

The evolution of the written accentuation system in Spanish since 1726

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Abstract: Douglass (1964, 1988) examines the Greek and Roman precursors and early uses of the written accent in Spanish, tracing its development to 1726, when the first *Diccionario de Autoridades* from the *Real Academia Española (RAE)* appeared. This system continues to evolve even today, but there is little published research on its development over the last almost 300 years. Along the way there have been inconsistencies, missed generalizations, and overlapping, unmotivated or *ad hoc* rules that have undergone significant revisions in the *Diccionarios*, *Ortografías*, *Prontuarios*, and *Gramáticas* by the *RAE* between 1726 and 2010. The ambiguous and tentative first rules of written accentuation in Spanish have, over the years, been modified and clarified, evolving into a streamlined and elegant system that constitutes a useful tool for the pronunciation and spelling of unfamiliar words. Early accentuation rules differed widely from the current ones in questions relating to prosody, the accentuation of vowels appearing singly as separate words, the use of the diacritical accent, diphthongization and hiatus, the relation between written accentuation and grammatical categories, and the consolidation of rules for the accentuation of words ending in *-n*, *-s*, or a vowel, all of which are explored in the current study.

Key words: Latin, Spanish, written accentuation rules, stress, diacritical accent, hiatus

1. Introduction

Any instructor faced with the question of why and how Spanish came to use a system of written accentuation would be hard pressed to find many answers in the existing literature. The purpose of this study is to draw attention to the only research we have found regarding the origins of the written accent in Spanish (Douglass 1988), and to provide an understanding of how written accentuation has evolved through modern-day Spanish. This study grew out of a question asked in a History of the Spanish Language class that, at the time, went unanswered. The class had been comparing a passage from Genesis from different periods (the fourth and eighth centuries and Modern Spanish) (Pharies 2007:10). Among other changes, reflected in the texts was the appearance of written accentuation after the fourth century. Thus came the fateful question: "Profe, where did written accentuation in Spanish come from?" Douglass (1988) answers the question in part, tracing the development of written accentuation up to the *Discurso proemial* of the first *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1726), but to the best of our knowledge, there is no research that traces the evolution of the rules from 1726 until the present.

Taking García-Cervigón (2002) and Gómez-Asencio (2008) as a starting point, we consulted, in print or on the Web, the following relevant publications by the *Real Academia Española (RAE)* (Royal Spanish Academy): *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1726), *Ortographia Española* (1741), *Ortografía de la Lengua Castellana* (1763, 1770, 1779, 1792, 1815, 1823, 1826), *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana* (1851), *Prontuario de Ortografía de la Lengua Castellana* (1854), *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana* (1874, 1883, 1885, 1888, 1889, 1904, 1906, 1917, 1920), *Gramática de la Lengua Española* (1928, 1931), *Las Nuevas Normas de Prosodia y Ortografía* (1959), *Esbozo de una Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española* (1973), and *Ortografía de la Lengua Española* (1999, 2010). Revisions to the rules, many of them significant, appeared in the *Ortographia* of 1741, the *Ortografía* of 1763, the *Prontuario* of 1854, the *Gramáticas* of 1883 and 1917, the *Nuevas Normas* of 1959, the 1973 *Esbozo*, and the *Ortografías* of 1990 and 2010.

1.1 Origins of the Spanish accent mark

According to Douglass (1988:927) the accent developed from the Latin rules, but the mark itself came from ancient Greek, which had a pitch accent system with the acute accent (´) indicating a rising tone, the circumflex (ˆ) a rising followed by a falling tone, and the grave accent (`) a falling tone. Although there has been some dispute about the nature of the Latin accent (Abbot 1907, 1908, Foster 1908, Kent 1920, 1932), there is evidence that it was a stress, not a pitch accent, and that Latin grammarians misapplied the Greek system to the description of Latin (Lloyd 1987:88).

Phonological changes in Vulgar Latin and Old Spanish made the invariable Latin rules obsolete. Douglass (1988:927) writes that Quintilian “was the first to use a mark that was the precursor of the Spanish acute accent”. Quintilian used the apex or sicilicus (ˆ) over a long vowel to indicate length. Kent (1932:38-39) distinguishes between the sicilicus, placed over a single consonant to denote doubling (e.g. *ś* instead of *ss*), and the apex, used on vowels to denote length, beginning in the first century B.C. (cf. Oliver 1966:157). In the fourth century, Latin grammarians adopted Greek symbols to identify stressed vowels and to differentiate between homonyms.

Nebrija (1492) follows Quintilian regarding the use of written accent marks when stress is not on the expected syllable, and in cases of potential ambiguity (e.g. *amo* ‘love (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’/*amó* ‘love (3rd p. sg. pret. indic.)’):

La tercera regla es de Quintiliano: que cuando alguna dición tuviere el acento indiferente a grave y agudo, habemos de determinar esta confusión y causa de error, poniendo encima de la sílaba que ha de tener el acento agudo un resguito, que él llama ápice, el cual suba de la mano siniestra a la diestra, cual lo vemos señalado en los libros antiguamente escritos. (Nebrija 1492:67-68)

The third rule is from Quintilian: that when a word has an accent indifferently of whether it is

grave or acute, we must solve this confusion and cause for error by placing a mark above the syllable that should have the acute accent, which he calls *apex*, and which slants upward from left to right, as we see it indicated in books written long ago.

Among the Romance languages, Italian (1505) and French (1526) first made systematic use of written accents. According to Douglass, accent marks were not used in Spanish books and manuscripts before 1550, and their use was negligible between 1475 and 1566. However, “by 1570 the grave, the acute, and the circumflex had appeared, in a sporadic but increasing frequency” (Douglass 1988:927). The *Discurso proemial* was “the first statement on correctness of Spanish spelling by an official governing body” (Douglass 1988:930). In 39 lines it set forth the following rules: 1) the circumflex had no use in Spanish since accents did not indicate pitch, but rather that the long syllable was accented; 2) the grave accent would appear only on *à, è, ò,* and *ù* and only when used as separate words; 3) the acute accent would mark a long syllable at the end of words with two or more vowels as in *amará* ‘love (3rd p. sg. fut. indic.)’, or a long penultimate syllable in words with three or more vowels (e.g. *famóso* ‘famous’), and distinguish between homographs like *cántara* ‘jug’, *cantára* ‘sing (1st and 3rd p. sg., imp. subj.)’, and *cantará* ‘sing (3rd p. sg. fut. indic.)’. Douglass shows that in practice, the authors of the *Discurso* “had in mind much more complicated rules than they prescribed, and were guilty of gross inconsistencies and negligence in the use of accents” (Douglass 1988:930). Further, he writes that “the actual practice of the authors differed from [the] stated precepts” so that we find, for example, “*calidades* [‘qualities’] and *calidádes* on the same page just a few lines apart” (Douglass 1988:932).

1.2 Accentuation in Classical Latin

Classical Latin did not require written accentuation because stress was invariably determined by syllable weight. A light syllable ended in a short vowel, and a heavy syllable in either in a long vowel or a vowel followed by a consonant. Words with two syllables were always stressed on the penult (e.g. *facit* [fâ-kit], from *facere* ‘to make’). In words of more than two syllables, if the penult was heavy it was stressed (e.g. *similāre* [si-mi-lá:-re] ‘similar’), and if it was light, the antepenultimate syllable was stressed (e.g. *bibere* [bí-be-re] ‘to drink’).

In the evolution from Latin to Spanish the tonic accent has remained highly stable, in most cases falling on the same syllable of a word in Spanish as it did on the same word in Latin (Penny 2002:41). Nonetheless, phonological changes caused a need for written accentuation in Spanish. These included loss of Latin long vowels, apocope of word-final [-e] (e.g. *aequāle*>*igual* ‘equal’), and the creation of the palatal glide from atonic /e/ or /i/ in hiatus (e.g. *superbia* [su-pér-bi-a]>*soberbia* [so-βér-βja] ‘pride’) (Lapesa 1986, Lloyd 1987, Penny 2002, Pharies 2007).

