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The Enigmatic Morphology of Spanish *azúcar* and the “New Feminine *el*”

Abstract: Most Spanish nouns are masculine or feminine, but a few are ambiguous, e.g., *el/la azúcar*, *el/la mar*, etc. Of these, ambiguous *azúcar* is unique because fem. *azúcar* may appear with *el*, e.g., ***el azúcar morena***. The RAE suggests that this feminine *el* is a residual case of the OSp. fem. *el* which appeared before feminine nouns beginning with any vowel, e.g., ***el arena*** (now restricted to the context of tonic /a/, e.g., ***el agua***). However, *azúcar* was originally masculine, such that *el* of ***el azúcar morena*** cannot be a diachronic continuation of the OSp. fem. *el*. Here ***el azúcar morena***-type structures are explained through a historical analysis involving processes of contamination and morpho-phonological reanalysis.

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Para José “Pito” Bruno

While most Spanish nouns are assigned either masculine or feminine gender, there are a few that are ambiguous, that is, that may be either masculine or feminine. Ramsey (1956:33) lists the following nouns of ambiguous gender: *azúcar*, *calor*, *color*, *cutis*, *dote*, *fin*, *linde*, *mar*, *margen*, *origen*, *pro*, *puente*, *sartén*, and *tilde*. These nouns will appear as either masculine or feminine according to various factors, such as the region, social register, and stylistic context in which they appear. It is also worth noting that at least some of these ambiguous nouns will occur as either masculine or feminine in the speech of the same individual.

A search of the *Corpus de referencia del español actual* of the Real Academia Española (henceforth CREA) yields the following occurrences of these ambiguous nouns as they appear with either the definite article *el* or *la*, shown in (1):

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(1) Ambiguous Nouns in CREA (1975–2004)¹

	<u>Number of Occurrences</u>		<u>Number of Documents</u>	
<i>el azúcar</i>	2,213	(99%)	707	(98%)
<i>la azúcar</i>	15	(1%)	13	(2%)
<i>el calor</i>	5,466	(99%)	2,552	(99%)
<i>la calor</i>	44	(1%)	31	(1%)
<i>el color</i>	5,836	(99%)	2,640	(99%)
<i>la color</i>	34	(1%)	28	(1%)
<i>el dote</i>	4	(5%)	4	(7%)
<i>la dote</i>	79	(95%)	51	(93%)
<i>el fin</i>	22,165	(99.95%)	11,736	(99.93%)
<i>la fin</i>	10	(.05%)	8	(.07%)
<i>el linde</i>	14	(20%)	14	(25%)
<i>la linde</i>	57	(80%)	43	(75%)
<i>el mar</i>	12,593	(91%)	5,055	(90%)
<i>la mar</i>	1,221	(9%)	573	(10%)
<i>el margen</i>	6,458	(96%)	4,317	(97%)
<i>la margen</i>	248	(4%)	150	(3%)
<i>el puente</i>	3,263	(99.8%)	1,842	(99.6%)
<i>la puente</i>	7	(.2%)	7	(.4%)
<i>el sartén</i>	34	(7%)	17	(9%)
<i>la sartén</i>	444	(93%)	176	(91%)
<i>el tilde</i>	2	(17%)	1	(10%)
<i>la tilde</i>	10	(83%)	9	(90%)

While all of the ambiguous nouns in (1) appear to be very similar to one another in that one of the variants occurs more frequently than the other, though to varying degrees, the noun *azúcar* is unlike any of the others in that its appearance with the definite article *el* does not guarantee that it is masculine. Of the 2,213

¹ There were no occurrences of **la cutis*, nor of **la origen*, against 128 occurrences of *el cutis* in 98 documents and 4,612 occurrences of *el origen* in 2,669 documents.

occurrences of the variant *el azúcar* in CREA, many appear modified by a feminine adjective. One finds, for example: *el azúcar blanca*, *el azúcar morena*, *el azúcar negra*, *el azúcar prieta*, *el azúcar rubia*, *el azúcar granulada*, *el azúcar procesada*, *el azúcar pulverizada*, *el azúcar refinada*, *el azúcar importada*, *el azúcar cubana*, *el azúcar dominicana*, *el azúcar puertorriqueña*, etc. In fact, the variant *el azúcar* appears more frequently immediately followed by a feminine adjective than by a masculine one, as shown in (2), such that these structures cannot simply be deemed sporadic errors of agreement:

