

Paper title: *Alea iacta est*. A ‘language ecology’ approach to the diachrony of the Latin passive

Julius Caesar's *Alea iacta est* is rendered in English by two subtly different translations: we might find *The die has been cast* or *The die is cast*. This difference lucidly reflects the ambiguity of the Latin passive perfect tense (type *cantatus est*) already present in Classical Latin: it either signifies a completed past (or anterior) event (*The die has been cast*), or a present ongoing state that results from a past event (*The die is cast*, cf. also Caes. BG. I.1.1. *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*), where the participle and auxiliary resemble more closely an adjective and a copula (Kiss 1982, 18). In addition, the latter translation harbours a third function, originally associated with the Latin passive *present* tense (type *cantatur*), viz. an ongoing present event, although the English progressive (*The die is being cast*) is more explicit here. As the Latin perfect (*cantatus est*) gradually specialized towards an ongoing present state, probably due to the structural similarity with the 'adjective + copula' construction (Aerts 2021, 186), it also encroached on the terrain of *cantatur* for the expression of an ongoing present event (Clackson and Horrocks 2007, 280; de Melo 2012), eventually resulting in the Romance passive (Fr. *il est chanté*, It. *è cantato*) while the form *cantatur* was lost. For past events in the passive (*The die has been cast*), the meaning of ‘anteriority’ came to reside on the auxiliary rather than on the participle (Cennamo 2016, 970): the innovation *cantatus fuit* gradually took over this function from *cantatus est*, leading to Romance forms such as It. *fu cantato* and Sp. *fue cantado*, which were subsequently replaced by analytic forms such as Fr. *il a été chanté* and It. *è stato cantato*.

In earlier studies of these shifts in form-function pairings, some developments remained understudied. In general, we have yet to understand and evidence which triggers and reactions directed the evolution of the tense system, both for individual constructions and as a whole. Adopting a ‘language ecology’ perspective (Mufwene 2001; Croft 2006), I aim to lay bare both language-internal and language-external influences on the Latin passive tenses. To that end, a broad selection of texts available in online corpora, consisting of literary (e.g. historiographical), non-literary (e.g. technical, epistolary) as well as documentary texts (e.g. curse tablets, papyri), was queried for these forms, resulting in a database in which certain hypothesized trends can be evaluated empirically. For example, Kiss' (1982, 29–30) suggestion that *cantatus est* was favoured over *cantatur* in Late Latin because of its potential – amidst the gradual loss of the case system – to clarify constituent roles by means of agreement (e.g. *carmen cantatum est*), can be checked by comparing its occurrence rate with the degree of case loss in an author's language (a language-internal influence). Moreover, given the Romance word order *è (stato) cantato* rather than Latin *cantatus est/fuit*, Danckaert (2017, 221–25) states that a gradual change must be attested towards later Latin, but he finds it only for *cantatus fuit*; at the basis of Romance *è cantato*, he suggests an innovation *cantatus est* ‘It is (being) sung’ in Late Latin, modelled on *cantatus fuit*, which did move towards *fuit cantatus*. Apart from confirming Danckaert's numerical data on word order patterns with supplementary data from the entire database, the present research also assesses the functional specialization in a representative sample through close-reading, in order to evaluate the association between *est cantatus* and a verbal (event) reading on the one hand, and between *cantatus est* and an adjectival (resultative) meaning on the other hand. Exceptions to this trend involve, for example, phonological pressure (i.e. length of the participle) and diaphasic variation (e.g. high register or classicism, a language-external influence) (Danckaert 2016, 160–61).

In the end, this research constitutes a case study – on one cluster of constructions, in one language – that could serve the field of historical linguistics in two ways. On the one hand, it reveals some of the potential triggers and reactions that could play a part in the historical or future development of tense systems in Romance languages and beyond. On the other hand, it forms an illustration of the ‘language ecology’ framework and its fruitful applicability in research of other subsystems and other languages.

Keywords

Latin; tense systems; language ecology; corpus linguistics; diachronic linguistics; functional linguistics

Author

Dr Simon Aerts

Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO)

Ghent University (Department of Linguistics – Latin section)

References

- Aerts, Simon. 2021. 'Servientia Servanda. A Functionalist and Quantitative Approach to the Survival of Grammatical Aspect in the Language of Gregory of Tours'. *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 99 (1): 161–96.
- Cennamo, Michela. 2016. 'Voice'. In *The Oxford Guide to the Romance Languages*, edited by Adam Ledgeway and Martin Maiden, 967–80. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clackson, James, and Geoffrey C. Horrocks. 2007. *The Blackwell History of the Latin Language*. Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell.
- Croft, William. 2006. 'Evolutionary Models and Functional-Typological Theories of Language Change'. In *The Handbook of the History of English*, edited by Ans van Kemenade and Bettelou Los, 68–91. Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell.
- Danckaert, Lieven. 2016. 'Variation and Change in Latin BE-Periphrases: Empirical and Methodological Considerations'. In *Early and Late Latin*, edited by James Adams and Nigel Vincent, 132–62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danckaert, Lieven. 2017. 'The Origins of the Romance Analytic Passive: Evidence from Word Order'. In *Micro-Change and Macro-Change in Diachronic Syntax*, edited by Eric Mathieu and Robert Truswell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kiss, Sándor. 1982. *Tendances évolutives de la syntaxe verbale en latin tardif*. Debrecen: Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem.
- Melo, Wolfgang D. C. de. 2012. 'Kurylowicz's First "law of Analogy" and the Development of Passive Periphrases in Latin'. In *Laws and Rules in Indo-European*, edited by Philomen Probert and Andreas Willi, 83–101. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mufwene, Salikoko S. 2001. *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press.