1.3 Written accentuation in Modern Spanish

An examination of stress assignment in Spanish is beyond the scope of this paper, but a number of approaches have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Harris 1983, 1995, Lipsky 1997, Roca 1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 2006). Rules for stress and written accentuation in Spanish are found in many phonetics and introductory linguistics text books (e.g. Dalbor 1997, Teschner 2000, Guitart 2004, Hualde et al. 2010). Words ending in a vowel (-V), -n, or -s (e.g. *casa* [ká-sa] ‘house’, *comen* [kó-men] ‘eat (1st p. pl. pres. indic.)’, *comes* [kó-mes] ‘eat (2nd p. sg. pres. indic.)’ are stressed on the penult (*llanas*). Words ending in other consonants (e.g. *hablar* [a-βlár] ‘to talk’) are stressed on the final syllable (*agudas*). Words that conform to these patterns require no accent mark. Written accents: 1) indicate the stressed syllable in words that do not follow the above rules; 2) reflect hiatus between vowels that would otherwise form a diphthong (e.g. *hacia* [á-sja] ‘towards’ vs. *hacía* [a-sí-a] ‘used to do’), and; 3) distinguish between homophones with different meanings and grammatical functions (e.g. *se* ‘3rd p. pronoun’/ *sé* ‘I know’). Words with stress on the third or fourth syllable from the right edge of the word (*esdrújulas*, *sobresdrújulas*) always have a written accent (e.g. *pájaro* [pá-xa-ro] ‘bird’, *dígaselo* [dí-ya-se-lo] ‘tell it to him/her/them’). The rules are based on letters, not sounds. For example, *vejez* [be-xés] ‘old age’, ends with the phoneme /s/ in most varieties of Spanish, but is spelled with z, and so is stressed on the final syllable. Likewise, *Uruguay* ends in the sound /i/ but the letter -y, and thus, is by rule stressed on the final syllable. This first appeared in the *Gramática (GRAE)* of 1883: “*La y final, aunque suena como vocal, se considera como consonante para los efectos de la acentuación*” ‘Final -y, although it sounds like a vowel, is considered a consonant in terms of written accentuation’ (RAE 1883:365).

It is generally agreed that there are no present-day regional differences in written accentuation rules. The *Prólogo* of the *Ortografía* of 1999 affirms that due to the collaboration between the *Real Academia* and 21 sister academies in the Americas and the Philippines, standard Spanish orthography is “*verdaderamente panhispánica*” ‘truly pan-Hispanic’ (RAE 1999:V). Martínez (2010) points out that the general acceptance of a standardized orthography is a concept that goes back to Nebrija, who writes of: “*el común consentimiento de los que tienen poder para hazer uso*” ‘common agreement among those with the power to make use of it.’ (Nebrija 1492:38). Martínez traces the history of the standardization of Spanish orthography, and argues that while it is more difficult to standardize syntactical and lexical variation across dialects:

...es en la ortografía donde la convención inherente a la estandarización puede llegar a conseguir un grado mayor de estabilidad y aceptación, independientemente de los problemas relacionados con su aprendizaje.” (Martínez 2010:151)

...it is in the orthography that the convention inherent in standardization reaches its highest level

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of stability and acceptance, independently of any learning problems associated with it.

With regard to learning problems, much research shows that native Spanish speakers from primary school through university, not only foreign language learners, routinely fail to apply the rules of Spanish orthography. For example, Medina writes that even at the university level:

...muchos de los alumnos de la asignatura de Lengua Española de primero de Filología [son] capaces de escribir en un examen varios folios sobre el acento en español sin colocar una sola tilde. (Medina 1994:73)

...many Spanish language students in the first year of Philology are capable of writing several pages on an exam about the accent in Spanish without ever using a single accent mark.

2. Early accentuation rules

According to Douglass (1988), the *Discurso proemial* was a tentative first step in establishing the rules of written accentuation. In subsequent years inconsistencies, missed generalizations and *ad hoc* rules were modified and clarified. Several illustrative examples follow. In all citations, spelling and accentuation are reproduced as they appear in the originals. All translations are our own. The *Discurso proemial* of 1726 states:

En el uso de los acentos tambien se ha padecido grande equivocación, causada de la ignorancia, ò poca advertencia de su uso. En la Léngua Latina son tres, grave, agúdo, y circunflexo. En la Léngua Castellana el circunflexo, que se forma assi ^, no tiene uso alguno, y si tal vez se halla usado por algun Autór, es sin necesidad, porque no sabémos yá el tono que los Romanos usaban y explicaban con este accentto. (RAE 1726:LXIV)

In the use of accents there has been much error, caused by ignorance or little knowledge of their use. In Latin there are three, the grave, the acute, and the circumflex. In Castilian the circumflex, formed ^, has no use, and if it is used by any author it is without need, because we no longer know the tone that the Romans used and indicated with this accent.

Use of the circumflex accent is explicitly rejected, but reappears in the *Ortografias* of 1763 through 1792 to indicate when *ch* is pronounced /k/ (e.g. *chîromancia* ‘chiromancy’), and *x*, /ks/ (e.g. *exâcto* ‘exact’). However, if another accenting rule already assigned an acute accent, the circumflex rule did not apply:

Pero se advierte que hay algunos nombres en que la *Ch* se pronuncia como *K* y la *X* como *CS*, donde no es practicable el uso del Circunflexo, porque la vocal en que correspondia ponerle, debe acentuarse segun las reglas dadas, v.g. *Chímica*, *Chímico*, *hexámetro*, *exâmen*, &c. Y la razon de preferir el acento consiste en que el circunflexo, ó capucha es una Nota nuevamente usada para el oficio que se la aplica, y no tan necesaria: porque en estas voces, como facultativas y comunes á otras lenguas, es mas conocida esta pronunciacion de la *Ch* y de la *X*

que no el acento que las mismas voces tienen en castellano. (RAE 1763: 123)

But be aware that there are some nouns in which *Ch* is pronounced as *K*, and *X* as *CS*, where use of the circumflex is not practicable because the vowel on which it would appear should be otherwise accented according to the given rules, v.gr. *Chímica* ‘chemistry’, *Chímico* ‘chemical’, *hexámetro* ‘hexameter’, *exámen* ‘examination’, etc. And the reason that the accent is preferred is that the circumflex, or the hood, is a mark newly used for the purpose it has been assigned, and is not so necessary, because in these words, which are optional and common to other languages, this pronunciation of *Ch* and *X* is better known than which stress these words have in Castilian.

This inconsistency was repeated in actual practice. The *Diccionario* of 1729 lists *chiromancia* with no circumflex, those of 1780, 1783, and 1791 list *chîromancia*, and in 1792 *chiromancia* is listed again without a circumflex. From 1803 onward it appears with its modern spelling, *quiromancia*. The *GRAE* of 1851 decidedly put the circumflex to rest:

Otro acento que se llama circunflejo, figurado así (ˆ), se usaba ántes tambien sobre algunas vocales [...]. Por manera que no habiendo ya motivo para incurrir en equivocacion [...] es inútil serviros del acento circunflejo, y así quedará solo el que se llama agudo para notar la letra sobre qué se haya de apoyar al pronunciar las palabras que lo exigen en castellano... (RAE 1851:303)

Another accent, the circumflex, formed (ˆ), was used before on certain vowels [...]. Since there is no longer any motive for error [...] it is useless to use the circumflex, so that only the accent called acute will be used to indicate which letter should be most strongly pronounced, in words that require it in Castilian.

There were also missed generalizations leading to abundant overlapping rules of various types, beginning, but not ending, with the *Discurso proemial* of 1726:

...no hai necesidad de tal acento, respecto de que por su naturaleza es larga la pronunciación, exceptuándose de esta regla las voces en que las consonantes son muda y líquida, en cuyo caso muchas tienen breve la vocal antecedente, especialmente en la prosa: como *álgebra*, *árbitro*, *Cátedra*, *Fúnebre*, *Lúgubre*, *Quádruplo*. Lo mismo se debe observar en las voces llamadas esdrújulos: como *águila*, *Música*, *Máximo*, *Philósopho*, *Theólogo*, *Escolástico*, *Doctísimo*, en las cuales la sílaba penúltima es breve: y para que se reconozca que la pronunciación no se detiene sobre ella sino sobre la antecedente, se pone el acento agudo sobre esta. (RAE 1726:LXIV)

...there is no need for such an accent, considering that the pronunciation in question is naturally long, except in words with a mute and liquid consonant, in which case many have a preceding short vowel, especially in prose: like *álgebra*, *árbitro* ‘arbiter’, *Cátedra* ‘professorship’, *Fúnebre* ‘funereal’, *Lúgubre* ‘lugubrious’, *Quádruplo* ‘quadruple’. The same should occur in words called *esdrújulos* ‘proparoxytone’; like *águila* ‘eagle’, *Música* ‘music’, *Máximo* ‘maximum’, *Philósopho* ‘philosopher’, *Theólogo* ‘theologian’, *Escolástico* ‘scholastic’,

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Doctísimo ‘extremely well-versed’, in which the penultimate syllable is short: and to indicate that the pronunciation does not linger on the penult, but on the preceding syllable, the acute accent is placed on the preceding syllable.’