(2) Occurrences of *el azúcar* Modified as Feminine vs. Masculine in CREA (1975–2004)

<u>Number of Occurrences</u>	<u>Percentage of Occurrences</u>
<i>el azúcar</i> + feminine adjective: 112	(63%)
<i>el azúcar</i> + masculine adjective: 65	(37%)

One also finds other examples in CREA, not included in (2), in which *el azúcar* is modified by a feminine adjective that does not immediately follow the noun, such as those shown in (3):

- (3) *El único producto que tenía acogida favorable en el mercado norteamericano era el azúcar, que también se encontraba, según indicamos, **sujeta** a impuestos.* (1987 Puerto Rico, Blanca G. Silvestrini / Luque de Sánchez, *Historia de Puerto Rico: trayectoria de un pueblo*; CREA)

*En una cacerolita pequeña poner **el** azúcar y llevar al fuego hasta formar un caramelo, cuidando que no se pase, es decir que no tome color marrón oscuro, pues se pone **amarga***
...
(1990 Argentina, Lila Bonfiglioli de Wehberg, *El arte de sazonar con hierbas y especias*; CREA)

*En los próximos anuncios te subiré el café -respondió Laura sin mirarle-; te lo voy a poner muy azucarado, que **el** azúcar es **buena** para estas situaciones de esfuerzo.*
(1988 Madrid, Juan José Millás, *El desorden de tu nombre*; CREA)

The appearance of the noun *azúcar* with the definite article *el*, but modified by a feminine adjective, makes this noun the most enigmatic ambiguous noun of the Spanish language as far as its morphological structure is concerned.

At first glance it appears as though we are faced with a noun whose first half is masculine, thus calling for the masculine definite article, but whose second half is feminine, thus calling for a feminine adjective, as depicted in (4):

- (4) *azúcar* → *azú-* (masc.) + *-car* (fem.) → ***el** azúcar morena*

While such an analysis may seem preposterous, Eddington and Hualde (2008), following Janda and Varela-García (1991), suggest something very similar for nouns such as *el agua*, *el hacha*, *el águila*, etc. They conclude that rather than having one gender, i.e., feminine, and a phonologically-conditioned definite article, i.e., *el*, these nouns are “hermaphroditic”, or “grammatical hermaphrodites”, being at once masculine and feminine, and are therefore preceded by either masculine or feminine modifiers, but followed by only feminine ones, e.g., *el agua fría*, *este/esta agua sucia*, *aquel/aquella agua clara*, etc.² Although the noun *azúcar* in structures such as *el azúcar morena* may initially appear to be of the “hermaphroditic” type as described by Eddington and Hualde (2008) and Janda and Varela-García (1991), it differs from these in two very important respects. First, adjectives that follow *azúcar* may also be masculine, e.g., *el azúcar moreno*, whereas in the case of the so-called “hermaphroditic” nouns, they may not, e.g., ***el agua sucio*.³ Second, all “hermaphroditic” nouns analyzed in Eddington and Hualde (2008) begin with tonic /a/, while *azúcar* does not.

Moreover, speakers invariably pronominalize structures such as *el azúcar morena* with the feminine direct object pronoun *la*, as shown in (5), rather than with vacillation between *lo* and *la*, thus revealing that the noun of this structure is indeed feminine, and not both masculine and feminine, i.e., “hermaphroditic”:

- (5) *El azúcar morena se endurecerá si no la guardas apropiadamente. En lugar de tirarla a la basura continúa leyendo estos tres pasos para aprender cómo guardarla y así evitar que se endurezca... No abras el paquete de azúcar morena hasta que la vayas a utilizar... Si ya se te endureció el azúcar morena, envuélvela en papel aluminio y ponla cinco minutos en el horno a 300 grados Fahrenheit. Cuando la descubras estará suave y lista para emplearla en cualquier receta... Para volverla a utilizar debes esperar que se descongele... Otra opción para suavizarla es poner una rodaja de pan adentro del contenedor. Tomará algunos días pero no la tendrás que tirar...*
 (“Cómo evitar que el azúcar morena se endurezca”; <http://latinguru.com>)

One can even find examples of *el azúcar*, when not immediately followed by a feminine adjective, pronominalized with *la*, as seen in the examples in (6),

² Eddington and Hualde (2008:12): “To summarize, *agua*-type nouns (those in (1)) are inconsistent in the gender feature that they condition on agreeing modifiers, showing a tendency towards lateral hermaphroditism (Janda & Varela-García 1991). That is, they tend to condition either feminine or masculine agreement with preceeding (sic) modifiers, and only feminine agreement with following ones.”

