

## Did Cervantes Stutter?

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The exquisite pain of being able to select a word, to think it, to be able to spell it in your head, to be able to imagine yourself saying it, but then finding it impossible to actually say it is exactly the pain of stuttering.

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THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WRITTEN literature and its oral forms has long interested scholars. Literary scholars, however, have paid little attention to stuttering and its relationship to literature. The stutterer is keenly aware of the difficult world between the written and the spoken word; between the word on paper and speech itself.<sup>1</sup> The stutterer accords his own speech an extraordinary degree of attention and the stutterer's way of thinking about language differs remarkably from that of a non-stutterer. Indeed, the difficulty that stutterers have in speaking can cause them to focus on written language and inspire literary brilliance.

A few scholars write that Miguel de Cervantes was a stutterer. Cervantes' biographer Luis Astrana Marín (I: 332) briefly explains that Cervantes stuttered as did Aristotle. George Shipley and Adrienne Laskier Martín make passing mention to Cervantes as a stutterer. Recently, the medical historian Angel Rodríguez Cabezas asserts that Cervantes stuttered, but his conclusion has not inspired significant study from literary circles. Biographers generally do not treat the question and no literary scholar has dedicated a full-length study to the question. The following article examines the current state

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1 For the general information about stuttering and stutterers in this article, see Shell.

of the question. While I believe that Miguel de Cervantes stuttered, the evidence is scanty. My conclusion is based more on intuition than solid textual evidence. Despite the lack of clear, conclusive evidence, the argument put forth here seeks to establish both the relevance of the condition to his writing and the need for further inquiry.

Perhaps the principal reason that scholars have not given more attention to the question of Cervantes as a stutterer is because of the negative popular stereotypes with stutterers. Stutterers are often connected with the idea of being *tontos*. To cite one recent example, take the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy's definition of *gallego*. The primary definition of *gallego* is a person from Galicia a region in the northwest corner of Spain. But the dictionary lists as a secondary meaning of *gallego*: "tonto y tartamudo." A 2007 debate in academic circles in Spain began as to whether or not eliminate the dictionary entry (see "Ser"). Negative prejudice against the condition has been both a conscious and unconscious reason that more have not studied the condition as it connects to Cervantes.

Establishing whether or not Cervantes stuttered requires overcoming two major obstacles. First, the meaning of stuttering has never been clear. In addition to negative prejudice, little is known about the condition and, because of that, little has been written on it.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, even today scientists and speech therapists are unsure about the causes and exact meaning of the condition. Scholars can only agree that stuttering is a mysterious condition that straddles the hypothetical line between the physiological and psychological and between the voluntary and involuntary. Second, no systematic descriptions of stutterers exist from the sixteenth and seventeenth century and the literary historian must reconstruct the meaning of stuttering from scratch.

Cervantes suggests that he is a stutterer on three occasions. In the relatively obscure letter from 1577, the *Epístola a Miguel Vázquez*, Cervantes writes:

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2 Very few scholars have studied stuttering in the context of Hispanic studies. For further reading on the unique perception of stutterer in the context of reading Federico García Lorca, see Bonaddio.

si vuestra intercesión, señor, me ayuda  
 a verme ante Filipino arrodillado,  
 mi lengua balbuciente y casi muda  
 pienso mover en la real presencia. (221; l. 199)

The poem repeats many verses, with trivial variations, from the first act of *El trato de Argel* (Stagg 204). This case is no exception as the semi-autobiographical character Saavedra from Cervantes' play *El trato de Argel* also describes himself with a "lengua balbuciente y casi muda" in the same situation:

si la suerte o si el favor me ayuda  
 a verme ante Filipino arrodillado,  
 mi lengua balbuciente y casi muda,  
 pienso mover en la real presencia... (Cervantes, *El trato*)

Admittedly, reasons exist that support dismissing the description as an autobiographical reference to stuttering. Even if we ignore the problematic critical practice of connecting literary reference with real autobiography, the two passages might not suggest a stutterer, but that Cervantes is befuddled and awe-stricken in the royal presence. Indeed, the reference has a literary (not an auto-biographical) source. Cervantes borrows the self-description from Garcilaso de la Vega. In "Eglogue III" Garcilaso writes: "mas con la lengua muerta y fría en la boca / pienso mover la voz a ti debida" (v. 11-12; 120).

No critic makes the case, though, that these arguments prevent us from reading the two passages as references to stuttering. Despite the fact that Cervantes makes a literary reference, there is room to read the passage as auto-biographical. *Balbuciente* derives from the Latin *balbus* and it is the term meaning stuttering that appears in Nebrija's late fifteenth-century lexicon. When Cervantes uses the term he does not refer to a specific moment when he is trying to speak before the king. Cervantes describes a hypothetical moment. If he were before the king, he would speak, even though his tongue is stuttering and

mute. To describe his tongue, Cervantes replaces Garcilaso's adjective *muerta* with *balbuciente*. While *balbucear* can refer to a momentary type of stammering, *balbuciente* in the context of the passages suggests the permanent condition. In other words, "la lengua *es* balbuciente y muda," rather than "la lengua *está* balbuciente y muda."