There are two rules, the second to account specifically for *esdrújulas* (accented on the third syllable from the right edge of the word). However, all the examples used to illustrate the first rule are also *esdrújulas*.

Finally, there are unmotivated, *ad hoc* rules like those for patronymics, last names given to children derived from the name of the father, for example, *Fernández*, from *Fernando*. In the somewhat circular rule from the *Ortografía* of 1741, no written accent is required where it otherwise would be, because the pronunciation of the surnames is so commonly known:

Los Apellidos Patronímicos acabados en *az*, y en *ez*, como *Diaz*, *Perez*, *Marquez*, y otros conocidos, nunca se hallan de acentuacion aguda, acaso por haberse formado de los plurales de los nombres propios, y no haber mudado su acentuacion, aunque hayan mudado en *Z* la *S* de su terminacion, y siendo tan conocido, comun, y freqüente el modo de acentuarse, no necesitan de nota, que los distinga de las otras voces de su misma terminacion. (RAE 1741:253-254)

Patronymic surnames ending in *az* and *ez*, like *Diaz*, *Perez*, *Marquez*, and other well-known ones, never have an acute accent, perhaps because they were formed from the plural of the proper nouns, and because their accentuation did not change, even though their last letter changed from *S* to *Z*, and because their accentuation is so well-known, common, and frequent, they do not require a mark to distinguish them from other words with the same ending.

In a rule from the *Prontuario* of 1854, surnames that are adjectives or the same as common nouns have no written accent mark, even if they end in the same letter as other surnames which do:

Se dará tambien acento á los apellidos terminados en consonante, cuya última sílaba fuere larga, como *Ardanáz*, *Muñíz*; pero no lo llevarán los apellidos que fuesen al mismo tiempo sustantivos comunes como *Calderon*, *Doncel*, *Pastor* ó adjetivos como *Leal*, *Capaz*, ó nombres geográficos como *Teruel*, *Motril*, ó verbos como *Escalar*, *Amar*. (RAE 1854:33-34)

An accent will also be given to surnames whose last syllable is long and that end in a consonant, like *Ardanáz*, *Muñíz*, but surnames that are also common nouns like *Calderon* ‘paragraph mark’, *Doncel* ‘young nobleman’, *Pastor* ‘shepherd’, or adjectives like *Leal* ‘loyal’, *Capaz* ‘capable’, or geographical names like *Teruel*, *Motril*, or verbs like *Escalar* ‘to climb’, *Amar* ‘to love’, will not have one.

Except for *Calderon* (today *Calderón*), all the words fall within the unmarked pattern of final stress on non-verbs ending in a consonant, so their lack of written accentuation can be explained without reference to other factors.

3. Written accentuation since 1726

Current accentuation rules differ widely from the earlier rules. Early in its evolution, the acute accent was almost always described as indicating length rather than stress. The grave accent was maintained on *à, è, ò*, and *ù* when used as separate words, and was later replaced by the acute accent, which has since ceased to be used in these cases. There was, until quite recently, confusion regarding the accentuation of monosyllables. There was no clear rule for indicating hiatus, and no clear understanding of diphthongization. Accents were required for certain grammatical categories and verb forms. And finally, unlike in the current rules, the plural markers *-n* and *-s* were grouped with all other consonants. Based on these differences this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Until when was accent equated with syllable length rather than stress?
2. Until when was the written accent maintained on vowels used as separate words?
3. When did the diacritical accent on monosyllables become clearly defined?
4. When were the rules for indicating hiatus clearly defined?
5. When were certain verb tenses no longer defined as requiring written accents?
6. When were *-n*, *-s* and *-V* grouped together in a single rule?

3.1 Length versus stress

The *Diccionario* of 1726 defined the function of the accent in terms of syllable length:

En nuestra Léngua los accentos no sirven para explicar el tono, sino para significar que la syllaba que se accentúa es larga. (RAE 1726:LXIV)

In our language the accent is not used to indicate stress, but rather that the accented syllable is long.

According to Douglass (1988) *larga* meant ‘stressed’ rather than ‘long’. This was: “...another case of confusion caused by developments from Latin to Spanish, since a vowel in Latin was ‘long by nature’ if it was double in pronunciation (long) and ‘long by position’ if it was followed by two or more consonants” (Douglass 1988:931).

The *Ortographia* of 1741 is closer to the modern *Ortografías* than to those of its time, defining accent in terms of greater prominence, regardless of syllable length:

Nosotros, como solo acentuamos la pronunciacion en una syllaba de la palabra, haciendo en ella fuerza con animar algo el pecho, y deteniendo con alguna pausa la voz, solo necesitamos (sin distinción de syllabas breves, ó largas) de una nota de acento, con la qual, puesta sobre la vocal, damos a entender, y conocemos que en ella hemos de acentuar... (RAE 1741:245)

Since we only stress the pronunciation of a single syllable in a word, with greater force coming

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from the chest, and pausing the voice, (with no distinction between short and long syllables) we only need a single accent mark placed on the vowel with which we indicate and know that it is to be accented...

In later *Ortografías* (1763-1826), for reasons that are unclear, ‘stressed’ was again equated with ‘long’:

Acento en su sentido propio es el tono con que se pronuncia una diccion, ya subiendo ó ya baxando la voz; pero en la ortografía española vulgarmente entendemos por acento aquella nota ó señal con que se denotan las sílabas largas, porque las breves no se acentúan en castellano: y también llamamos acento la misma pronunciacion larga de alguna sílaba. (RAE 1763: 108)

Accent as such is the stress with which a word is pronounced, raising or lowering the voice, but in Spanish spelling we commonly understand accent as the mark or sign with which long syllables are indicated, because the short ones are not accented in Castilian: and we also refer to the long pronunciation of a syllable as accent.

The *Prontuario* of 1854 states that the written accent indicates which syllable is pronounced with greater prominence:

Se llama acento una rayita oblicua [...] que se pone, en los casos que se dirán, sobre la vocal de la sílaba en que carga la fuerza, segun la verdadera pronunciacion de la palabras. (RAE 1854:29-30)

Accent is what we call a slanting line [...] which is placed, in the cases that will be enumerated, on the vowel of the syllable pronounced with the greatest force, according to the true pronunciation of the word.

However, accenting rules continue to be couched in terms of length:

Las voces que, no siendo verbos, plurales ni apellidos, acaban en consonante, y tienen larga la penúltima, llevarán acento en ella, como *trébol*, *ágil*, *mártir*, *Cármén*, *alférez*, *miéntras*, *entónces*. (RAE 1854:31)

Words that are not verbs, plurals, or surnames, end in a consonant, and have a long penultimate syllable, will have an accent on the penult, as in *trébol* ‘cloverleaf’, *ágil* ‘agile’, *mártir* ‘martyr’, *Cármén*, *alférez* ‘second lieutenant’, *miéntras* ‘while’, *entónces* ‘then’.

Finally in the *GRAE* of 1883, accent was equated solely with stress, and length disappeared from the discussion:

Se llama *acento ortográfico*, ó simplemente *acento*, una rayita oblicua (´) que [...] se pone, en los casos que se dirán, sobre la vocal de la sílaba donde carga la fuerza en la pronunciación del vocablo. (RAE 1883:364)

A slanting line (´) placed, in the cases that will be enumerated, over the vowel of the syllable

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pronounced with the greatest force, is called *orthographic accent*, or simply *accent*.

The term *acento de intensidad* ‘stress accent’ first appeared in the *Esbozo* of 1973 and is still used today, along with *acento prosódico* ‘prosodic accent’. The current rule is in spirit very similar to the one from 1883:

Para señalar la sílaba tónica de una palabra, el español emplea en ciertos casos el acento gráfico llamado también tilde (´), signo colocado sobre la vocal de la sílaba tónica de la palabra según reglas bien establecidas. (RAE 1999:24)

To indicate the tonic syllable in a word, in certain cases Spanish uses a graphic or written accent (´) over the vowel of the tonic syllable, according to well-established rules.