³ A search of CREA, for example, yields 86 examples of *azúcar morena* in 18 documents vs. 40 examples of *azúcar moreno* in 12 documents, compared to 120 examples of *agua sucia* in 83 documents, and zero of **agua sucio*.

revealing that for many speakers, the structure **el azúcar**, in and of itself, despite its masculine-looking article, is feminine:

- (6) *Pensar que **el azúcar** no engorda: disminuye su consumo o sustitúyela por edulcorante.*
(2004 Santo Domingo, *Hoy Digital. Suplemento Salud*: “Alimentos que adelgazan y cuidan tu salud”; CREA)

*“Hemos venido a conversar con los trabajadores que han tomado el ingenio azucarero y ver la manera de sacar **el azúcar** para ponerla a disposición de todos los peruanos en los diversos mercados de Lima...”*

(“Liberan 350 mil bolsas de azúcar en Andahuasi”; <http://LaRepublica.pe>)

*Si se va a flamear, es recomendable esperar a que se enfríe para que no se disuelva **el azúcar** al echarla por encima.*

(“Arroz con leche”, *Recetas de cocina*; <http://masrecetasdecocina.wordpress.com>.)

*Puedes omitir **el azúcar**, y ponerla cuando la sirvas, así cada quien mide el dulzor ...*

(“¿Cómo preparar la avena Quaker? ”; <http://mx.answers.yahoo.com/question/index>. N.D.)

***El azúcar** que se producía localmente era **la** del tipo moscabado cuya cotización en el mercado internacional era inferior al del azúcar blanca y refinada.*

(1987 Puerto Rico, Blanca G. Silvestrini/Luque de Sánchez, *Historia de Puerto Rico: trayectoria de un pueblo*; CREA)

Finally, feminine adjectives may appear before **el azúcar**, as seen in the examples in (7):

- (7) *El presidente de la Asociación de Abarroteros, Emilio Torrico, dijo que sus afiliados acordaron terminar de vender **toda el azúcar** que tienen en sus almacenes a un precio entre 19 y 20 bolivianos la cuartilla.*
(“Comerciantes venderán todo su stock de azúcar”, *Los Tiempos* (Bolivia), January 8, 2011; <http://lostiempos.com>)

***Toda el azúcar** que consumirán los hogares bolivianos en los próximos 60 días será cubierta con más de 53 mil toneladas del producto que están siendo importadas de Brasil y Colombia por el Gobierno y los ingenios azucareros del oriente boliviano, debido a que la producción nacional de 8,7 millones de quintales de 2010 está ya agotada.*

(“En el país sólo se vende azúcar importada”, *Los Tiempos* (Bolivia), January 22, 2011; <http://lostiempos.com>)

*Comenzamos mezclando el azúcar con una cucharada de agua, y removemos bien, hasta que **toda el azúcar** se humedezca ligeramente.*

(“Golosinas caseras de azúcar”, February 18, 2012; <http://pequerecetas.com>)

*Mezcla la leche con azúcar al gusto. Mueve hasta que **toda el azúcar** se disuelva.*
 (“Morir soñando”, January 8, 2011; <http://cocinadominicana.com>)

...derretida el azúcar en una cacerola puesta en el fogón...
 (1986 Venezuela, Guillermo Morón, *El gallo de las espuelas de oro*; CREA)

The feminine modifiers *toda* and *derretida* in these examples clearly reveal that the noun *azúcar* in such structures is feminine, and that the *el* of these structures is not the masculine definite article, but an allomorph of the feminine definite article *la*.

