

The Origin of Retroflex Plosives in Italian, Sardinian, and Corsican Dialects

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The development of a voiced retroflex plosive [ɖ] from Latin /ll/ in the dialects of southern Italian, Sardinian and Corsican has long presented a puzzle to linguists working on these varieties. Two theories have emerged: one, a substrate theory, hypothesises that the retroflex stop must be the product of language contact from a language now extinct, at least on Italian soil (Politzer 1954, Blasco Ferrer 1984). The other, described in Hock (1986), derives the retroflex plosive from original palatal laterals via the sound change $\lambda > dʒ$, attested for related Spanish dialects. This study indicates the shortcomings of both of these accounts, and proposes a new explanation.

1 INTRODUCTION

“A peculiarity of some southern [Italian] dialects (including Sardinian and some dialects of Corsican) is that original long [ll] historically developed as a retroflex [ɖɖ] (which subsequently has become [dd] in some localities): e.g., *'stella ‘star’ > 'stedɖɖə...” (Maiden 1995: 240).

The development of voiced retroflex plosives in the dialects of southern Italy, Sardinia and Corsica is well-attested. The geographical distribution of [ɖ] is illustrated by areas with dark shading in the map in (1).

(1) *Map 1: The distribution of the change Latin /ll/ to [ɖɖ] in Italian dialects.*

