

Romance rhizotony and perfective stems: Morphological biases and predictability

Borja Herce
University of Zurich

The predictability of morphological properties from other elements in the word or paradigm has recently (re-)emerged as a crucial domain of study in theoretical morphology (Blevins 2016). In general, more predictability is equated with greater simplicity and should also be expected to constitute a powerful force in diachrony (see Herce 2020). Changes where two traits become predictive of each other would seem to demand an explanation along these lines. This is the case of perfective stem allomorphy and stress in Romance:

	PERF	PLUP.SBJV	PERF	PLUP.SBJV
1SG	'koksi:	kok'sissem	'cossi	cuo'cessi
2SG	kok'sisti	kok'sisse:s	cuo'cesti	cuo'cessi
3SG	'koksit	kok'sisset	'cosse	cuo'cesse

Table 1: Partial paradigm of 'cook' in Latin (left) and Italian (right)

In present-day Romance, unlike in Latin, rhizotony (i.e. root-stress) and the remnants of the former perfectum stem constitute purely morphological traits (see Esher 2015), as they no longer correlate to any well-defined semantic value or phonological environment. Whereas in Latin the two traits were completely independent of each other and orthogonal, in Romance this has changed, with the result that the perfectum root and rhizotony can now predict each other to some extent in most varieties:

		Latin		Romanian		Italian		Friulian	
Allomorphy		+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
Rhizotony	+	∃	∃	∃	∄	∃	∄	∄	∄
	-	∃	∃	∃	∃	∄	∃	∄	∃

Table 2: The relation between perfective rhizotony and stem alternation

Although, as shown in Table 2, all trait combinations were possible in Latin, a big asymmetry existed according to the number of verbs that displayed each of them:

	+ Stem allomorphy	- Stem allomorphy
+ rhizotony	68.3% e.g. <i>dīcere</i>	9.6% e.g. <i>vertere</i>
- rhizotony	0.4% e.g. <i>quaerere</i>	21.7% e.g. <i>petere</i>

Table 3: The relation between perfective rhizotony and allomorphy in Latin

In the light of the above numbers (from Francese 2014), one may think of the Romance developments in Table 2 as driven by language-users' necessity to predict these morphological traits in the absence of extramorphological cues. In a context where

+rhizotony +allomorphy, and -rhizotony -allomorphy were the most frequent combinations, the emergence of a predictability relation between the two would not be unexpected.

Although this must have been an important factor, it can only be part of the story. The class -allomorphy +rhizotony (e.g. *vertere*) was not infrequent in Latin but has been completely eliminated from every single contemporary Romance variety. Something quite different is found in the opposite class of verbs (+allomorphy -rhizotony), which was extremely infrequent in Latin but is still encountered occasionally in Romance. A strong bias is observed, thus, against +rhizotony -allomorphy but not against other classes. The reason for this concrete bias might be found in homophony avoidance. Whereas +rhizotony and/or a dedicated stem alternant unmistakably identify a form as ‘past’, the absence of both properties would give rise to very ‘uncomfortable’ past-present diagonal syncretisms:

	<i>caber</i> ‘fit’		<i>decir</i> ‘say’		pseudo- <i>caber</i> ‘fit’		pseudo- <i>decir</i> ‘say’	
	PRS	PRET	PRS	PRET	PRS	PRET	PRS	PRET
1SG	ˈkepo	ˈkupe	ˈdiyo	ˈdixe	ˈkepo	ˈkabe	ˈdiyo	ˈdiθe
2SG	ˈkabes	kuˈpiste	ˈdiθes	diˈxiste	ˈkabes	kaˈbiste	ˈdiθes	diˈθiste
3SG	ˈkabe	ˈkupo	ˈdiθe	ˈdixo	ˈkabe	ˈkabo	ˈdiθe	ˈdiθo

Table 4: Actual (left) and hypothetical (right) partial paradigms of two Spanish verbs

No-shared-value formal identities are costly for language processing (MacGregor et al. 2015) and are sometimes avoided with defectiveness (see Baerman 2011) of the less frequent cell. This Romance data show that properties that result in these suboptimal configurations are diachronically dispreferred, which is understandable only in the light of the discriminative (i.e. not realizational) role attributed to morphology in abstractive models (Blevins 2016).

References

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