3.2 Vowels as separate words

The *Diccionario* of 1726 presented a rule for vowels used as separate words:

...el grave, que es el que baxa obliquamente de la izquierda à la derecha en esta forma ` , unicamente puede tener uso sobre las quatro vocáles à è ò ù , quando cada una es como voz separada de otras, y hace cabál sentido por sí sola, dexando de ser mera vocal. (RAE 1726:LXIV)

...the grave accent, which slants downward from left to right is this way (`), can only be used on the four vowels à è ò ù, when each one is used as a word separate from the others, has meaning in and of itself, and ceases to be simply a vowel.

This use of the grave accent is illustrated above (*de la izquierda à la derecha* ‘from left to right’), and in frases such as “*en palabras de tres ò mas vocáles*” ‘in words with three or more vowels’ (LXIV).

The *Ortografía* of 1741 eliminated the grave accent in favor of the acute, albeit with some inconsistency in the application of the rule (*ò á Pedro*):

La misma nota, ó virgulilla se ha de poner sobre qualquiera de las vocales, a,e,o,u, quando hablasse por si sola, v.g. *á Juan, ò á Pedro, ú á otro*: no porque demuestre su acentuacion; sino porque no se pronuncie unida á la voz antecedente, ó subsiguiente. (RAE 1741:258)

The same mark or dash should appear over the vowels, *a,e,o,u* when they stand alone, v.gr. *á Juan* ‘to Juan’, *ò á Pedro* ‘or to Pedro’, *ú á otro* ‘or to another’: not because it indicates their accentuation, but because they are pronounced separately from the preceding or following word.

In the *Prontuario* of 1854 the grammatical function of vowels used as separate words comes into play:

Cuando *a* es preposicion, y la *e*, la *o* y la *u* son conjunciones, llevan siempre acento, v.gr. *Ama á tu prójimo; diez ú once; ayer ú hoy*. (RAE 1854:30)

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When *a* is a preposition, and *e*, *o*, and *u* are conjunctions, they always have an accent, v.gr. *Ama á tu prójimo* ‘love your neighbor’; *diez ú once* ‘ten or eleven’; *ayer ú hoy* ‘yesterday or today’.

The *GRAE* of 1883 conceded that these vowels were accented out of custom rather than for prosodic reasons:

La preposición *á* y las conjunciones *é, ó, ú*, se acentúan ortográficamente por costumbre y no por ninguna razón prosódica. (RAE 1883:366)

The preposition *á* and the conjunctions *é, ó, ú* have a written accent mark out of custom and not for any prosodic reason.

The 1883 rule remained intact through 1906. The *GRAE* of 1917 argued that it was unfounded, with one exception:

La preposición *a* y las conjunciones *e, o, u*, no llevando acento prosódico... tampoco deben llevarlo escrito. No obstante, lo llevará escrito la conjunción *o* cuando, por hallarse inmediata a cifras, pudiera confundirse con el cero; así, *3 ó 4* nunca podrá tomarse por *304*. (RAE 1917:490)

Since the preposition *a* and the conjunctions *e, o, u* do not have a prosodic accent...they should not have a written one either. However, the conjunction *o* will have a written accent when it immediately precedes a number, because it might be confused with the zero, so that *3 ó 4* can never be confused with *304*.

This exception was eliminated in the *Ortografía* of 2010:

...a partir de este momento, la conjunción *o* se escribirá siempre sin tilde, como corresponde a su condición de palabra monosílaba átona, con independencia de que aparezca entre palabras, cifras o signos: *¿Quieres té o café?*; *Terminaré dentro de 3 o 4 días*;... (RAE 2010:n.p.)

...from now on, the conjunction *o* will always be written without an accent, in accordance with its status as an atonic monosyllabic word, independently of whether it appears between words, numbers, or symbols: *¿Quieres té o café?* ‘Do you want tea or coffee?’; *Terminaré dentro de 3 o 4 días* ‘I’ll finish within 3 or 4 days’;...

3.3 The diacritical accent

The term *tilde diacrítica* appeared only recently, in the *Ortografía* of 1999:

La tilde diacrítica es aquella que permite distinguir, por lo general, palabras pertenecientes a diferentes categorías gramaticales, que tienen, sin embargo, idéntica forma. (RAE 1999:27)

The diacritic accent is the one that, in general, allows us to distinguish between words belonging to different grammatical categories, but that are identical in form.

This rule includes *el* ‘the’/‘él’ he’ and *solo* ‘lonely’/‘sólo’ ‘only’, among others, demonstrative pronouns versus determiners (e.g. *éste/este* ‘this’), interrogatives (e.g. *¿dónde?* ‘where?’), and exclamatives (e.g. *¡Qué bonito!* ‘How pretty!’). The *Ortografía* of 2010 eliminates the diacritical accent on *solo* ‘only’ (adverb) and demonstrative pronouns.

The current concept of the diacritical accent evolved slowly. It is not mentioned in the *Diccionario* of 1726. The *Ortografía* of 1741 grouped *de* and *el* with all other monosyllables:

En los monosílabos, ó voces de una syllaba no se debe poner nota de acento: porque nunca puede variarse la pronunciacion, v.g. *dan, de, el, que,* y otras semejantes. (RAE 1741:248)

On monosyllables, or words with a single syllable, there should be no written accent mark: because their pronunciation can never vary, v.gr. *dan* ‘they give’, *de* ‘of’, *el* ‘the’, *que* ‘that’, and other similar ones.

The modern diacritical accent began to take shape in the *Ortografía* of 1763:

Ningun monosílabo, ó voz apelativa ó propia de una sílaba, ya acabe en vocal, ya en consonante, se acentuará [...]. Exceptúanse aquellos monosílabos que teniendo mas de una significacion, se pronuncian con mayor pausa en una que en otra [...] como *él* quando fuere pronombre, á diferencia de quando fuere artículo; [...] (RAE 1736:110-111)

No monosyllable, or appellative or individual word of one syllable, whether it ends in a vowel or a consonant, will have a written accent [...] except those monosyllables which have more than one meaning, and where one is pronounced with greater pause than the other, for example *él* ‘he’ when it is a pronoun as opposed to an article; [...]

The list also includes *mí* ‘to or for me’/‘mi’ ‘my’, *dé* ‘give (imperative or subjunctive)’/‘de’ ‘of’, *sé* “I know”/‘se’ ‘third person pronoun’ and *sí* ‘yes’/‘si’ ‘if’. The *Prontuario* of 1854 (32) added *tú* ‘you (personal pronoun)’ and *más* ‘more’, and included the adverbs *sólo* ‘only’ and *aún* ‘still’, interrogatives, exclamatives, and demonstratives. It also distinguished between the prepositions *para* ‘for’, *entre* ‘between’, and *sobre* ‘above’, and the verbs *pára* ‘stop’, *éntre* ‘enter’ and *sóbre* ‘to be left over/plentiful’, not mentioned before or since:

Para, entre y sobre, preposiciones, no llevarán acento; *pára, éntre y sóbre,* verbos, pueden necesitarlo. Se escribirá pues: *Cochero, pára el coche; para coches no es bueno este piso. Si hemos de elegir entre Juan y Pedro cuál ha de entrar en casa, éntre Juan. Sóbre el pan aunque falte el vino; esto importa sobre todo.* (RAE 1854:35)

The prepositions *para, entre,* and *sobre* will not have a written accent; the verbs *pára, éntre,* and *sóbre* may need one. So the following will be written: *Cochero, pára el coche; para coches no es bueno este piso.* ‘Driver, stop the car; this surface is not good for cars’. *Si hemos de elegir entre Juan y Pedro cuál ha de entrar en casa, éntre Juan.* ‘If we have to chose between Juan

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and Pedro who enters the house, let Juan enter’. *Sobre el pan aunque falte el vino; esto importa sobre todo*. ‘Let the bread be plentiful even though there is not enough wine; this matters above all’.

The *GRAE* of 1917 established a connection between the grammatical function of monosyllables and prosody:

...se escribe el acento cuando existen dos monosílabos iguales en su forma, pero con distinta función gramatical en una de las cuales lleva acento prosódico y en otra es átona. (RAE 1917:490)

the accent is written when there are two monosyllables with the same form but different grammatical function, one of which has a tonic accent and the other of which is atonic.

