

# Open syllable drift and the evolution of Classical Latin open and closed syllable structure into Spanish, Italian & Neapolitan



John M. Ryan, University of Northern Colorado  
(john.ryan@unco.edu)

## Introduction, Purpose, and Method

**Syllable structure** is the proverbial skeleton or template upon which the sounds of a given language may combine to make sequences and divisions that are licit in that language.

Classical Latin (CL) is known to have exhibited both open and closed syllable structure in word final position, as well as internally. The daughter languages of Spanish, Italian and Neapolitan, however, have evolved to manifest this dichotomy to differing due to both phonological and extra-phonological realities.

**Purpose:** to conduct a comparative syllabic analysis of *The Lord's Prayer* in Classical Latin (CL), modern Spanish, Italian and Neapolitan in order to determine:



- the distribution of open and closed syllables in terms of word position;
- what factors, both phonological (e.g., coda deletion, apocope, syncope, degemination,) and extra-phonological (e.g., *raddoppiamento sintattico* and other historical morphosyntactic innovations as the emergence of articles), might explain the distribution of the data.
- whether the data support or weaken the theory of 'open syllable drift' proposed by Lausberg (1976) and others to have occurred in late Latin or early Proto Romance.

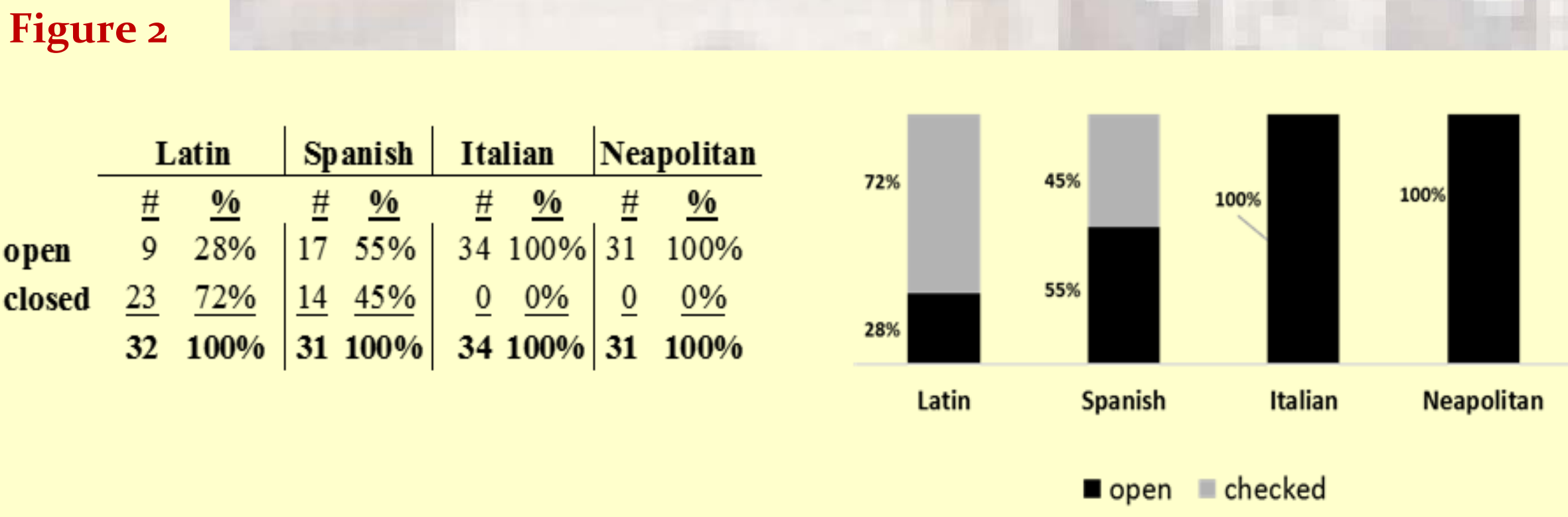
**Figure 1** shows the breakdown of words, syllables and syllable/word ratio for all four texts of the study:

<b>Figure 1</b>	<b>Latin</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>Italian</b>	<b>Neapolitan</b>	<b>total</b>
<b>total number of words</b>	49	53	56	49	<b>207</b>
<b>total number of syllables</b>	103	97	106	90	<b>396</b>
<b>syllable/word ratio</b>	2.1020	1.8302	1.8929	1.8367	<b>1.9130</b>

