Spanish Phonetics and Phonology

Diphthongs, syllable structure and stress

1 Diphthongs and hiatus

1.1 Two vowels separated by a syllable-boundary are in hiatus:

re-ír, ba-úl

1.2 Two vowels occurring in the same syllable form a diphthong:

pei-ne, áu-re-o

1.3 Diphthongs in Spanish may be rising or falling:

Rising: bien, bueno
Falling: hay, deudá

Rising diphthongs consist phonetically of a semivowel ([j] or [w]) + a full vowel; falling diphthongs consist phonetically of the reverse sequence. Phonologically, the possibilities are:

Rising

\[
\begin{array}{c}
    \{i\} \\
    \{u\} \\
    \{a\} \\
    \{e\} \\
    \{o\} \\
    \{iu\}
\end{array}
\]

Falling

\[
\begin{array}{c}
    \{a\} \\
    \{e\} \\
    \{o\} \\
    \{i\} \\
    \{u\}
\end{array}
\]

though some combinations (u + o, o + u) are relatively infrequent.

1.4 Triphthongs may be formed by the combination of semivowel+vowel+semivowel:

averiguáis, limpiéís

1.5 The above principles apply to word-internal diphthongs. In the phenomenon of sinalefa, vowels form diphthongs (and even triphthongs) across word-boundaries:

esto es, no así, me alegro

hasta hoy, no hay, gloria inmortal, regia autoridad

envidio a Eusebio

Such sequences count as single syllables in the scansion of Spanish poetry, and permit a larger range of diphthongs, triphthongs, etc. than word-internally.
Groups of more than two vowels must conform to one of the following patterns in order to constitute *sinalefa*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open ---- Close</td>
<td>a-e-u&lt;br&gt;culta&lt;br&gt;Europa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close ---- Open</td>
<td>i-o-a&lt;br&gt;genio&lt;br&gt;astuto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close ---- Open ---- Close</td>
<td>e-a-i&lt;br&gt;muerte&lt;br&gt;airada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any grouping of Open ---- Close ---- Open (e.g. a-i-e) will not constitute complete *sinalefa*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open ---- Close ---- Open</td>
<td>a-i-e&lt;br&gt;apaga#y&lt;br&gt;enciende</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Spanish syllable structure

Spanish syllables may consist of:

- **V**: a-mo<br>a-la<br>a-grio<br>ap-to<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **VV**: hue-co<br>pa-lo<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>plu-go
- **CV**: la-na<br>tan-to<br>de-pr-imir<br>de-pr-imir<br>a-la
- **CVV**: lue-go<br>la-na<br>la-na<br>a-la<br>a-grio<br>ap-to<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **CCV**: pla-za<br>tan-to<br>plu-go<br>a-la<br>a-grio<br>ap-to<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **CCVV**: true-no<br>a-la<br>a-grio<br>ap-to<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **CVC**: pla-za<br>tan-to<br>plu-go<br>a-la<br>a-grio<br>ap-to<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **CVVC**: true-no<br>a-la<br>a-grio<br>ap-to<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **CCVC**: trein-ta<br>apaga#y<br>enciende<br>a-paga#y<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **CCVVC**: trans-por-tar<br>a-paga#y<br>enciende<br>a-paga#y<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to
- **CCVVCC**: trans-por-tar<br>a-paga#y<br>enciende<br>a-paga#y<br>en-te-rar<br>a-fli-gir<br>ha-blar-le<br>mal-va-do<br>a-bier-to

Syllabification

For **VV** sequences, see above.

**VCV** sequences syllabify V-CV, i.e. a consonant is preferentially the onset of a syllable

- **a-la**, **pa-lo**

**VC1C2V** groups:

- If neither C is a liquid (/r/ or /l/), then the syllabification is **VC1-C2V**.
  - ap-to, en-te-rar
- If **C1** is a plosive or /f/ and **C2** is a liquid, then the syllabification is **V-C1C2V**.
  - a-grio, de-pr-imir, a-fli-gir
- If **C1** and **C2** are both liquids, then the syllabification is **VC1-C2V**.
  - ha-blár-le
- If **C1** is a liquid and **C2** is not, then the syllabification is **VC1-C2V**.
  - mal-va-do, a-bier-to
VC₁C₂C₃V groups:
These involve /s/ as C₁ or C₂. The syllable boundary always follows /s/
estreñar, ex-pre-so (/eks-pre-so/)

However, morphological considerations are sometimes dominant, thus:

\[ \text{sub-rep-ti-cia-men-te rather than su-brep-ti-cia-men-te} \]
\[ \text{trans-ac-ción rather than tran-sac-ción} \]

3 Stress

3.1 The orthographic stress mark (´)

The orthographic stress rule assumes the following generalization:

All plurisyllabic words are stressed on the final syllable, except for those ending in \( n \), \( s \) or a vowel, which are stressed on the penultimate syllable.

Deviations from this are marked by a written accent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>azafrán</th>
<th>débil</th>
<th>término</th>
<th>cómetelo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>francés</td>
<td>césped</td>
<td>límite</td>
<td>cántanosla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jabalí</td>
<td>éter</td>
<td>íntima</td>
<td>árbitro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lápiz</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regularly stressed words involving potentially diphthongal groups of vowels which are in fact hiatic have a written accent to show this:

bebia, baúl, periodo

(but not trae, maestro)

3.2 Major classes of exception

(1) Verb-endings: -é, -ó (Preterite), -é, etc. (Future), -ía, etc. (Conditional and Imperfect).

(2) Words ending in -n and -s which are not respectively plural forms of verbs and nouns, e.g. nación, francés.

(3) Stress patterns which vary consistently with morphological category, e.g. ánimo (Noun), animo (1st p.sg. Present), animó (3rd p.sg. Preterite).

(4) Clitic pronouns which do not affect the stress of the verb form: come, cómelo, cómetelo.

(5) The pattern CCVCV is characteristic of PROPARoxytonic words (words stressed on the antepenultimate syllable): doméstico, párpado, romántico

(1)-(4) could be accommodated within a stress rule that took account of morphological categories rather than solely phonological patterning.