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# At the core of morphological autonomy: inflectional classes as a residue, ballast, or resource?

Livio Gaeta  
University of Turin

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## 1 Inflectional classes as a residue

Inflectional classes (= ICs) can be held to constitute the essence of morphological autonomy as they cannot be reduced to any other language component in terms of phonologically conditioned alternations, syntactically determined distribution, or semantically driven class assignment. In this sense, they are an irreducible residue and warrant for the autonomous status of morphology (cf. Aronoff 1994: 46, 166 a. o.). On the other hand, they clearly profile language-specific patterning while their cross-linguistic relief remains limited as they are not found or only marginally present in several languages.

## 2 Ways for lexical groupings

To be sure, ICs do not represent the only way for grouping words within a certain lexical class. To make just one example, we can divide intransitive verbs in English on the basis of their syntactic behavior. Unaccusatives display conjoined past participles, while unergatives don't: *The girl arrived / \*slept yesterday is my sister*. On the other hand, inflectional properties can also interact in a crucial way with such a syntactically based grouping. For instance, German unaccusatives typically select the auxiliary BE for the present perfect (cf. *ist angekommen* 'has arrived'), while unergatives take HAVE (cf. *hat geschlafen* 'has slept'). In other words, the paradigm of an unaccusative and of an unergative verb in German crucially differ in this property.

### 2.1 The role of analytic constructions in morphological paradigms

However, the property of different auxiliary selection is not normally used to distinguish inflectional behavior, i.e. IC membership. Accordingly, one does not normally consider *verrosten* 'to roast' and *putzen* 'to clean' as belonging to two different ICs in spite of their different auxiliary selection in the present perfect, cf. *sind verrostet* vs. *haben geputzt*, where exactly the same bundle of morphological features {ind., pres. perf., 3rd ps., pl.} is spelled out. Notice that assuming different ICs for different word forms associated with the same set of morphological features is the normal strategy adopted in a typical IC distinction like in the preterite of two German verbs like *schlafen* 'to sleep' and *schlagen* 'to hit', cf. respectively *schlafen* and *schlugen*, corresponding to the same feature set {ind., pret., 3rd ps., pl.}.

In addition, excluding the analytic pieces of an inflectional paradigm from the calculus of IC assignment is also due to the fact that verbs can select different auxiliaries in dependence of the different argument structure which is concretely selected in a certain syntactic environment. Accordingly, a German verb like *fahren* 'to go' shows unaccusative behavior and selects BE (cf. *Hans ist gestern nach München gefahren* 'Yesterday, Hans went to Munich'), but can also appear in a transitive frame where it selects HAVE: *Hans hat gestern seine Frau nach München gefahren* 'Yesterday, Hans drove his wife to Munich'. Furthermore, one and the same verb can display different auxiliary selection as shown by the verb *schließen* 'to close' which combines with both auxiliaries: *Die Metzgerei ist / hat geschlossen* 'the butcher shop is / has closed'. Notice that this variation does not crucially resemble the phenomenon of so-called overabundance, namely when two forms occupy one and the same slot (cf. the past participle of the German verb *weben* 'to weave': *gewebt / gewoben*).

From a lexical / lexicological point of view, two options are possible for treating such cases. On the one hand – and this is the mostly adopted solution – one simply dismisses the issue considering the

different analytic combinations as resulting from the syntactic implementation of the lexeme. Accordingly, the different usages are at best considered as single specifications of the same vocabulary entry, independently of any morphological relief. On the other hand, it is possible to conceive the different usages as relating to different lexemes standing in a derivational relation via a process of conversion (cf. García Velasco & Hengeveld 2002). This latter option accounts for the empirical operation observed in *schließen* which consists in a change of the argument structure whereby the patient / direct object is promoted to a subject while the original agent / subject is totally demoted and even inexpressible.

## 2.2 On the possible and impossible interactions of syntax and morphology

The provisional conclusion of this brief discussion amounts to saying that IC assignment has normally been taken to represent an exclusive morphological phenomenon in which the morphosyntactic context does not seem to play any role. Even more than this, however. For instance, Corbett (2012: 61, see also Corbett & Baerman 2006) emphasizes that syntactic information is only indirectly relevant for IC assignment to the extent that an IC assignment rule like the following has to be expressly rejected:

“\*Verbs which inflect according to inflectional class II take a preceding direct object; others take a following direct object”.

This complies with a Morphology-Free Syntax Principle (= MFSP) which maintains that strictly morphological information like ICs is generally inaccessible to syntax and to syntactic processes (cf. Zwicky 1992). To come back to our German examples with unaccusative verbs, the MFSP prevents auxiliary selection from influencing IC assignment in the following hypothetical terms:

\*Verbs which inflect according to the strong IC take the auxiliary BE; others take HAVE.