The *Esbozo* of 1973 reiterated the connection between forms with a written accent and prosody. Demonstrative pronouns (e.g. *éste* ‘this one’) and adjectives (*este libro* ‘this book’) are both considered *prosódicamente acentuados* ‘prosodically stressed’, but not so pairs like *cómo* ‘how’/*como* ‘as, like’ or *él/el*, among others:

En los casos restantes de dos acentuaciones, la diferencia se establece entre dos voces homófonas prosódicamente acentuada la una e inacentuada la otra. (RAE 1973:140)

In the remaining cases of two accentuations, the difference is established between two homophones, one prosodically stressed and the other unstressed.

There is no mention of prosody in relation to this type of accent in 1999 and 2010. Now the diacritical accent is the only one that is truly only a written accent. Its very name indicates that it is not meant to reflect any difference in pronunciation.

3.4 Hiatus

Diphthongs and hiatus were first discussed in the *Ortografía* of 1741. It mandated an accent in combinations like *-ia-*, *-ie-*, *-uo-*, *-io-* to mark hiatus, even when the word adhered to general accentuation rules:

En las combinaciones de *ia*, *ie*, *uo*, *io*, y semejantes, en que suelen terminar algunas voces, se pondrá sobre la primera de aquellas vocales la misma nota, siempre que, separada de la siguiente, hubiese de acentuar en ella la pronunciación, como en *Ortografía*, *desvíos*, *varien*, *arrío*, *continúo*, y otros [...] para advertir la separación de las dos vocales, y dar á conocer que cada una debe pronunciarse con distinto número, y tiempo, formando dos sílabas, á diferencia de otras voces de la misma terminación, en que las dos vocales solo hacen un número, y tiempo, y por consiguiente una sola sílaba, como en *ciencia*, *Diccionario*, *serie*, *aficion*, *antiguos*, *infíel*, y otros, en los cuales la falta de nota dará á conocer, que ambas vocales componen una sola sílaba. (RAE 1741:255-256)

In the combinations *ia*, *ie*, *uo*, *io* and the like, found at the end of some words, the same mark

will appear on the first vowel whenever it is separated from the following vowel and its pronunciation is emphasized, as in *Ortographia* ‘orthography’, *desvíos* ‘detours’, *varíen* ‘vary (3rd p. pl. pres. subj.)’, *arrio* ‘lower (a flag or a sail) (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *continúo* ‘continue (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’, and others, to indicate that the vowels are separate and form two syllables, unlike in other words with the same ending in which both vowels are pronounced together in the same syllable, as in *ciencia* ‘science’, *Diccionario* ‘dictionary’, *serie* ‘series’, *aficion* ‘fondness for’, *antiguos* ‘old’, *infiel* ‘unfaithful’, and others in which the lack of written mark will indicate that both vowels constitute a single syllable.

Although more elaborate, this rule approximates the current one, distinguishing between high (/i/, /u/) and mid and low vowels (/a/, /e/, /o/), presenting examples consistent with the stated precepts. However, the clarity was short lived. The *Ortografía* of 1763 complicated the issue with several new rules, losing the distinction between high and non-high vowels for purposes of written accentuation. By the first rule, two-syllable words ending in two vowels never have a written accent:

Las voces que terminan en dos vocales y se componen solo de dos sílabas no deben acentuarse en la primera, quando en ella cargare la pronunciacion, por ser esta la que comunmente tienen en Castellano: como *nao*, *cae*, *brea*, *sea*, *lee*, *reo*, *veo*, *via*, *tia*, *lie*, *rio*, *mio*, *loa*, *loe*, *roo*, *pua*, *rue*, *duo*. (RAE 1763:115)

Words that end in two vowels and that have only two syllables should not have a written accent on the first vowel when this vowel is stressed, since this is the usual pronunciation in Castilian: as in *nao* ‘vessel’, *cae* ‘fall (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *brea* ‘tar/pitch’, *sea* ‘be (third p. sg., pres. subj.)’, *lee* ‘read (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *reo* ‘defendant/accused’, *veo* ‘see (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *via* ‘road/way’, *tia* ‘aunt’, *lie* ‘bind (3rd p. sg., pres. subj.)’, *rio* ‘river’, *mio* ‘mine’, *loa* ‘praise’, *loe* ‘praise (3rd p. sg., pres. subj.)’, *roo* ‘gnaw (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *pua* ‘barb’, *rue* ‘street’, *duo* ‘duet’.

Notably, there is no distinction between words with hiatus between a high and a non-high vowel (*via*, *tia*, *lie*, *rio*, *mio*, *pua*, *rue*, *duo*), and between two mid or low vowels (*nao*, *cae*, *brea*, *sea*, *lee*, *reo*, *veo*, *loa*, *loe*, *roo*). Under current rules, two adjacent mid or low vowels (e.g. *re-o* ‘defendant/accused’) each form a separate syllable. Words like *rí-o* ‘river’ require a written accent indicating hiatus, since an atonic high vowel adjacent to a mid or low vowel (e.g. /i̯o/) forms a diphthong. Another unmotivated rule distinguished between simple and compound forms:

Adviértese que hay algunas voces acabadas en dos vocales, que aunque en sus simples no necesitan de acento, deben llevarle los compuestos, v.g. *lia* y *via* que se componen solo de dos sílabas, no se acentúan [...]; y sin embargo sus compuestos *deslía*, *desvía* [...] se deberán acentuar en la penúltima, conforme á esta quarta Regla: y así otras voces semejantes. (RAE 1763:119)

Notice that there are words ending in two vowels that, in their simple forms do not require a

written accent, but that should have one in their compound forms, *v.gr.* *lia* ‘bind (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’ and *via* ‘road/way’, which only have two syllables, do not have a written accent [...]; however, the compound forms *deslíá* ‘unbind (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’ and *desvíá* ‘detour (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’ [...] should have one on the penult according to this, the fourth rule; and likewise in similar words.

Revisions in the *Prontuario* of 1854 mandated a written accent on the penult in words ending in *-ea* and *-eo*, then (but not now) considered diphthongs, but not those ending in *-ia*, *-ie*, *-io*, *-ua*, and *-uo*:

Esta regla tiene varias excepciones: á saber. Se pondrá acento en la penúltima sílaba larga, cuando la última sea un diptongo en *ea* ó en *eo*, como *línea*, *cutáneo*, *etéreo*, *purpúreo*; mas no si el diptongo fuere en *ia*, *ie*, *io*, *ua*, *uo*; como en *concordia*, *enturbie*, *consorcio*, *recua*, *continuo*. (RAE 1854:30-31)

This rule has several exceptions. Namely, there will be a written accent on a long penultimate syllable when the final syllable is a diphthong in *ea* or in *eo*, as in *línea* ‘line’, *cutáneo* ‘cutaneous’, *etéreo* ‘ethereal’, *purpúreo* ‘purple’; but not if the diphthong is *ia*, *ie*, *io*, *ua*, *uo*, as in *concordia* ‘concord’, *enturbie* ‘muddy (3rd p. sg. pres. subj.)’, *consorcio* ‘consortium’, *recua* ‘a train of animals’, *continuo* ‘continuous’.

This is another missed generalization, since all the examples of words in *-ea/-eo* are today identified as *esdrújulas*. The above rule, and those below, show that the concept of diphthongs and hiatus in Spanish was still in flux, as were the relevant rules for written accentuation:

Las voces de más de dos sílabas que terminen en *ia-ias-ian*, *ie-ies-ien*, *io-ios*, *ua-uas-uan*, *ue-ues-uen*, *uo*, y tengan la fuerza de la pronunciación en la primera de las dos vocales (en cuyo caso no forman diptongo), deberán distinguirse con acento sobre la vocal penúltima de la palabra, escribiéndose, por ejemplo: *Lucía*, *García*, *porfía*, *porfías*, *varían*; *engríe*, *envíes*, *amplíen*; *rocío*, *desvaríos*; *conceptúa*, *falúa*, *gradúa*, *falúas*, *gradúan*; *valúe*, *preceptúes*, *efectúen*; *conceptúo*. Pero cuando las terminaciones *ia*, *ias*, *ian* correspondan á los pretéritos imperfectos de indicativo ó subjuntivo, se omitirá el acento. (RAE 1854:31)

Words of more than two syllables that end in *ia-ias-ian*, *ie-ies-ien*, *io-ios*, *ua-uas-uan*, *ue-ues-uen*, *uo* that are stressed on the first of the two vowels (in which case they do not form a diphthong), should have a written accent on the penultimate vowel, as in *Lucía*, *García*, *porfía* ‘insist on (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *porfías* ‘insist on (2nd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *varían* ‘vary (3rd p. pl. present indic.)’; *engríe* ‘become conceited (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *envíes* ‘send (2nd p. sing. pres. subj.)’, *amplíen* ‘enlarge (3rd p. pl. pres. subj.)’; *rocío* ‘dew’, *desvaríos* ‘ravings’; *conceptúa* ‘consider (3rd p. sing. pres. indic.)’, *falúa* ‘a launch’, *gradúa* ‘graduate (3rd p. sing. pres. indic.)’, *falúas* ‘launches’, *gradúan* ‘graduate (3rd p. pl. pres. indic.)’; *valúe* ‘value (1st and 3rd p. sing. pres. subj.)’, *preceptúes* ‘establish (2nd p. sg. pres. subj.)’, *efectúen* ‘carry out (3rd p. pl. pres. subj.)’; *conceptúo* ‘consider (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’. But when the endings *ia*, *ias*, *ian* correspond to imperfect indicative or subjunctive verb forms, the accent will be omitted.