We may therefore conclude that *azúcar*, while indeed ambiguous, i.e., masculine for some speakers (e.g., *el azúcar moreno*), but feminine for many more (e.g., *el azúcar morena* ~ *la azúcar morena*), cannot be characterized as “hermaphroditic”, as defined by Janda and Varela-García (1991) and Eddington and Hualde (2008). Were the noun *azúcar* in structures such as *el azúcar morena* truly “hermaphroditic”, one would expect to find pronominalization of such structures by either *lo* or *la*, rather than exclusively by the latter. Thus the noun *azúcar* stands in a class of its own: In the many varieties of Spanish in which it is clearly considered to be feminine,⁴ it is the only feminine noun beginning with an unstressed /a/ that appears with the allomorph *el* of the feminine definite article

⁴ As regards the question of which varieties of Spanish assign feminine gender to *azúcar*, one may make the general observation that in the majority of varieties of Latin American Spanish *azúcar* is feminine, while in Peninsular Spanish it is masculine. A search of CREA turns up examples of *azúcar* modified by feminine adjectives such as *blanca*, *morena*, *negra*, *prieta*, *rubia*, *granulada*, *procesada*, *pulverizada*, *refinada*, *importada*, *cubana*, *dominicana*, *puertorriqueña*, among others, in the following Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. However, it would not be accurate to state that in Latin America *azúcar* is exclusively feminine, as a search of CREA also reveals examples of *azúcar* modified by masculine adjectives as well in Argentina, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela (though not in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama). Nonetheless, examples of masculine *azúcar* in Latin America are less frequent than examples of feminine *azúcar*. To cite a few examples from one Latin American country: in Argentina, *azúcar morena* appears 35 times in 6 documents vs. 2 occurrences of *azúcar moreno* in one document; *azúcar blanca* is found 15 times in 5 documents vs. 1 occurrence of *azúcar blanco*; *azúcar negra* occurs 44 times in 7 documents vs. 0 occurrences of *azúcar negro*. In Spain, although *azúcar* appears primarily as a masculine noun, examples as a feminine noun are also found. For example, in CREA, one finds: *azúcar blanco* 9 times in 7 documents vs. *azúcar blanca* 5 times in 5 documents; *azúcar moreno* 27 times in 10 documents vs. *azúcar morena* 1 time; *azúcar prieta* 1 time (vs. unusually, 0 of *azúcar prieto*); *azúcar refinado* 13 times in 7 documents vs. *azúcar refinada* 1 time; *mucho azúcar* 13 times in 10 documents vs. *mucha azúcar* 5 times in 4 documents. Thus, as with any linguistic feature, as regards the gender of *azúcar* in the Spanish-speaking world, one finds variation within the general tendencies.

It appears that, initially, before nouns beginning with stressed /a/ the outcome was most frequently *el*, before unstressed /a/ the outcome was more frequently *el* than *la*, while before nouns beginning with any other vowel the outcome was most frequently *la*.⁵ Eventually, however, *la* was generalized to feminine nouns beginning with an unstressed /a/ or any other vowel while the feminine *el* was ousted from these contexts and restricted to those nouns beginning with a stressed /a/, the syntactic context in which it was initially most frequent, e.g., *el agua*, *el águila*, *el ala*, *el alma*, *el ave*, etc.

There is a major problem with the RAE's explanation that the *el* of *el azúcar morena*, for example, is a residual case from Old Spanish of the use of *el* before any feminine noun beginning with any vowel, stressed or unstressed: In Old Spanish the noun *azúcar* was originally exclusively masculine, not feminine, as the textual evidence reveals. A search of CORDE yields the following occurrences shown in (9) of *azúcar* modified by masculine vs. feminine adjectives:

(9) Occurrences of *azúcar* Modified as Masculine vs. Feminine in CORDE

	<u><i>azúcar</i> + masculine adjective</u>		<u><i>azúcar</i> + feminine adjective</u>	
1100–1300:	42	(98%)	1	(2%)
1301–1500:	261	(98.5%)	4	(1.5%)
1501–1600:	188	(94%)	12	(6%)

To 1300, there is only one example of *azúcar* as a feminine noun, and this appears in verse to maintain consonant rhyme, shown in (10):

- (10) *Los árboles que facen sombra dulz e donosa*
son los santos miraclos que faz la Gloriosa,
ca son mucho más dulzes que azúcar sabrosa,
la que dan al enfermo en la cuita ravisosa.
 (1246–1252 Gonzalo de Berceo, *Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, ed. C. García Turza; CORDE)

Only after 1300, and in particular, after 1500, does one begin to find a significant number of *bona fide* examples of *azúcar* as a feminine noun, as seen above in (9).