## Data and Discussion

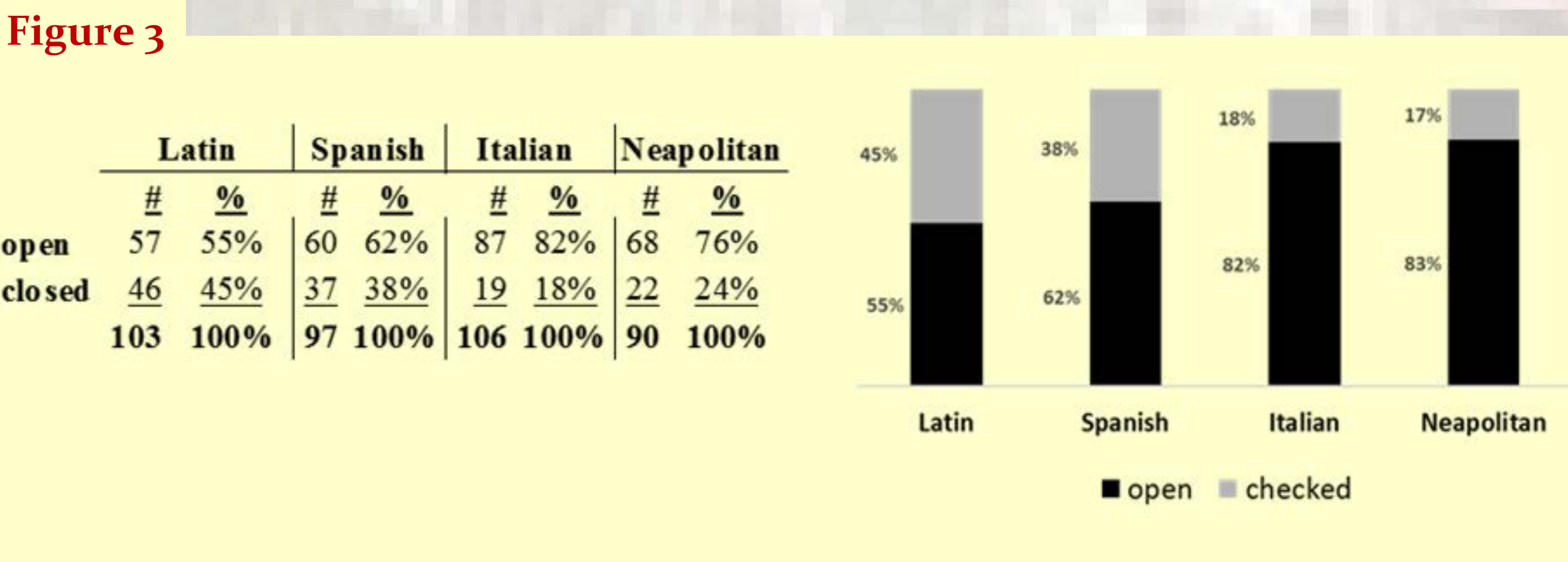
### 1) Polysyllabic word-final position in *The Lord's Prayer*

**Figure 2** shows that in **word-final** position, Latin overwhelmingly favors closed syllables at 72%, while Spanish only slightly favors open syllables at 55%. In word final position, both Italian and Neapolitan syllables were exclusively (100%) open.



