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Introduction to Romance languages

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Livio Gaeta

21 Introduction to Romance languages

21.1 Introduction

Romance languages inherited a productive system of derivation from Latin, which however developed in partially independent and original ways. On the one hand, we observe cases of Latin affixes which underwent considerable expansion: for instance, the Latin suffix *-mentum* found in *impedimentum* ‘obstacle’, *ornamentum* ‘ornament’, etc. massively expanded in all Romance languages except Romanian, in which only relics survive in the form of Latinisms (e.g. *impediment*, *ornament*) while action nouns are productively formed with the help of the original inflectional ending of the Latin infinitive *-re*, as in *a schimba* ‘to change’ > *schimbare* ‘change’ (cf. Gaeta 2015).

On the other hand, new procedures were developed that resulted from different sources. One example in which all Romance languages apparently concur in a similar innovation is the adverb-forming suffix resulting from the well-known process of the grammaticalization of the Latin noun *mente(m)* ‘mind’ (cf. Detges 2015): e.g. Catalan *realment*, French *réellement*, and Galician, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish *realmente* ‘really’. The suffix is, however, productive to different degrees across the Romance languages: in Romanian, for instance, only a handful of adverbs formed with *-mente* are commonly used, and are, however, borrowings from Italian and French processes (see individual chapters on several Romance languages in Müller et al. 2016: 2600–2751).

21.2 Across inflection and derivation and the question of transflection

In the light of the development with respect to the Latin mother tongue, another general issue arises with regard to the distinction between inflection and derivation, concerning a number of cases which are traditionally held to lie at the edge of the continuum. Moreover, the general perspective adopted in the project of leaving out any instance of conversion, including so-called transflection, poses a number of challenges which require homogeneous and theoretically convincing choices.

In particular, the bar against conversion implies that one should leave out derivatives based on inflectional forms in the absence of any overt affix univocally referring to derivation. This means that, for instance, a derivative formed on the basis of the feminine past participle such as Fr. *gorger* ‘to fill, saturate’ > *gorgée* ‘drink, swallow’ has to be left out because the final vowel cannot be interpreted as a derivational affix, exactly as in its correspondents It. *bere* / Gal. / Port. / Sp. *beber* ‘to drink’ > It. *bevuta* / Gal. / Port. / Sp. *bebida* ‘drink, swallow’. This goes hand in hand with the exclusion of any inflectional form used in a transposed function, as is typically the case for past participles used as adjectives as, for instance, Sp. *decidir* ‘to decide’ > *decidido* ‘resolute’. In addition, one should consider that in some cases the suffix forming the past participle has given rise to a derivational suffix forming adjectives without a corresponding verb, such as Sp. *toga* ‘robe’ > *tog-ado* ‘wearing a robe’. In this way, one might in principle interpret cases that look like conversions as being due to suffixation, as, for instance, Sp. *dentado* ‘dentate’ can in principle be formed either on the verb *dentar* ‘to provide with teeth’ or directly on the noun *dente* ‘tooth’.

On the other hand, the original form of the Latin present participle has undergone different processes of reanalysis across the modern Romance languages, which might have different outcomes nowadays. Accordingly, different choices have to be taken for the single languages, as, for instance, the participial value is still alive in French, in contrast to its Italian correspondent: Fr. *la fille chantant l’hymne national* / It. **la ragazza cantante l’inno nazionale* ‘the girl singing the national hymn’. Old present participles have developed different derivational values, ranging from AGENT nouns (e.g. Cat. *cantant*, Gal. / It. / Sp. *cantante* ‘singer’) to INSTRUMENTS (e.g. Cat. *tirant*, It. / Port. / Sp. *tirante* ‘tie-rod’, Cat. *tirants*, Gal. / Sp. *tirantes* ‘braces’), property adjectives (e.g. Gal. / Port. / Sp. *cortante*, Cat. *tallant*, It. *tagliente* ‘sharp’), etc.

In a similar way, the original suffix of the superlative has developed into a true elative in the modern Romance languages insofar as it has become irrelevant for syntax, as shown by the contrast between the Latin example in (1) and the Spanish one in (2):

- (1) *ex his omnibus longe sunt humanissimi qui Cantium incolunt* (Caes. *Gall.* 5.14.1)
among his all.ABL.PL long.ADV are human.SUP.PL who Cantium inhabit.3PL
‘of all people those who live in Cantium are by far the most human’
- (2) *este actor es famosísimo (*de todos)*
this actor is famous.SUP of all
‘this actor is very famous (*of all)’

In addition, the elative suffix has developed a number of restrictions, limiting its productivity to a different degree. For instance, in Spanish the so-called lexical elative is opposed to and blocks the morphological elative formed with the suffix **-ísimo**, while in French – except for a few established formations typical of the literary language such as *rarissime* ‘very rare’ and *richissime* ‘very rich’ – elatives formed with *-issime* are less entrenched than in other Romance languages like Italian, where it displays an extraordinary productivity, barely restricted by a small number of factors (cf. Rainer 2003). On the other hand, in several grammatical traditions, elatives formed with this suffix are nevertheless assigned to inflection.

21.3 Base allomorphy, suppletion and combining forms

Finally, the results of phonological change and of lexical stratification can lead to very different choices with regard to how to interpret allomorphy and suppletion (cf. Dressler 2015 for a general discussion). In general, cases of weak suppletion as, for instance, It. *caldo* ‘warm’ > *cal-ore* ‘heat’ and *occhio* ‘eye’ > *ocul-are* ‘ocular’ can be held to represent instances of base allomorphy, while strong suppletion cannot be counted on a par with the other derivatives, as shown on the one hand by It. *acqua* ‘water’ > *idr-ico* ‘hydric’ and on the other by Fr. *chaud* ‘warm’ > *chal-eur* ‘heat’, *oeil* ‘eye’ > *ocul-aire* ‘ocular’, etc. Clearly, the difference between weak and strong suppletion is difficult to draw and depends very much on the single examples in question. At any rate, the clear occurrence of an affix also has to be identified for weak suppletion, which forces the exclusion of cases like It. *nome* ‘noun’ > *nominare* ‘to nominate’ in which *-in-* cannot be interpreted as a verb-forming suffix.

Similar problems are provided by the difficult cline running from so-called neoclassical compounding down to affixation. It must be added that different criteria are adopted across the Romance languages for deciding between true affixation and the compounding of combining forms. For this reason, it is not possible to say *a priori* which choice has to be recommended, which instead relies very much on the single examples in question.

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