⁵ In a search of the *Corpus Diacrónico del Español* (henceforth CORDE), for example, to 1300, one finds 932 occurrences of *el agua* in 108 documents vs. 45 of *la agua* in 31 documents; 54 occurrences of *el arena* in 17 documents vs. 14 of *la arena* in 5 documents; 310 occurrences of *la entrada* in 61 documents vs. 18 of *el entrada* in 7 documents; 279 occurrences of *la espada* in 39 documents vs. 52 of *el espada* in 26 documents; and 3,912 occurrences of *la otra* in 607 documents vs. 155 of *el otra* in 66 documents.

Given that all other examples of *azúcar* to 1300 are modified as masculine, one may safely conclude that when the noun *azúcar* entered the language from Arabic, it was originally assigned masculine gender (as one would expect from a masculine Arabic loanword into a language whose default gender is masculine), such that the *el* of structures such as *el azúcar morena* cannot be a diachronic continuation of the Old Spanish feminine *el*, which arose before feminine nouns (as see above in (8b) in the case of *ILLA ĀRĒNA* > *ela arena* > *el(a) arena* > *el arena*).

However, even supposing that, at a time when the feminine *el* still appeared before nouns beginning with an unstressed /a/, e.g., *el abeja*, *el almeja*, *el arena*, etc., i.e., in Late Medieval or Early Modern Spanish, some speakers may have reinterpreted the definite article of *el azúcar* as the feminine *el* after the noun *azúcar* underwent a change of gender from masculine to feminine, i.e., *el (m.) azúcar moreno* > *azúcar moreno* ~ *azúcar morena* > *el (f.) azúcar morena* (vis à vis *el arena dorada*), we are still without an explanation for why this feminine *el* would have remained before this one feminine noun beginning with an unstressed /a/ in light of the fact that it receded and was ultimately replaced by *la* before all others, e.g., Old and Early ModSp. *el abadesa*, *el abeja*, *el abertura*, *el (h)abilidad*, *el abispa*, *el aceituna*, *el aguja*, *el alacena*, *el albahaca*, *el alcaparra*, *el alcoba*, *el almendra*, *el alfombra*, *el almeja*, *el almohada*, *el altura*, *el amistad*, *el araña*, *el arena*, etc. > ModSp. *la abadesa*, *la abeja*, *la abertura*, *la habilidad*, *la abispa*, *la aceituna*, *la aguja*, *la alacena*, *la albahaca*, *la alcaparra*, *la alcoba*, *la almendra*, *la alfombra*, *la almeja*, *la almohada*, *la altura*, *la amistad*, *la araña*, *la arena*, etc., but, *el azúcar (morena)*.⁶ It also remains to be explained why masculine *azúcar* became feminine in some varieties of Spanish in the first place. In what follows, a look at the factors involved in this change will reveal why this noun, in the varieties of Spanish in which it has become feminine, continues to appear with the article *el*.

I would like to suggest that the change of *azúcar* from masculine to feminine for many speakers resulted, in part, from a morphological process known as contamination, a process through which one form will become more similar to a semantically related form. One can cite numerous examples from the history of Spanish. For example, the /r/ of Spanish *estrella* was likely acquired through the contamination of Latin *STĒLLA* by *ASTRUM*, as shown in (11a). Dworkin (1980) suggests that the /l/ of Sp. *cola*, which should have evolved to **coa* from Latin

⁶ The examples *el abadesa*, *el abeja*, *el abertura*, *el (h)abilidad*, *el abispa*, *el aceituna*, *el aguja*, *el alacena*, *el albahaca*, *el alcaparra*, *el alcoba*, *el almendra*, *el alfombra*, *el almeja*, *el almohada*, *el altura*, *el amistad*, *el araña*, *el arena* all appear in CORDE.

CÔDA, was acquired through contamination by the semantically related *culo*, as shown in (11b). A similar case can be made for the /l/ of Sp. *nalgas*, which would have otherwise evolved to **nagas* from Latin NĀTĪCAS, as shown in (11c). Latin NŪRUS ‘daughter-in-law’, would have evolved to **la nora*, rather than *la nuera*, had this noun not received pressure (quite fittingly) from *la suegra*, as shown in (11d). Cravens (1982) attributes the high frequency of the feminine variant *la mar* in the speech of sailors and people whose livelihood is connected to the sea to contamination by the feminine nouns *agua*, *marea*, and *ola*, as depicted in (11e). Latin QUĪNQUE first evolved to **cinque*, and would have remained as such had it not been for the –o of *cuatro*, which contaminated the following number through a process called “serial contamination”, as these words were said in a series, shown in (11f). Likewise, (DIES) LUNAE and (DIES) MĒRCŪRII would first have evolved to **lune* and **miércoles*, i.e., without –s, and ultimately to ***lun* and ***miércol*, had it not been for the process of serial contamination and the final –s of *martes*, *jueves*, and *viernes* (< (DIES) MARTIS, JŌVIS, VĒNERIS), shown in (11g):

