Popular (palabras populares/derivadas) words are those which, in a given language, have a continuous oral history. In the case of Spanish, the term means that the word concerned has been transmitted from spoken Latin, generation by generation, by word of mouth, to modern Spanish (or until the word dropped out of use), undergoing in the process all the phonological and morphological changes which are characteristic of the development of Spanish.

FABULARI > hablar 'to speak'
REGULA > reja 'ploughshare'

Learned (cultismos) words are ones which have been borrowed by Spanish from Latin (Classical or Medieval), through the medium of writing. Such borrowings were already frequent in the Middle Ages and have taken place at all times since then. The words concerned do not undergo the changes typical of popular words, but merely suffer minor modifications of their endings in order to fit them to the morphological patterns of Spanish. Thus, fábula 'fable' (a borrowing of Lat. FABULA) reveals its learned nature by appearance of /f/. Likewise regular (Lat. REGULARIS) 'regular, poor, etc.' is best described as learned, because of its failure of /gl/ to evolve to /x/.

Much dispute has taken place over the precise definition to be given to the term semi-learned (semi-cultismos). The definition adopted here is that of words which, although (like popular words) orally inherited from VL, have been remodeled, usually during the medieval period, under the influence of Latin, as read aloud in the church, the law-courts, etc. Because of their oral transmissions, they undergo some (but, by definition, not all) of the changes typical of popular words; however, in other features, semi-learned words are unevolved.