The third time that Cervantes refers to himself as a stutterer, instead of *balbucear*, he uses an adjectival form of *tartamudear*, the preferred popular term to describe the condition. Cervantes states to the reader of the prologue of *Las novelas ejemplares*: "Será forzoso valerme por mi pico, aunque tartamudo..." (51). Cervantes begins the prologue saying that the prologue is not necessary. Cervantes wishes that an unnamed old friend would have painted his portrait. He also wishes that his friend would have placed a biographical description below the portrait. But that friend did not do it, and the opportunity was lost. So Cervantes tells his reader that he is going to simply have to tell the reader himself the prologue. When Cervantes says this, he writes that he will have to take recourse to his own tongue. Upon mentioning his tongue (he literally uses the word "beak" which in Spanish is often synonymous one with a long beak, or wordy), he writes *aunque tartamudo* [although it is a stuttering beak].

With respect to this reference one may argue that the reference to stuttering is a reference to old age. The reference to his condition as stutterer then may suggest that he has become a stammering old man, not one who has always suffered from the condition. But the reference to the condition in the context of sentence where it appears does not suggest a momentary stammering that accompanies old age, but a self-reference to a condition that Cervantes would have suffered his entire life. Cervantes, again, uses the word "to stutter" for a general, not momentary, description of himself.

Through the slippery auto-biographical references in Cervantes' work, the prologue to the *Novelas ejemplares* gives the most reliable description of Cervantes. Cervantes uses a new, precise word in Spanish that means stuttering and since stutterers stuttered in the similar way today as they did in the seventeenth century, the word probably referred to the condition, not a temporary moment.

Stuttering is trans-historic and trans-cultural and it is one of the few conditions where the symptom equals the sign equals the disease. Sebastián de Covarrubias mentions the existence of the variant *tartamudear* under the entry *tartajear* and the first appearance of *tartamudo* in literature in the Spanish language appears in Cervantes' prologue. The more standard popular word for stuttering from the period then was *tartajear* and *tartamudear*, the newer popular form of the word, had begun to replace *tartajear* at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century. *Tartamudear* is a combination of the notion of muteness (*mudo*) with *tata* (the added "r" to *tata*, *tarta*, is normal linguistic evolution in Spanish). Although muteness has nothing to do with the condition of stuttering, it is a decision that stutterers typically make.

While they mention his maimed hand, authors from the period do not mention Cervantes' condition of stuttering. But the lack of evidence may be because he did a good job at his efforts of hiding it (as many stutterers do). One reference, in particular, from a writer from the period could suggest his stuttering was not completely unknown. In the early 1600s, Lope wrote a *sonatada*, an invective poem used to insult and make fun of others, dedicated to Cervantes. In Lope's *sonetada* to Cervantes, he makes a mention to his injured hand and then writes: "Hablaſte, buey: pero dijiſte mú" (Laskier Martín 232). A popular Gallician joke from the period goes: "falou o boi e dixo mu" [habló el buey y dijo mu]. The joke implies that one talks and talks, but does not really say much at all. Lope might be criticizing Cervantes to say that he writes a lot but does not *say* anything at all. Lope may also be using the pun on *mu* (moo and silence) to make fun of a stuttering Cervantes. Cervantes opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

I do not think that the contemporary self-references from Cervantes and the one probably from Lope (the authorship of the *sonetada* is questionable) solidly confirm that Cervantes was a stutterer. Nonetheless, the question "did Cervantes stutter?" needs to be asked and examined. It invites an investigation into stuttering and it might force a reconsideration of aspects of Cervantes literary production.

With respect an investigation into stuttering, the question of whether Cervantes stuttered opens up onto a series of important questions related to linguistics and literary and cultural studies. A study of stuttering in the Spanish context could influence how scholars understand historical linguistics. Ever since Roman Jakobson's conclusions on the arbitrariness of the sign, scholars generally do not accept that signifier, the sound of the word, has anything to do with the signified. Jakobson exhaustively showed that any association that one makes between the sound and the word and the object it represents, even in the case of onomatopoeias, is arbitrary.