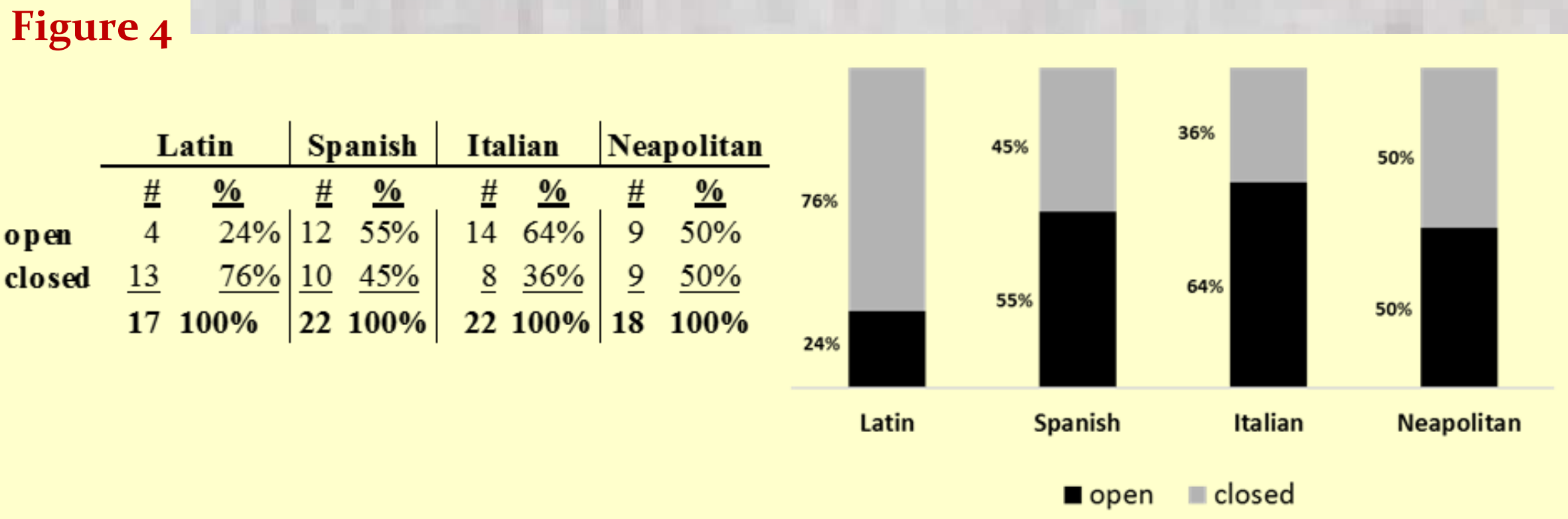
### 2) Polysyllabic word-internal position in *The Lord's Prayer*

**Figure 4** suggests that the **word-internal** position of polysyllabic words is the most stable position in that all three languages continue Latin's tendency to favor open syllables: Latin at 81%; Spanish at 70%; Italian at 78%; and Neapolitan at 68%.



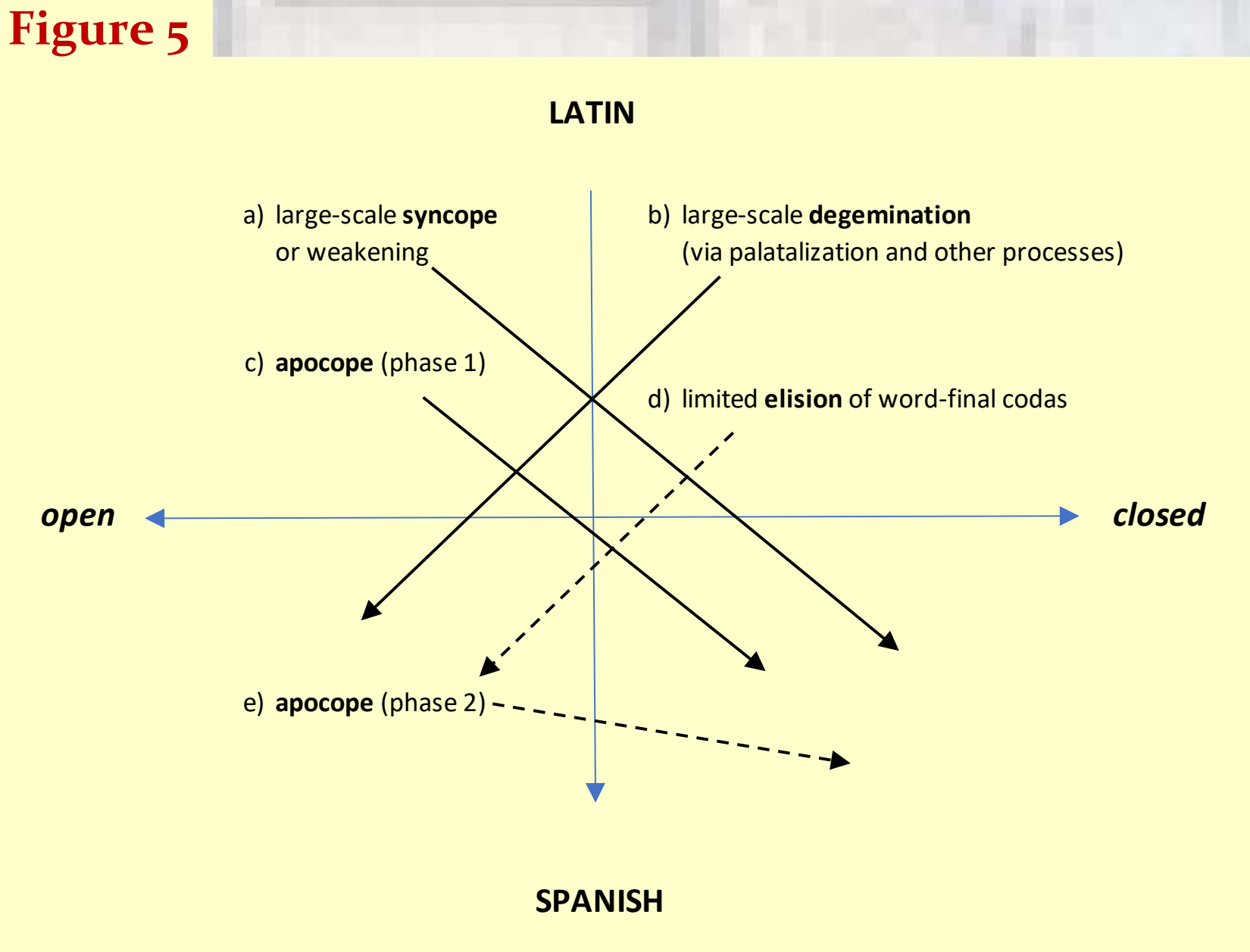
### 3) Monosyllables and word boundaries in *The Lord's Prayer*