In a given phonological context some words required written accentuation narrowly based on grammatical classification. Words with *ia-ias-ian* where /i/ is in hiatus with /a/ had an accent, but not verbs in the imperfect indicative or subjunctive. Because the system was still changing, there was confusion and a lack of economy, especially in cases of potential ambiguity:

No obstante lo prevenido en varias reglas anteriores, se acentuarán todas las palabras en que la falta de este signo produzca ambigüedad en la significacion de ellas. Así se escribirá *sábía*, *régia*, *vénia*, *séria*, *Bailén*, *cortés*, *prévia* y *pié*, á fin de diferenciarlas de *sabia*, *regia*, *venia*, *seria*, *bailen*, *cortes*, *previa*, y *pie*. Ni estaría de más acentuar tambien estas últimas voces en obsequio de la claridad, escribiendo, segun fuere necesario *sábía* y *sabía*, *régia* y *regia*, *vénia* y *venía*, *séria* y *sería*, *córtés* y *cortés*, *prévia* y *prévia*, *continúa* y *continúa*, *pié*, *pie* y *pié*. (RAE1854:34-35)

Despite the preceding rules, all words whose meaning may be ambiguous without it will have a written accent. The words *sábía* ‘wise’, *régia* ‘regal’, *vénia* ‘permission’, *séria* ‘serious’, *Bailén*, *cortés* ‘courteous’, *prévia* ‘previous’ and *pié* ‘foot’ will be written as such to distinguish them from the words *sabia* ‘know (1st and 3rd p. sg. imp. indic.)’, *regia* ‘rule (1st and 3rd p. sg. imp. indic.)’, *venia* ‘come (1st and 3rd p. sg. imp. indic.)’, *seria* ‘be (1st and 3rd p. sg. conditional.)’, *bailen* ‘dance (3rd p. pl. pres. subj.)’, *cortes* ‘royal court’, *previa* (*sic*) ‘foresee (3rd p. sg. imp. indic.)’, and *pie* ‘chirp (1st and 3rd p. sg. pres. subj.)’. And for the sake of clarity, it would not be unwarranted to accent these words as well, where necessary, writing *sábía* and *sabía*, *régia* and *regia*, *vénia* and *venía*, *séria* and *sería*, *córtés* and *cortés*, *prévia* and *prévia*, *continúa* and *continúa*, *pié*, *pie* and *pié* ‘chirp (1st p. sg. pret. indic.)’.

These rules persisted until the *GRAE* of 1883, which established the current distinction between diphthongs and hiatus:

Debe asimismo recordarse lo que en su lugar oportuno se dijo, de que no hay diptongo en castellano sino cuando las vocales débiles *i*, *u*, se juntan entre sí, ó con cualquiera de las fuertes *a*, *e*, *o*; v.gr.: *viuda*, *ruido*, *jaula*, *Juana*, *cielo*, *fuego*, *odio*. [...] Cuando se juntan dos vocales fuertes no existe diptongo; v.gr.: *Bilbao*, *poeta*, *decae*. (RAE 1883:364)

It should also be remembered what was said before; that there is no diphthong in Castilian other than when the weak vowels *i*, *u* are adjacent to each other or to the strong vowels *a*, *e*, *o*; v.gr. *viuda* ‘widow’, *ruido* ‘noise’, *jaula* ‘cage’, *Juana*, *cielo* ‘heaven’, *fuego* ‘fire’, *odio* ‘hate’. [...]. When two strong vowels are adjacent, there is no diphthong. v.gr.: *Bilbao*, *poeta* ‘poet’, *decae* ‘decline (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’.

It also brought the accentuation rules for diphthongs and hiatus into line with the current rules:

Las voces llanas terminadas en dos vocales se deberán acentuar si la primera de estas vocales es débil y sobre ella carga la pronunciación, vayan ó no seguidas de *n* ó *s* final: *poesía*, *desvario*, *falúa*, *dúo*, *tenía*, *sería*, *día*, *mío*, *pía*, *pío*, *pie*, *acentúo* [...].

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En las voces agudas donde haya encuentro de vocal fuerte con una débil acentuada, ésta llevará acento ortográfico; v. gr.: *país, ataúd, baúl, Bails, Saúl*.

[...]

Pero siguen la regla general de no acentuarse los vocablos llanos que finalizan en diptongo ó en dos vocales fuertes, vayan ó no seguidas de *n* ó *s* final; v. gr.: *patria, seria, tenia, delirio, sitio, agua, fatuo, acaricia, atestigua; bacalao, deseo; canoa, corroe*,[...] *Esquivias, bacalaos, canoas, corroen*. (RAE 1883:366)

Paroxytone words ending in two vowels should have an accent mark if the first of the two is a weak vowel but is stressed, whether or not it is followed by final *n* or *s*: *poesía* ‘poetry’, *desvario* ‘raving’, *falúa* ‘a launch’, *dúo* ‘duet’, *tenía* ‘have (1st and 3rd p. sg. imp. indic.)’, *sería* ‘be (1st and 3rd p. sg. cond.)’, *día* ‘day’, *mío* ‘mine’, *pía* ‘chirp (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *pío* ‘chirp (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *píe* ‘chirp (1st and 3rd p. sg. pres. subj.)’, *acentúo* ‘accentuate (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’ [...].’

‘In oxytone words where a strong vowel is adjacent to a stressed weak vowel, the weak vowel will have a written accent mark; v.gr. *país* ‘country’, *ataúd* ‘coffin’, *baúl* ‘trunk’, *Bails, Saúl*.’

[...]

‘But paroxytone words that end in a diphthong or in two strong vowels, whether or not they are followed by final *n* or *s* follow the general rule and do not have a written accent mark; v.gr. *patria* ‘homeland’, *seria* ‘serious’, *tenia* ‘tapeworm’, *delirio* ‘delirium’, *sitio* ‘place’, *agua* ‘water’, *fatuo* ‘fatuous’, *acaricia* ‘caress (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *atestigua* ‘bear witness (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *bacalao* ‘cod’, *deseo* ‘desire’, *canoa* ‘canoe’, *corroe* ‘corrode (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’,[...] *Esquivias* ‘municipality in Toledo province’, *bacalaos* ‘cods’, *canoas* ‘canoes’, *corroen* ‘corrode (3rd p. pl. pres. indic.)’.

The *Ortografía* of 1959 first spelled out that the silent *-h-* has no effect on the formation of diphthongs and hiatus. For example, *desahucio* ‘eviction’ is pronounced [de-sáϣ-sjo] or [de-sáϣ-θjo] and *vahído* ‘fainting spell’, [ba-í-ðo] (1959:540). The phrasing of the rules was revised in the *Esbozo* of 1973, and further simplified in the *Ortografía* of 1999, which also explicitly defined a triphthong as a strong vowel (i.e. the mid and low vowels /e/, /a/ /o/) between two weak vowels (i.e. the high vowels /i/ and /u/), for example, *estudiáis* [es-tu-ðjájs] ‘study (2nd p. pl. pres. indic.)’ (RAE 1999:26).