But words for stuttering seem to fly in the face of Jakobson's conclusions. In what seems to have been an onomatopoeic move to imitate the sounds made by stutterers, words for stuttering often consist of the reduplication of a consonant followed by an "a" sound. For example, in Korean stuttering is *dada*, a dental followed by an "a" sound. Spanish uses a similar dental followed by an "a" sound. *Tata* forms the base word of the most prevalent lexical item for to stutter, *tartamudear* (with the variation *tartajear*). During Cervantes' time (and today) a series of other words could suggest the phenomenon of stuttering. Those words also consist of the reduplication of a consonant followed by an "a" sound. *Gaga*, *baba*, and *zaza* were associated with stutterers. *Gaga* gives the old verb to stutter *gagadear*.<sup>3</sup> *Baba*, meaning drool, takes the verbal form *babear*. The word is related to the Latin-based *balbucir* and *balbucear*. These words are connected to the infantile tendency to repeat the syllable *ba*. *Zaza* took the form *çaçabilloso* in early Spanish and exists in modern Spanish in two adjectival forms, *zazo* and *zazoso*. *Zaza* never formed into any standard verb forms (because of the preference for lexical variations derived from *tata*). These examples suggest that the signifier, the word for stuttering, curiously imitates the signified, the sound that stutterers

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3 *Gagadear* is found in a fifteenth century poem by Rodrigo Cota (Cota 113). Its modern form *gaguear* generally refers to one who can not articulate consonants. *Gaga* is also associated with the common form to stutter in Portuguese, *gaguejar*. As an adjective in modern colloquial Spanish, to be *gaga* not only means someone who cannot articulate consonants, but means to be speechless over something.

make. The connection does not just occur within the Spanish language, but may occur in a similar fashion in other languages, reflecting the condition of stuttering as a trans-cultural condition.

Aside from its linguistic implications, studying Cervantes and stuttering can contribute to the field of cultural studies, specifically, in aiding historians, speech therapists, and literary scholars to understand the phenomenon and representation of stuttering in the past. Aristotle is considered a stutterer from antiquity and Demosthenes overcoming his speech impairment by putting pebbles in his mouth is a commonly cited past example. But neither example has been contextualized within a cultural context. Studying Cervantes will help explain the role that stuttering played in early Spanish society and culture.

Take one understudied example that may open a window on to attitudes both in the past and present with respect to the reconstruction of a history of stuttering. The medieval *Cid* text might make the first reference to a stutterer, associating the condition with muteness. The text records the *Cid* making fun of Pedro Bermúdez because he is unable to speak:

Pero Vemuéz conpeço de fablar,  
 detiènes la lengua, no puede delibrar,  
 mas quando enpieça, sabed no'da vagar:  
 ¡Dirévos, Cid, costubres avedes tales,  
 siempre en las cortes 'Pero Mudo' me llamades!  
 Bien lo sabedes que yo non puedo más”

[Pedro Bermúdez spoke in his turn,  
 a little tongue-tied at first,  
 but once he started there was no stopping him.  
 “I declare, Cid, you have got into the habit  
 in every assembly of calling me Pedro Mudo!  
 You know very well that  
 I cannot help my defect of speech...”]  
 (192-93; l. 3307-3311).

In her eulogizing of Pedro Bermúdez, Dian Fox argues that these lines do not indicate that he suffered from the condition of stuttering (325 n.18). Many stutterers, however, do consider it a reference to a stutterer. The question of whether Bermúdez stuttered depends on one's interpretation of *no puedo más*. Was Bermúdez unable to speak only at that moment or did he suffer from the permanent condition of a speech impediment? Significantly, when Cervantes was writing, Bermúdez was popularly considered a stutterer. In the *Historia y romancero del Cid* (Lisbon, 1605), Juan de Escobar uses the common denomination of *tartajoso* to describe Bermúdez (190).

A cultural history of stuttering in the early Spanish context still has to be written. Studying Cervantes and stuttering will help understand how the stutterer has been the object of ridicule, particularly in the Spanish-speaking context. If he was a stutterer, what degree did his speech stigma affect the trajectory of Cervantes' perambulations in the sixteenth century? With late sixteenth-century Spain's rigid hierarchies, often determined on spoken rhetoric (how you sell yourself orally to others, especially in the court), stuttering would have affected Cervantes' reputation and social position.

Finally, and most importantly with respect to questions of the literary and Cervantes, the study of stuttering and Cervantes will help elucidate a connection that exists between stuttering and writing. The brains of stutterers are different from non-stutterers and the mental effort to deal with stuttering, the compensation for the difficulties of the tongue, can be a trigger for creative literary genius. One writer-stutterer has written that "being in these vocal handcuffs made me a desperate, devoted writer" (qtd. in Shell 40). Cervantes may have used writing as a prosthetic means of communication to substitute for speaking although the condition that he would have had to struggle with since boyhood is not overtly represented in his fiction. His prose is not like Charles Dickens' realism in which a character's stammer is represented in the prose. But Cervantes, like the singing stutterer (stutterers typically do not stutter when they sing) produces a seamless imitation of orality that never misses a

beat (or misses a beat with calculated brilliance).

