

The development of inflectional uniformity in the present subjunctive of Italian dialects

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The verbal systems of Italian dialects display affixal allomorphy related to inflectional classes in various parts of the paradigm: basically, verbs belonging to different classes ('conjugations') may take different affixes for expressing the same combination of morphosyntactic properties. This characteristic (admittedly, a morphological complication, involving violation of the ideal one-to-one mapping between grammatical meaning and form) has been inherited from Latin, and can be interpreted as a 'defining property' of the relevant systems, a manifestation of 'system-dependent naturalness' (Wurzel 1989).

The present subjunctive inflection, however, is a noteworthy exception to the general trend: while this paradigm portion in Latin had affixal allomorphy based on inflectional classes (notably a binary pattern, with the formative *-e-* for first conjugation verbs and the formative *-a-* for verbs of the other classes, both of them occurring between the verbal stem and transparent personal markers), in Italo-Romance dialects the affixes of the relevant forms -in particular, those of the rhizotonic ones- display a high degree of uniformity across classes, such that there is typically one and the same affix set for verbs of all conjugations. On closer inspection, two sub-types can be identified within this pattern: in some dialects (which we may classify as 'Type-A'), the relevant forms are characterized by one and the same inflectional marker (notably a vowel) not only for verbs of all classes but also, within each class, for all persons - cf. the data in Table 1 below, from Pelicciardi (1977); in others ('Type-B dialects'), inter-paradigmatic uniformity is accompanied by unprecedented intra-paradigmatic variation, such that in the inflection of each verb there are different affixes according to person - cf. the data in Table 2, from Toso (1997).

Table 1 – Emilian-Romagnol, Lugo; Present Subjunctive

	First Conj.	Second Conj.	Third Conj.	Affix set
	la' vee 'wash'	'korar 'run'	bu' li 'boil'	
1sg.	'lev-a	'kor-a	'bol-a	-a
2sg.	'lev-a	'kor-a	'bol-a	-a
3sg.	'lev-a	'kor-a	'bol-a	-a
1pl.	la' v-ena	ku' r-ena	bu' l-ena	
2pl.	la' v-iva	ku' r-iva	bu' l-iva	
3pl.	'lev-a	'kor-a	'bol-a	-a

Table 2 – Ligurian, Genoese; Present Subjunctive

	First Conj.	Second Conj.		Third Conj.	Affix set
	can' ta 'sing'	ta' zej 'keep/ fall silent'	'bejve 'drink'	ser' vi 'serve'	
1sg.	'kant-e	'ta:z-e	'bejv-e	'serv-e	-e
2sg.	'kant-i	'ta:z-i	'bejv-i	'serv-i	-i
3sg.	'kant-e	'ta:z-e	'bejv-e	'serv-e	-e
1pl.	kan' t-emu	ta' z-emu	be' v-emu	ser' v-imu	
2pl.	kan' t-ε:	ta' z-εj	be' v-εj	ser' v-i:	
3pl.	'kant-an	'ta:z-an	'bejv-an	'serv-an	- an

This evolution raises several problems. On the one hand, it cannot be explained as the result of regular sound change. On the other, as the result of morphologically motivated change, it is at odds with what is observed in other paradigm portions, where class-related distinctions are typically retained and can in fact be explained in terms of 'system-dependent naturalness'.

I will argue that the developments at issue are best interpreted as a manifestation of the well-known tension between sound change and analogy (McMahon (1994) a.o.). More precisely, they would be an instance of how analogical change can intervene in a morphological pattern which has been disrupted by sound change, yielding a new pattern which is “as regular as the old, but with a different basis” (Carstairs-McCarthy 2001).

The Latin present subjunctive, we have said, displayed a precise pattern of allomorphy involving two rival affix-sets. In such a system, the fact that a verb such as AMARE ‘love’ systematically takes inflectional –e- and not –a- in the six present subjunctive forms can be explained (or ‘motivated’, cf. Radden & Panther 2004) on purely morphological ground, notably by its membership in the so-called first conjugation.

Now in the transition to Italo-Romance, this regular pattern of allomorphy was severely affected by the action of sound change: some of the original personal markers were obliterated, leaving the stem-following formatives in word-final position; in some varieties, unstressed vowels other than –A were also lost when they occurred in word-final position, leading to zero inflection for first conjugation verbs; last but not least, in some persons, the formal distinction between affixes marking different classes was neutralized.

My hypothesis is that all this would have led to a reanalysis of the stem-following formatives, which were no longer interpreted as class-related present subjunctive allomorphs, but came to be seen as either the only present subjunctive markers available, or as personal markers. The inflectional uniformity that we currently observe, then, can be explained as the result of analogical adjustments, which typically follow reanalysis processes (Trask 1996, Fertig 2013).

The evolution of the Romance verbal systems provides extensive evidence that purely morphological (in Aronoff’s (1994) terminology, ‘morphomic’) categories such as inflectional classes are psychologically real to speakers: as a rule, these are sufficient to ensure the diachronic persistence of affixal oppositions which cannot be motivated on morphosyntactic grounds (Carstairs-McCarthy 2010, Maiden 2004, 2011). What this case study suggests, however, is that formal distinctions based on purely morphological classes, however ‘system congruous’ they may be, are by no means necessary: under the right circumstances, they can be discarded, in such a way that the inflection of lexemes belonging to different classes is unified on the basis of the common morphosyntactic value.

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