(11) Examples of Contamination from Latin to Spanish

- (a) STĚLLA X ASTRUM > *estrella*
 (b) CŌDA > **coa* X *culo* > *cola* (Dworkin 1980)
 (c) NĀTĪCAS > *nadegas* (Port.) > **nadgas* > **nagas* X *culo* > *nalgas*
 (d) SŌCRUS > *SŌCRA > *la suegra*
 ↓
 NŮRUS > *NŮRA > **la nora* > *la nuera*
- (e) MĀRE > **el** *mar* X *agua, marea, ola* > **la** *mar* (Cravens 1982)
- (f) QUĪNQVE > **cinque*
 But: *uno, dos, tres, cuatro*, **cinque* > *uno, dos, tres, cuatro*, *cinco*...
- (g) (DIES) LUNAE, MĒRCŪRII > **lune*, **miércoles* (> ***lun*, ***miércol*)
 (DIES) MARTIS, JŌVIS, VĒNERIS > *martes, jueves, viernes*
 But: **lune, martes, miércoles, jueves, viernes* >
 lunes, martes, miécoles, jueves, viernes

In light of the foregoing examples of contamination in the history of Spanish, I would like to suggest that the shift of *azúcar* from masculine to feminine began with the process of contamination by semantically related feminine nouns such as *la caña*, and those of the semantic category of *las especias* and other cooking ingredients of feminine gender, such as, for example, *la sal*, *la pimienta*, *la canela*, *la harina*, *la manteca*, and *la miel*, especially when these words were uttered in a series. In a search of CORDE to 1600, one finds the word *azúcar* appearing together with the feminine nouns of this semantic category to the varying degrees shown in (12):

(12) Feminine Nouns Appearing with *azúcar* in CORDE from 1100–1600

	<u>Number of Occurrences</u>
<i>la miel</i>	208
<i>la canela</i>	76
<i>la(s) caña(s)</i>	39
<i>las almendras</i>	21
<i>la sal</i>	20
<i>la(s) especia(s)</i>	15
<i>la leche</i>	15
<i>la manteca</i>	13
<i>las pasas</i>	11
<i>la harina</i>	5
<i>la pimienta</i>	3

The word *azúcar* appears with these words either in a series, or in a conjoined structure, as shown in the selected examples of (13):

(13) Feminine Nouns Appearing with *azúcar* in a Series or in Conjoined Structures

cuanto cabe en **el *açucar*** e en **la *miel*** (1250)
 que se gaste templadamente el ***açucar, especias, miel, manteca***... (1500)
 e, sinon quisieres poner ay ***açucar***, pon ay ***miel*** (1500)
 freguen con ***açucar*** & con ***miel*** & con ***farina*** (1500)
 tomalo con ***açucar*** o ***miel*** o con un poco de ***sal*** (1500)
 pollo en agua cocho con poca ***sal*** y con ***açucar*** y con ***mjel*** (1500)
 beva agua de ***miel*** & agua de ***açucar*** (1500)
 tome dela ***mjel*** & del ***açucar*** (1500)
 Y henchir el agua de ***açucar y canela y manteca*** de vacas... (1525)
 Y daca ***especia, açúcar, trae canela, miel, manteca***... (1528)
 y después en el plato échenle ***miel y açúcar y canela*** (1529)
 en aquel libro ***las especias, la sal y el açúcar*** (1550)
 se templen con ***açucar, sal, leche de almendras, canela, pimienta***... (1598)

Given that the most frequent of these nouns to appear with *azúcar* is *la miel*, as seen above in (12), it comes as no surprise to find that most of the earliest examples of *azúcar* as a feminine noun appear with *la miel*, either in a series or in conjoined structures, as seen in the examples in (14):

(14) Feminine *azúcar* Appearing with *miel* in a Series or in Conjoined Structures