**Figure 5** shows that **monosyllables** in *The Lord's Prayer*, favored closed syllables in Latin (at 76%), while the three modern languages favor open syllables: Spanish at 55%; Italian at 64%; and Neapolitan at 89%.

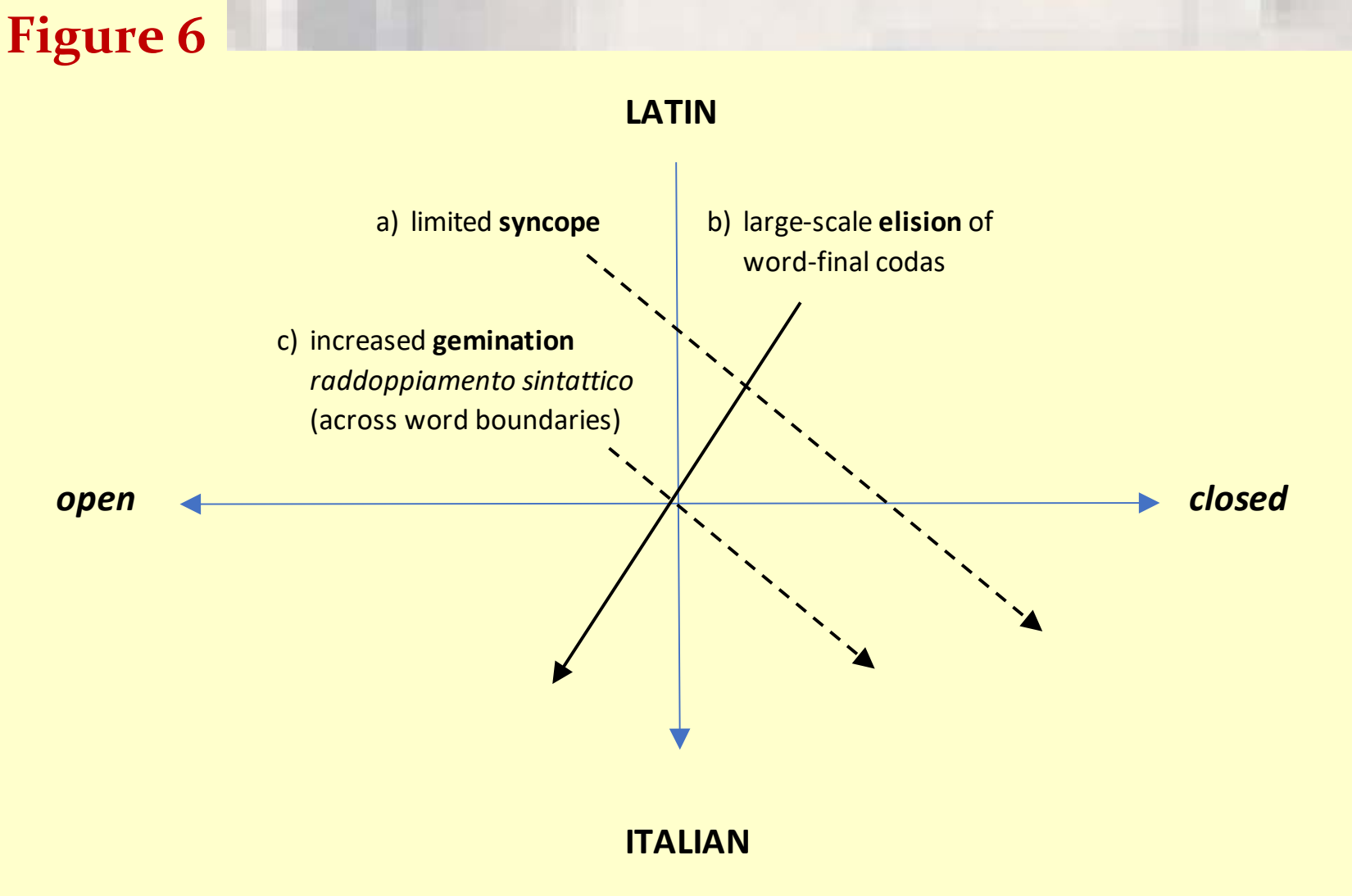


### 4) Historical processes producing reversal effects on CL open and closed syllable structure

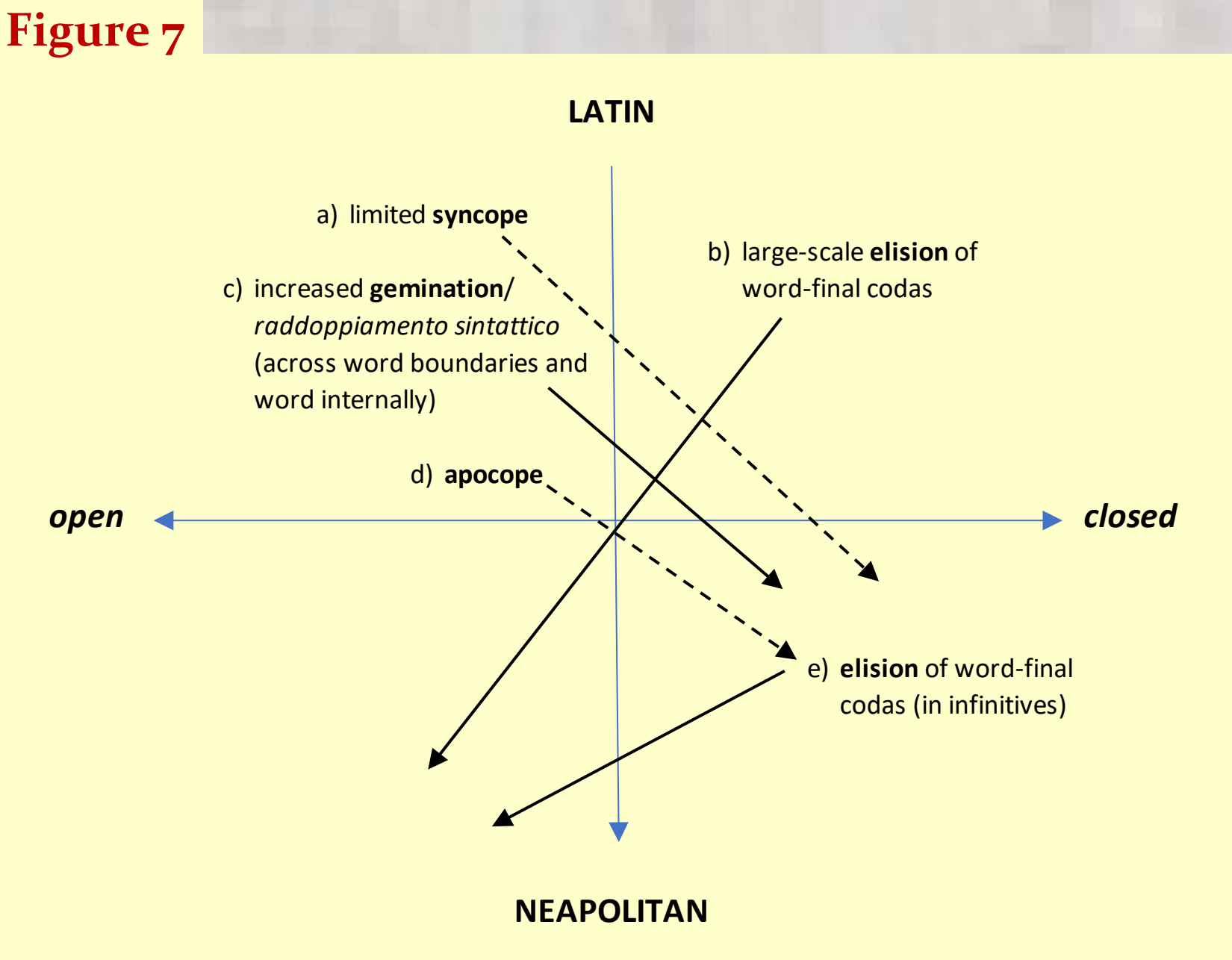
**Figure 5** shows five phonological processes affecting the evolution of open and closed syllable structure from **Latin to Spanish**. The greatest of these occurred word internally, with: a) syncope (e.g., NO-MI-NE 'name' > *nom-bre*) and b) degemination (e.g., FLAM-MA 'flame' > *lla-ma*). Three processes affecting word-final position were: c) an earlier phase of apocope (e.g., CA-DE-RE 'fall' > *ca-er*); d) limited elision of word-final codas (e.g., REG-NUM 'kingdom' > *rei-no*); and e) as an extension of d), a second, limited phase of apocope ((e.g., PA-NEM 'bread' > PA-NE > *pan*).



