

Quantifying morphological autonomy: CVC- to C(V)- stems in Romance verbs and the long-term vitality of morphomes

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Morphologists of different backgrounds disagree with respect to the degree of autonomy of the morphological component of language from syntax and semantics. Although in this 'morphome' debate (Aronoff 1994, Luís & Bermúdez-Otero 2016) Romance stem alternations and their diachronic productivity have been extensively studied (see e.g. Maiden 1992, 2011, 2018; Esher 2015; Herce 2019, 2021; Nevins et al. 2015, etc.), this research has been overwhelmingly qualitative. It has largely relied on the subjective analysis of "cherry-picked" examples, which can be used to support almost any theoretical stance. A precise and objective quantification of the productivity of the Romance morphomes is the piece of evidence most crucially missing from this debate. This is the purpose of the present paper.

New stem alternation patterns emerging from the loss of stem-final segments have been surveyed to quantify the degree of diachronic productivity of established morphomic patterns (N, L/U, PYTA, or FUÈC) vis à vis other (e.g. semantic) templates. This type of changes (of the type *ve-o v-es v-e* (Sp.) < VIDEO 'see', or *cre-o cre-es cre-e* (Sp.) < CREDO 'believe') offers an ideal benchmark due to two reasons. i) Unlike the sound changes that gave rise to N and L/U these changes occur largely independently in different local varieties after the split of the family. In addition, ii) the alternations that these changes (may) give rise to do not bear any systematic resemblance to the typically morphomic ones involving e.g. palatalizations (L/U) or stem-vowel quality differences (N). As a result, assimilation to inherited morphomic patterns of alternation would be based on truly abstract paradigmatic templates independent of the phonological profile of the new alternations.

With this goal in mind, the inflectional paradigms of 22 verbs (the reflexes of Latin AUDIO, BIBO, CADO, CREDO, DEBO, FUGIO, TRAHO, VIDEO, VIVO, among others), were surveyed across 65+ varieties in the Oxford Online Database of Romance Verb Morphology (Maiden et al. 2010). The result is a database with 502 morphophonological innovations, the majority of which (432) have resulted in paradigmatic alternations. On the basis of these, a precise quantification can be made of the relative degree of productivity of different morphomic structures (in this case N (27) >> PYTA (8) > L (6) > FUÈC (5)), as well as of the productivity of inherited morphomic templates (46) relative to the rest (386, 89%). Although these results need to be properly contextualised (it would be most unlikely for a new alternation to split the large Romance paradigm exactly according to one of the four morphomic templates just by chance), they put into perspective the role of morphologically autonomous structures to explain the diachrony of (Romance) paradigms. The most recurrent novel patterns of alternation identified here require reference not only to morphomic domains, but also to semantic structure, and frequency of use (à la Bybee 2007). All of these factors seem to play a similarly important role in predicting the domain over which a novel alternant may spread, and the "borders" against which an innovation may stop.

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