3.5 Accent associated with verb form

We know today that verbs do not have a written accent because of tense or mood, but because they break the Spanish stress rules. For example, *comió* ends in *-o*, and so should by rule be accented on the penult. *Vino* is also preterit, but follows the stress rules and does not have a written accent. However, the *Diccionario* of 1726 called for accents to distinguish between verb forms, and nouns and verbs:

Fuera de estos fines tiene otro mui conveniente y oportúno, que es de evitar la equivocación en la pronunciación de algunos tiempos de los verbos, señalando quando es presente, ò preterito, quando es indicativo, ò subjuntivo, &c. como *Enseño, Enseñó, Amára, Amará, Deseáre,*

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Desearé, Aparejare, Aparejaré, y para distinguir los nombres de los verbos: como *Cántara, Cantára, y Cantará*, que puesto sobre la antepenúltima es nombre, sobre la penúltima verbo, y señala un tiempo, y colocado sobre la última denota otro. (RAE 1726:LXIV-LXV)

Aside from this use, it has another which is very convenient and opportune, which is to avoid mistakes in the pronunciation of certain verb tenses, indicating when it is present or preterit, indicative or subjunctive, etc., as in *Enseño* ‘teach (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *Enseñó* ‘teach (3rd p. sg. pret. indic.)’, *Amára* ‘love (1st and 3rd p. sg. imp. subj.)’, *Amará* ‘love (3rd p. sg. fut. indic.)’, *Desearé* ‘desire (1st and 3rd p. sg. fut. subj.)’, *Desearé* ‘desire (1st p. sg. fut. indic.)’, *Aparejare* ‘prepare (1st and 3rd p. sg. fut. subj.)’, *Aparejaré* ‘prepare (1st p. sg. fut. indic.)’, and to distinguish nouns from verbs, as in *cántara* ‘jug’, *cantára* ‘sing (1st and 3rd p. sg., imp. subj.)’, and *cantará* ‘sing (3rd p. sg. fut. indic.)’, where on the antepenultimate syllable it denotes a noun, on the penultimate, a verb and it indicates tense, and placed on the final syllable, it denotes a different verb tense.

The rules varied in each publication. The *Ortographia* of 1741 eliminated the above rule, instead requiring an accent on third person plural future verbs ending in *-n*, and making an exception to the general stress rules for plural verbs in *-mos* or *-is*:

Las acabadas en qualquiera de las otras consonantes, se han observado generalmente de pronunciacion aguda, y por ser esta su mas comun, y freqüente acentuacion, solo necesitan de acento sobre la vocal de la penúltima sylaba, quando no fueren agudas, como en carácter, fácil, cánon; pero como en las terceras personas del plural de los verbos, que acaban en *n*, solo sean de acento agudo las de los futuros, á estas se les debe poner nota de acento en la última vocal, y no á las demás, como en *amarán, enseñarán*. (RAE 1741:252-253)

Y se advierte que las voces que tienen nota de acento, la conservan [...] en los verbos, quando para formar el plural se les añade el *mos*, ó *is*, ó se les pospone unido alguno de los pronombres como en *amarémos, amaréis, enseñóme, daréte*, [...]; porque como estas adiciones no inmutan su pronunciacion, tampoco deben hacer novedad en las notas de sus acentos. (RAE 1741:254-255)

Words ending in any of the other consonants are generally oxytone, and since this is their most common and frequent accentuation, they only need a written accent on the vowel of the penultimate syllable when they are not oxytone, as in *carácter* ‘character’, *fácil* ‘easy’, *cánon* ‘canon’; but since in third person plural verbs that end in *n* only future tense verbs are oxytone, only these and no others will have a written accent on the final vowel, as in *amarán* ‘love/enseñarán’ ‘teach’ (3rd p. pl. fut. indic.).

And be advised that words that have a written accent will maintain it [...] on the verb forms in the plural that are formed with *-mos* or *-is*, or to which is added one of the pronouns, as in *amarémos* ‘love (1st p. pl. fut. indic.)’, *amaréis* ‘love (2nd p. pl. fut. indic.)’, *enseñóme* ‘show to me (3rd p. sg. pret. indic.)’, *daréte* ‘give to you (1st p. sg. fut. indic.)’ [...]; because since these additions do not alter their pronunciation, they should have no effect on their written accent mark.

The rules were changed in 1763, and called for accents on first and third person sg.

preterit and future indicative forms, but not on first and third singular imperfect forms in *-ia*:

En la última se acentuarán [...] las primeras y terceras personas de singular del pretérito y futuro de indicativo de los verbos, como en *amé, conocí, amó, amaré, conoceré, amaré, conocerá*. (RAE 1763:113)

En la penúltima se acentuarán también, como en los nombres y verbos acabados en *ee, ia, ie, ua, ue, uo*, v.g. *provée, filosofía, desvía, embíe, desafío, ganzúa, reditúe, gradúo*. De que se exceptúan las primeras y terceras personas de singular de los pretéritos imperfectos de indicativo y subjuntivo que acaban en *ia*, como *yo convenia, aquel convenia, yo tomaria, aquel tomaria*, en las cuales no se acentuará la penúltima vocal, por ser siempre larga, y esta clase de voces muy numerosa. (RAE 1763:117)

First and 3rd person preterit and future indicative verbs will be accented on the last syllable [...], as in *amé* ‘love’/ *conocí* ‘meet’ (1st p. sg. preterit indicative), *amó* ‘love’ (3rd p. sg. pret. indic.), *amaré* ‘love’/ *conoceré* ‘meet’ (1st p. sg. fut. indic.), *amará* ‘love’/ *conocerá* ‘meet’ (3rd p. sg. fut. indic.).

Nouns and verbs ending in *ee, ia, ie, ua, ue, uo*, will be accented on the penultimate syllable; v.g. *provée* ‘provide’ (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.), *filosofía* ‘philosophy’, *desvía* ‘detour’ (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.), *embíe(sic)* ‘send’ (3rd p. sg. pres. subj.), *desafío* ‘challenge’, *ganzúa* ‘lock pick’, *reditúe* ‘produce’ (1st and 3rd p. sg. pres. subj.), *gradúo* ‘graduate’ (1st p. sg. pres. indic.). First and 3rd person singular imperfect indicative and subjunctive (*sic*) verb forms ending in *ia* are an exception to this rule, as in *yo convenia* ‘agree’ (1st p. sg. imp. indic.), *aquel convenia* ‘agree’ (3rd p. sg. imp. indic.), *yo tomaria* ‘take’ (1st p. sg. conditional), *aquel tomaria* ‘take’ (3rd p. sg. conditional); in which the penultimate vowel will not be accented because it is always long, and because this class of words is very numerous.

The rule refers to verbs in the subjunctive, but the examples given are in the conditional. Similar rules persisted until the *GRAE* of 1883, in which there are no longer separate rules for verb forms.

3.6 Words ending in *-n, -s* and *-V*

The two current rules that account for almost all written accentuation not covered by the rules of hiatus and the diacritical accent group *-n, -s* and *-V* together:

Las palabras agudas llevan tilde en la sílaba tónica cuando terminan en vocal, *-n* o *-s*. [...]. Las palabras llanas llevan acento gráfico en la sílaba tónica cuando terminan en consonante que no sea *-n* o *-s*. (RAE 1999: 24-25)

Oxytone words have a written accent on the stressed syllable when they end in a vowel, *-n* or *-s*. [...] Paroxytone words have a written accent on the stressed syllable when they end in any consonant other than *-n* or *-s*.’

The only exceptions are words ending in *-s* preceded by another consonant (e.g.

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robots, cómics), but these are all linguistic borrowings. A third rule falls out directly from the first two:

Las palabras esdrújulas y sobresdrújulas siempre llevan tilde en la sílaba tónica. (RAE 1999:25)

Words with stress on the antepenultimate and pre-antepenultimate syllable always have a written accent on the stressed syllable.

The generalization regarding the accentuation of multisyllabic words ending in any vowel was not captured until 1883. The *Ortografía* of 1741 distinguished between words ending in *-a, -e, -o*, and those ending in *-i* and *-u*:

La voces acabadas en qualquiera de las vocales *a, e, o* tienen su mas freqüente, y comun acentuacion en la penúltima syllaba, y solo necesitan de nota de acento en la última vocal quando fueren agudas, como en *allá, amará, cupé, amaré, amó, enseñó*.

A el contrario las acabadas en *i* latina, ó en *u*, tienen su acentuacion mas comun, y freqüente en la última vocal: por esso solo necesitan de nota de acento en la vocal de la penúltima syllaba, quando no fueren de terminacion aguda, como en *cási, tribu*. (RAE 1741:251)

Words that end in the vowels *a, e, o* are most frequently and commonly stressed on the penultimate syllable, and only require a written accent mark on the final vowels when they are oxytonic, as in *allá* ‘there’, *amará* ‘love (3rd p. sg. fut. indic)’, *cupé* ‘coupe’, *amaré* ‘love (1st p. sg. fut. indic)’, *amó* ‘love (3rd p. sg. pret. indic)’, *enseñó* ‘teach/show (3rd p. sg. pret. indic)’.