Although counterintuitive for many, the lack of an overt imitation of a person that stutters in his work may be a sign of a stuttering Cervantes. Indeed, the question of whether he stuttered can affect how we read Cervantes on other levels. If Cervantes stuttered, then, our readings of important works, such as *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, “El licenciado vidriera,” and “El coloquio de los perros,” can be altered in significant ways.

A linguistic trip up exists in the first paragraph of the first part of the *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Quijote’s original name might be “Quijada, o Quesada.” Cervantes states that the multiple versions of the proper name occur because previous authors had written different versions of the name. Literary critics, like E.C. Riley, argue that the different proper names indicate a reflection on the problem of identity as related to the epistemological status of the proper name (114). But might Cervantes also be making a nod to stuttering? *Zazo* or *zaza* is often used to describe one who mixes sibilants and in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century when standard Spanish had more sibilants than today, the phenomenon of the *zazo* speech defect would have been more prevalent. In the case of Quijada and Quesada, the affricate *sh* sound stutters into a sibilant *s* sound. Moreover, Quijote constantly is thinking about elocution and prides himself on his elocution. When Quijote adopts his carefully selected, archaic speech patterns, I not only hear a crazy man speaking a dead, literary dialect, but a stutterer who like actors or other stutterers adopts a new persona, enabling him to speak without a stutter.

The novella, “El licenciado vidriera,” roughly, the “Glass Graduate Student,” is about a young man who believes he is made of glass and who will not approach anyone for fear that they might break him. His condition of insanity and its connection to the character Quijote has often been made. But the condition of being made of glass and suffering from a speech impediment has been largely overlooked. As Cervantes in the prologue describes his speech impediment, so the character Vidriera also stutters, stating he has a “lengua turbada y tartamuda” (I: 53) [an inhibited and stuttering tongue]. George Shipley

posits that Vidriera, like Cervantes, had to overcome the condition of stuttering. Shipley goes so far as to suggest that the Hieronymite friar in the novella, who helps restore the graduate's speech, is first representation of an early modern speech pathologist (115).

An internet forum known as "Social Anxiety Support" has taken up the theme of "Going Blank and Stuttering" (Social). Supporting the fact that the examples from the *Epístola a Miguel Vázquez* and *El trato de Argel* are references to stuttering, one contributor to the forum writes that he goes blank and stutters when he talks to figures of authority. That same contributor suggests that the condition makes one feel vulnerable and fragile. The contributor quotes the following from a song: "When your house is see-through, learn to close your eyes in case the glass shatters." Might the condition of stuttering have had something to do with the graduate's belief that he too was made of glass? Could Cervantes have felt that he was made of glass because he was a stutterer?

Even though Cervantes creates a character that also stutters and he himself writes that he is a stutterer, the way that I came to believe that Cervantes was a stutterer was based on an intuition rather than something I read. While researching the origin of the talking dogs, I came upon the writings of Marc Shell, a professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard, who described that as a child he always loved to imagine that all the talking animals from Æsop must have come from a person who stuttered like himself.

Could Cervantes' creation of talking dogs have paralleled Æsop's interest in creating talking animal? Cervantes read Æsop when he was a child and adult. He, like many of his contemporaries, would have read not only the fables, but the biography of Æsop, a text that typically accompanied the fables. Paul Carranza has written on how influential the biography of Æsop had been on the creation of "El coloquio de los perros." But Carranza does not mention the possible affinity Cervantes as stutterer could have felt with Æsop when reading the biography. The opening paragraph of one early Spanish Æsop biography calls him a stutterer twice: Æsop had a tongue that was *tata* and *zaza* (*tartamuda* and *çaçabillosa*) (*Esopete* 2).

These intuitions about Cervantes as stuttester in creating talking dogs lead to other questions that might open new readings of *El coloquio de los perros*. Might Cervantes' interest in the tongue in the dialogue not be a figurative interest, but a literal one?<sup>4</sup> When Cipión cautions his comrade to restrain his tongue because "en ella consisten los mayores daños de la humana vida" (304), could it refer to a tongue that caused Cervantes innumerable nightmares?

Scholars have long been interested in one of Cervantes' physical disabilities, his maimed hand, an injury sustained from the battle of Lepanto. "El manco de Lepanto" [maimed from Lepanto] has been an inseparable part of Cervantine identity and numerous critics have dwelled on literal and figurative "hands" in Cervantes' literary production. As opposed to the maimed hand, an injury sustained in adulthood, an impaired tongue would have been a disability that Cervantes would have lived with since he began to talk. The tongue, as opposed to the hand, is inside the man and, because of its profound psychological and physiological effects, the possibility of Cervantes' stuttering tongue needs discussion. Did Cervantes compensate broken everyday oral language into some of the most luscious and finest flowing prose in Spanish?

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4 For a discussion of the tongue as used figuratively, see Forcione 187-236.

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