& dulce de ***mjel*** & conplida de ***mucha açucar*** (1344)
 para faser ***açucar rrosada, e miel rrosada*** (1477–1491)
 una onza de ***miel o açúcar bermeja*** (1506)

ellos porende se deuen comer con mucha açucar o con mucha miel (1518)
ha encarecido las especias, la manteca, la miel y la açucar (1553)
y leche como de almendras, miel y azúcar muy sabrosa. (1585–1586)
vale muy barata la miel de Cañas, la azúcar y quanto della se hace (1653)⁷

Of course, once the contamination of *azúcar* by *la miel* had begun to occur, *azúcar* would begin to appear alone as a feminine noun, as seen in the examples in (15):

(15) Feminine *azúcar* Appearing Alone

para haser açucar rrosada (1477–1491)
para faser açucar rrosada (1477–1491)
por que de la açucar tabarzet verdad es que le aya? (1515)
y échales azúcar fina. (1529)
Otros dizen: ni de açucar buena. (1549)
y más dulce que l'azúcar (1550)
donde agora se hace la mejor azúcar de aquella isla. (1552)
buenas medicinas amargas embueltas en la sabrosa açucar. (1555)
e llevaba mucha azúcar e perlas e otras cosas (1535–1557)
Aun de azúcar amarga. (1574)
donde se produce mucha azúcar. (1583)
Cuando el azúcar dulce bien sazónada y compuesta... (1598)
De la açucar no se ha de quitar nada (1607)
Y se añadirá la açucar para ser buena. (1607)
con la açucar peregrina del Cuzco (1632)
las tareas de la azúcar (1684)
por que la azucar, el dulce que empalaga (1710)
que si la azucar no es muy limpia, blanca y bien purgada... (1710)
y á la azucar otra media. (1800)

⁷ It should be noted that the process of contamination described here had long been at work within this semantic category, as Latin *SĀL* (m.) appears in the earliest Old Spanish texts exclusively as a feminine noun: To 1300, CORDE shows 154 occurrences of *la sal* in 46 documents, with zero occurrences of **el sal*. It is likely that once the Latin neuter plural *PIGMENTA* (of s. *PIGMENTUM*) was reanalyzed as a feminine singular, it contaminated *SĀL*, causing its gender to shift from masculine to feminine, as these two condiments have gone hand in hand since the Middle Ages and often appear conjoined, e.g., *deuen boluer la sal molida et la pimienta tanto por tanto, et enboluer aquellos lardones en la sal et pimienta et meter los al falcon por la voca* (Juan Manuel, *Libro de la caza*, 1337–1348). Likewise, Latin *MEL* (n.), appears in the earliest Old Spanish texts exclusively as a feminine noun instead of with the expected, default masculine gender: To 1300, CORDE shows 127 occurrences of *la miel* in 23 documents, with zero occurrences of **el miel*. Again here, contamination by semantically related feminine nouns such as those shown in the foregoing examples was likely responsible for this assignment of feminine gender.

Once contamination by semantically related nouns had initiated the shift of *azúcar* from masculine to feminine, another factor that likely propagated the change in gender of this noun was the morphological reanalysis of the phonetic realization of syntactic structures such as *del azúcar* and *al azúcar*. These syntactic structures would have been realized phonetically as shown in (16), as they are in Modern Spanish:

- (16) *del azúcar* → [de-la-sú-kar]
al azúcar → [a-la-sú-kar]

The contracted articles of such phonetic realizations could have easily been reanalyzed morphologically as *de la* and *a la*, leading to new structures such as those shown in (17):

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (17) <i>del azúcar</i> → [delasúkar] | <i>al azúcar</i> [alasúkar] |
| ↓ | ↓ |
| <i>de la</i> | <i>a la</i> |
| ↓ | ↓ |
| <i>de la azúcar</i> | <i>a la azúcar</i> |

Two of the three earliest examples of *azúcar* with the feminine definite article *la* in fact appear with *de* (the other in a series with *miel*), as shown in (18):

- (18) Earliest Attestations of *azúcar* with Feminine Article *la* según in CORDE

*por que **de la açúcar** tabarzet verdad es que le aya?* (1515)

De la açúcar no se ha de quitar nada (1607)

(*ha encarecido las especias, la manteca, **la miel y la açúcar*** (1553))

However, the feminine article *la* never fully took hold in this syntactic context precisely because the articles in this ambiguous phonetic realization could be reanalyzed back to *del* and *al*, as shown in (19):