On the other hand, words that end in *i* or *u* are most frequently and commonly stressed on the final syllable, and so only require a written accent mark on the vowel of the penultimate syllable when they are not oxytonic, as in *cási* ‘almost’, *tribu* ‘tribe’.

The *Ortografía* of 1763 eliminated this distinction, but proposed *ad hoc* rules like the one below, in which words with three or more syllables ending in any two vowels have a written accent on whichever syllable is stressed:

Las voces que fueren de tres ó mas sílabas y acabaren en dos vocales se acentuarán por su mucha variedad en qualquiera vocal, dondê cargare la pronunciacion. (RAE 1763:116)

Due to their great variety, words with three or more syllables that end in two vowels will have a written accent on whichever vowel is stressed.

The *GRAE* of 1883 presented rules for words ending in *-V* that are, for all practical purposes, the same as today’s:

Las voces agudas de más de una sílaba, terminadas en vocal, se acentúan: *bajá, café, alelí, dominó, alajú, amará, tendré, partí, huyó*, [...] Perú. (RAE 1883:364)

Las voces llanas terminadas en vocal no se acentúan: *ala, bufete, casi, oscuro; maquina, teme, domino, regulo* [...]. (RAE 1883:364-365)

Oxytone words of more than one syllable that end in a vowel will have a written accent: *bajá*

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‘pasha’, *café*, *alelí* ‘stock’, *dominó* ‘dominoes’, *alajú* ‘honey and nut sweet’, *amará* ‘love (3rd p. sg. fut. indic.)’, *tendré* ‘have (1st p. sg. fut. indic.)’, *partí* ‘leave (1st p. sg. pret. indic.)’, *huyó* ‘flee (3rd p. sg. pret. indic.)’ [...], *Perú*.

Paroxytone words that end in a vowel do not have a written accent: *ala* ‘wing’, *bufete* ‘lawyer’s office’, *casi* ‘almost’, *oscuro* ‘dark’; *maquina* ‘scheme (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *teme* ‘fear (3rd p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *domino* ‘dominate (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’, *regulo* ‘regulate (1st p. sg. pres. indic.)’ [...].

Regarding consonants, the *Ortographia* of 1741 came close to capturing the generalization of the current rules, but in an inexplicable reversal, the *Ortografía* of 1763 grouped *-n* and *-s* with all other consonants, witnessed by examples like *tambien*, *manten*, *compas*, and *reves*:

Las voces acabadas en alguna de las letras consonantes se acentuarán en todas las sílabas en que cargare la pronunciacion, menos en la última, porque esta es comunmente larga en las voces de esta especie, como *necesidad*, *penetrad*, *badil*, *aquel*, *almidon*, *tambien*, *manten*, *espaldar*, *amar*, *ayer*, *hacer*, *discurrir*, *mejor*, *compas*, *reves*, *alморadux* [...]. (RAE 1763:120)

Words ending in any consonant will have a written accent on any stressed syllable except the last, because the last is commonly long in this type of word, as in *necesidad* ‘necessity’, *penetrad* ‘penetrate (2nd p. pl. imp.)’, *badil* ‘fire shovel’, *aquel* ‘that’, *almidon* ‘starch’, *tambien* ‘also’, *manten* ‘maintain (2nd p. sg. imp.)’, *espaldar* ‘chair back’, *amar* ‘to love’, *ayer* ‘yesterday’, *hacer* ‘to do’, *discurrir* ‘to flow’, *mejor* ‘better’, *compas* ‘compass’, *reves* ‘reverse’, *alморadux* ‘marjoram’ [...].

In the *GRAE* of 1883, the rules for words in *-n* and *-s* are in essence the same as today’s, with a noteworthy change regarding their application. In the *Diccionario* of 1726 words in *-ión*, like *equivocación* ‘error’ and *pronunciación* ‘pronunciation’ have a written accent. This changed after 1726, and *-ión* words did not appear again with a written accent until the *GRAE* of 1883. Words in *-n*, *-s* and *-V* were not “packaged” together until quite recently, in the *Esbozo* of 1973:

Si terminan en vocal o en una de las consonantes *-s* o *-n*, no agrupadas con otra consonante, se escriben con tilde sobre la última vocal: *bacarrá* (escrito también *bacará*), *parné*, *jabalí*, *landó*, *ombú*; *alacrán*, *almacén*, *alevín*, *hurón*, *atún*; *barrabás*, *cortés*, *parchís*, *intradós*, *obús*. (RAE 1973:134)

If they end in a vowel or *-s* or *-n*, not clustered with another consonant, words will have a written accent on their last vowel: *bacarrá* (also spelled *bacará*) ‘baccarat’, *parné* ‘money’, *jabalí* ‘boar’, *landó* ‘landau’, *ombú* ‘type of tree’; *alacrán* ‘scorpion’, *almacén* ‘warehouse’, *alevín* ‘young fish’, *hurón* ‘ferret’, *atún* ‘tuna’; *barrabás* ‘scoundrel’, *cortés* ‘courteous’, *parchís* ‘parchisi’, *intradós* ‘interior surface of an arch’, *obús* ‘artillery shell’.

3.7 Other orthographic developments

As a point of interest, the inverted interrogative (*¿*) first appeared in the *Ortografía* of

1754:

...hay periodos largos en los quales no basta la Nota de Interrogante que se pone á lo último, para que se lean [las oraciones] con su perfecto sentido. [...] La dificultad ha consistido en la elección de Nota; pues emplear en esto las que sirven para los Acentos y otros usos, daría motivo á equivocaciones, y el inventar nueva Nota sería reparable, y quizas no bien admitido. Por esto, despues de un largo examen ha parecido a la Academia se puede usar la misma Nota de Interrogación, poniendola inversa antes de la palabra en que tiene principio el tono interrogante...(RAE 1754:126-127)

...there are long extensions of text in which the question mark placed at the end is not sufficient for [the sentences] to be read with their intended meaning. [...] The real problem was one of choosing the notation to be used; employing the notation used for accents and other purposes would lead to mistakes, and inventing a new notation might lead to modifications or be ill received. For this reason, after a great deal of study it occurred to the Academy that the same question mark can be used, inverting it in front of the word where the interrogative tone begins.

The inverted exclamation (!) appeared at the same time for similar reasons (RAE 1754:128-129).

4. Conclusion

Compared to earlier versions, the current accentuation rules represent a streamlined and elegant system that constitutes a useful tool for the pronunciation and spelling of unfamiliar words. As seen above, in Modern Spanish written accents indicate the stressed syllable in words that do not follow the Spanish stress rules, distinguish between homophones with the same form but different grammatical function, and indicate hiatus between two contiguous high vowels or a contiguous high vowel and a mid or low vowel. Many of the current rules took shape in the *GRAE* of 1883, but significant modification and clarification have continued until very recently. To summarize, accent was equated with syllable length until the *GRAE* of 1883, and the term *acento de intensidad* ‘stress accent’ did not appear until the *Esbozo* of 1973. The written accent was maintained on vowels used as separate words until 1906. The *GRAE* of 1917 changed the rule, maintaining only the accentuation of *ó* between numbers, and the *Ortografía* of 2010 eliminated this exception. The diacritical accent was recognized as a purely written accent very recently, in the *Ortografía* of 1999, which first used the term *tilde diacrítica*. The *GRAE* of 1883, established the current distinction between diphthongs and hiatus, as well as the current accentuation rules. Clarifications continued to be made through the *Ortografía* of 1999, which defined a triphthong as a strong vowel between two weak vowels. Certain verb tenses were defined as requiring written accents until the *GRAE* of 1883, in which such rules disappeared. Finally, words in *-ión* were not uniformly written with an accent mark until the *GRAE* of 1883, and *-n*, *-s* and *-V* were not grouped together in a single rule until the *Esbozo* of 1973. Students very often question why the written accent came to

be in Spanish. Instructors often do not know where to turn to find the answers. We expect an understanding of the origins and evolution of the written accent in Spanish, and of the current rules for written accentuation, to help clear up at least some of the questions about its inner workings.

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