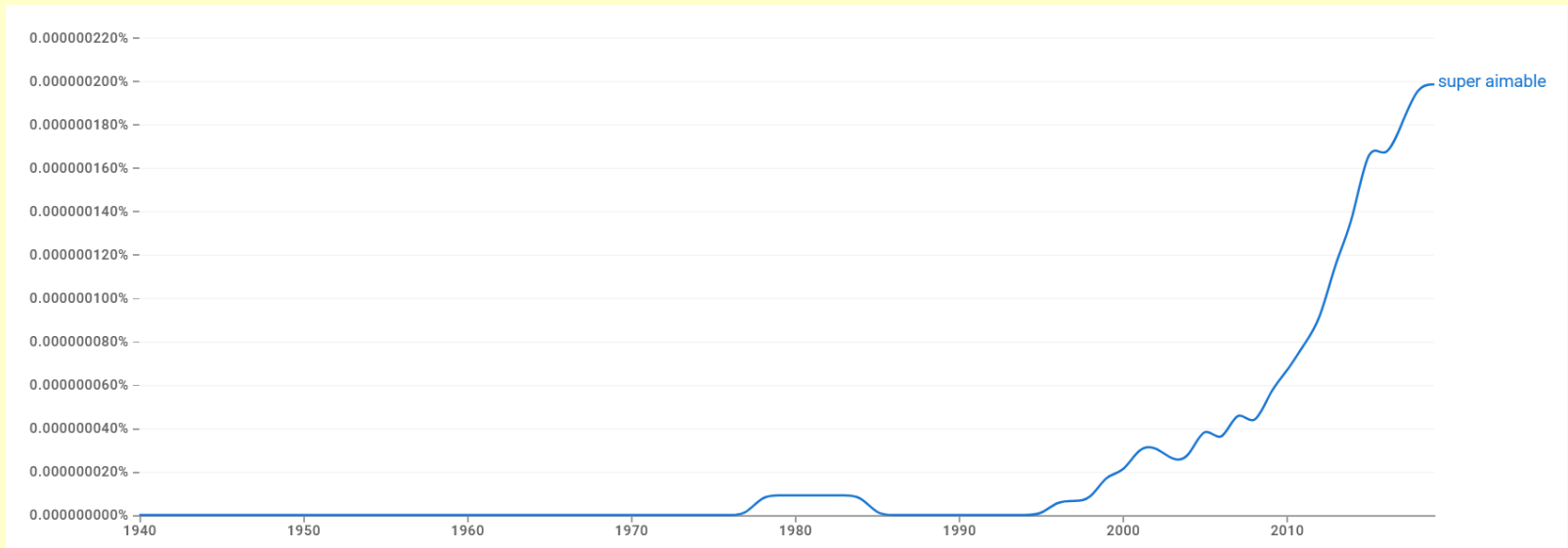


It. *supergentile* in Google ngram viewer

Deeper levels of borrowing

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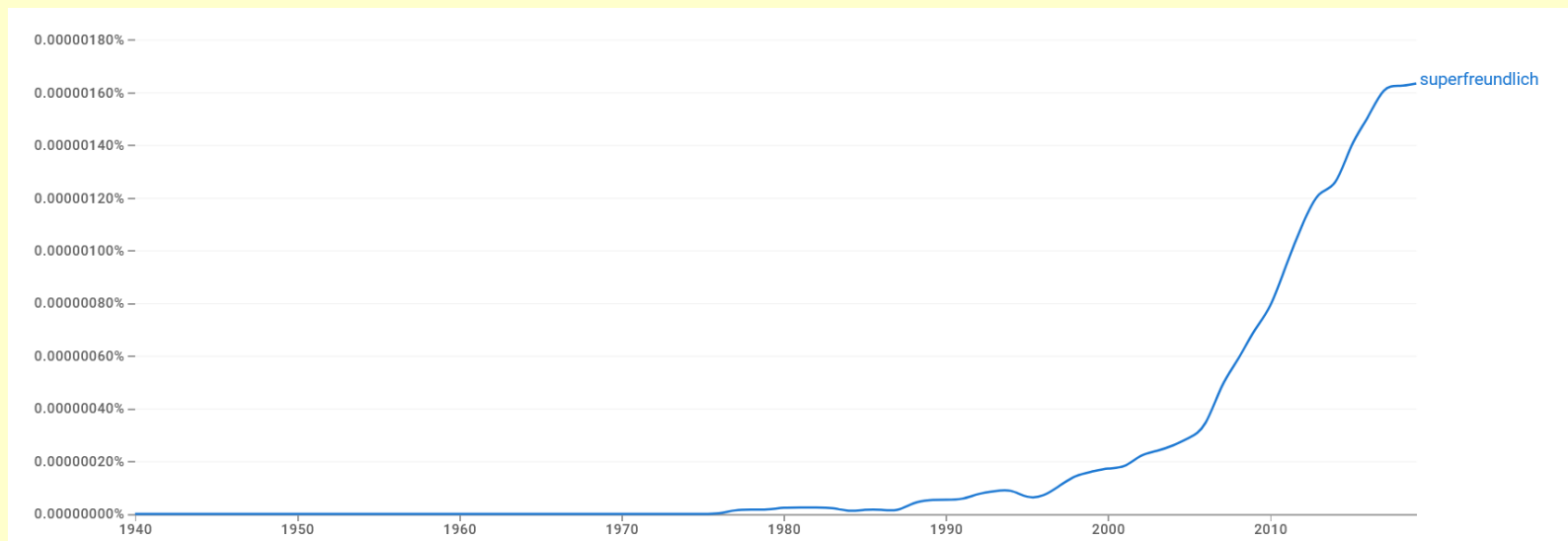


Fr. *superaimable* in Google ngram viewer

Deeper levels of borrowing

Of these, *super-* has achieved the highest degree of embedding in Spanish.

Notice again the CONVERGENCE of western European languages (despite some important differences) in this phenomenon.



Ger. *superfreundlich* in Google ngram viewer

Deeper levels of borrowing

Conclusions

- *Super-* probably becomes familiar in Spanish as the result of a relatively small number of individual cultured borrowings which are **reanalysed** as consisting of prefix + root.
- The **convergence** of several western European languages (despite some important differences) in this phenomenon is very striking and suggests mutual influence (or the influence of English).
- Will the use of *super-* as a prefix challenge the existing use of the suffix *-ísimo* and even the intensifier *muy* in Spanish? If so, Spanish will become a more **inflectional** language (like Latin).

Some more general conclusions

- We need to reassess the notion of a **‘dead’ language!**
- Cultured borrowings from Latin/Greek probably affect **all levels of language**, although they are most obvious in **vocabulary**, and some other changes (e.g. the identification of the *super-* prefix) are probably dependent on vocabulary.
- The idea that Latin, a ‘dead’ language, influences living ones is subject to some qualification, however. While dictionaries attribute the etymology of cultured borrowings to just one source, it is likely that **borrowing among living languages** is also involved.

How a dead language can change a living one

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