**Figure 6** shows three phonological processes affecting the evolution of open and closed syllable structure **Latin to Italian**. The least impactful these was: a) syncope, occurring in word-internal position (e.g., VI-RI-DIS 'green' > *ver-de*). The most impactful was: b) elision, occurring in word-final position (e.g., CAE-LUM 'heaven' > *lo*). Also, c) limited increases of word-internal gemination (*raddoppiamento sintattico* (HA-BE-AM 'I have' > *ab-bia*), and in some cases, across word boundaries (*e + pure* = *pure* 'and yet').



**Figure 7** shows five phonological processes affecting the evolution of open and closed syllable structure from **Latin to Neapolitan**. The impactful of these was: a) syncope, occurring in word-internal position (e.g., O-CU-LUS 'eye' > *uoc-chio*). The most impactful was: b) elision word final codas (e.g., SEM-PER > *sem-pe*), c) syntactic gemination internally (e.g., NO-MEN > *nom-me*) and across word boundaries ('o *ppane* 'the bread'). Also, d) apocope plus e) elision in infinitives (VE-NI-RE 'come' > *ve-ni*).



## Conclusions

This cross-linguistic syllabic analysis of *The Lord's Prayer* suggests the following:.

- Most variation among the four languages of the study is found in polysyllabic word final position, while least variation word internally.
- Spanish and Neapolitan appear to have undergone the most changes affecting reversal of closed/open structure, while Italian, except in the case of elision of word final codas, the least.

- In spite of new opportunities for closed syllables (Loporcaro 2011), and in particular with the innovation in Romance with articles and gemination across word boundaries in both Italian and Neapolitan, all three languages of the study sustained significant increases in open syllable structure in all positions when compared to their CL counterpart.
- Even Spanish, shown to be more favorable to closed syllables in polysyllabic word-final position than Italian and Neapolitan, sustained increases in open syllable structure from CL, though not to the same degree..
- This suggests that the notion of 'open syllable drift' (Lausberg 1976; Kiss 1972) in the evolution from CL to Romance may indeed be a real phenomenon.

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