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| (19) <i>de la azúcar</i> → [delasúkar] | <i>a la azúcar</i> [alasúkar] |
| ↓ | ↓ |
| <i>del</i> | <i>al</i> |
| ↓ | ↓ |
| <i>del azúcar</i> | <i>al azúcar</i> |

This ambiguous phonetic realization not only occurred in the syntactic context of the prepositions *de* and *a* plus the definite articles, but also occurred and continues to do so in any syntactic context in which unstressed /e/ precedes the definite articles since, in Spanish, two contiguous like vowels, when unstressed,

While I believe that the foregoing diachronic and synchronic analyses explain the enigmatic morphology of Spanish *el azúcar morena*, some questions do remain. For example, if the ambiguous phonetic context described above can be interpreted as either *el azúcar* or *la azúcar*, why do we find so many more occurrences of feminine *azúcar* with *el* than with *la*? In the present study, for example, in CREA (1975–2004), one finds only 15 occurrences of *la azúcar* as seen above in (1), compared to 112 occurrences of *el azúcar* + a feminine adjective as seen above in (2), not to mention the unknown number of attestations of *el azúcar* without an adjective that may actually be feminine, i.e., that would be pronominalized with *la*. Has education played a role in limiting the occurrences of *la azúcar*? Could it be that *la azúcar* is therefore avoided in the written language, but that it actually occurs more frequently in the spoken, or in less formal registers of written language? Is *la azúcar* found more frequently in some regions and social registers than in others? Does *la azúcar* occur in some syntactic contexts more than in others? Perhaps some carefully planned and carefully conducted field research could provide us with some answers to these remaining questions.¹⁰

respect to these two nouns in Puerto Rico: “No empecé la predilección culta en el país por el género masculino en los arabismos *azúcar*, *almíbar*, la expresión popular urbana y rural siempre utiliza estos nombres como femeninos, acaso por herencia dialectal de raíces meridionales: *la azúcar* [l’asúkal], *la almíbar* [l’almíbal o l’armíbal].” In such cases, the feminine *la almíbar* could well be the result of analogy with the structurally similar feminine *la azúcar*.

10 I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Deborah Feliciano Bernier, Gustavo López, and Yamira George for assisting in a preliminary study of some of these remaining questions. The study was carried out in Puerto Rico from March 7–13, 2014, and involved 34 informants ranging in age from 12–92, all born, raised, and currently living on the Island. Of these 34 informants for whom the noun *azúcar* was clearly feminine, as revealed by the informants’ pronominalization of *azúcar* with *la* in the sentence “*Fuiste al colmado para comprar azúcar pero no la compraste*”, 19 (56%) preferred *el azúcar*, 13 preferred *la azúcar* (38%), and 2 (6%) showed no preference for either article when the noun stood alone. These data reveal that there is indeed a higher occurrence of *la azúcar* in the spoken language, at least in this variety of Spanish and in this particular sample of speakers, than the data in CREA show (i.e., only 1–2%, as seen above in (1)). Nonetheless, *el azúcar*, with the “new feminine *el*”, is still the more frequent variant. However, when modified by the adjective *morena*, 26 of the 34 informants preferred *la azúcar morena*. That is, of the 19 informants who used *el azúcar* when not modified by any adjective, 11, that is 58%, changed to *la azúcar* when the noun was modified by *morena*. The 2 informants who were indifferent to the choice of *el azúcar* vs. *la azúcar* when the noun was not modified by any adjective also preferred *la azúcar* when modified by *morena*. Only 8 of 19 informants who preferred *el azúcar* when not modified by any adjective maintained *el azúcar* when modified by *morena*, i.e., *el azúcar morena*. Thus, when modified by the adjective *morena*, *la azúcar* occurred at 76.5% vs. *el azúcar* at 23.5%. These data reveal a possible syntactic factor in the choice of the definite article: That, at least for some speakers, the feminine adjective *morena* influenced a change in the definite article from *el* to *la*, thus, synchronically: *el azúcar* → *el azúcar* + *morena* →

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la azúcar morena. This synchronic rule may reflect a diachronic change in progress of *el azúcar ~ el azúcar morena* > *el azúcar ~ la azúcar morena* > *la azúcar*. While this preliminary field work may shed some light on the issue of feminine *el azúcar* vs. *la azúcar*, many questions are still unanswered, and therefore, much work remains.