In fact, in German we observe a complete independence of auxiliary selection and IC membership: as already mentioned above, both *fahren* and *verrosten* select BE but belong respectively to the strong and to the weak IC.

## 3 Exploiting syntax for preserving morphology

In contrast to Corbett’s and Zwicky’s view, however, the generality of the MFSP cannot be taken for granted a priori, and needs in fact empirical validation. In this connection, an interesting development is found in a variety of Highest Alemannic spoken in Gressoney, a Walser German island of north-western Italy (cf. Zürrer 2009). There, the strong/weak IC membership depends on the morphosyntactic environment in which a verb occurs. In particular, most verbs belonging to the etymological strong class follow the  $I_s$ -Class-Rule:

Verbs which inflect according to the inflectional class  $I_s$  display the strong suffix in the past participle when the latter is used in constructions where the auxiliary BE is selected, while they take the weak suffix when the participle appears in constructions where HAVE is found.

Accordingly, a verb like *schribe* ‘to write’ shows two different past participles in clear dependence of the morphosyntactic environment in which it occurs: *éscht gschrében* ‘is / was written’ vs. *hät gschrébet* ‘has written / wrote’. It must be added that past participles taking BE generally display subject agreement, while participles taking HAVE don’t, independently of the IC: *ennéra halb stòn ésch z’bròt bach-en-z* / *\*bach-et-z gsid* ‘within one half hour the bread(N.SG) has been baked-N.SG vs. *de ma wò hannensch noch hientoa schwarz brot bach-et* / *\*bach-en-z* ‘the men who still have baked the brown

bread occasionally'. Notice that only few etymological strong verbs don't display this alternation and show the weak suffix throughout all environments, as for instance *erfénne* 'to invent' which has the forms *éscht / hät erfönnet*: *de freezer éscht noch nid erfönn-et-e gsid* 'the fridge(M.SG) has not yet been invented-M.SG' and *de lehrer hät d'mòsék erfönn-et* 'the teacher has invented the music'. This is similar to what is found with the other two weak verb classes, for instance with II-class verbs like *publiziere* 'to publish': *éscht / hät publiziert*, or with III-class verbs like *entwécklò* 'to develop': *éscht / hät entwécklòt*. In addition, it must be emphasized that also etymological weak verbs like *spreite* 'to spread' have adopted the I<sub>s</sub>-Class-Rule and display the forms: *éscht gspreaden* 'is / was spread' / *hät gspreadet* 'has spread / spread'.

The distribution of the participles in Gressoney is particularly interesting because it results from a language change which does not have a reductive effect on the Germanic strong and weak classes in contrast to what is commonly observed in the rest of the family. As is well known, etymological strong verbs normally shift to the weak class, as shown by the Middle English preterite *healp* which is remodeled as *helped*, etc., while the opposite change is only sporadically found (cf. Fertig 2020: 207). As an extreme case of this general tendency, Afrikaans has completely dispensed with the morphological ballast provided by different ICs and verbs follow the same inflectional pattern.

### 3.1 Verbal periphrases and complexification

Far from being reductive, the change observed in Gressoney shows that in fact IC assignment has grown in complexity to the extent that most IC I verbs have developed two different ways of forming the past participle depending on a clear distribution. Periphrases containing the auxiliary BE trigger strong inflection of the past participle, while the selection of HAVE implies weak inflection of the participle. The latter is promoted to a general property of the system to the extent that it is uniformly adopted throughout all verbal classes. This brings along a clear advantage in terms of what Wurzel (1984) labels extra-morphological motivation of ICs. Accordingly, with the exception of a handful of verbs which only display the weak form, most IC I verbs are now characterized by a selective form of the participle in dependence of the morphosyntactic environment. Since in periphrastic constructions taking HAVE the past participles remain uninflected, the focal difference between IC I verbs and the others is overtly – i.e. via inflectional markers – expressed only where the past participles display agreement markers. It's this extra-morphological motivation – i.e. the occurrence of BE triggering agreement – which decides for IC membership and is expressed by the strong form of the past participle.

### 3.2 Syntax-driven complexification as a response to ballast

Such a syntax-driven complexification can be seen as a response to the general tendency towards the reduction of the strong/weak class distinction found in the Germanic languages. Such a change counteracted the loss of IC distinction which is completely dismissed in Afrikaans as a useless ballast, where this loss has left behind a considerable number of residues of the strong IC in terms of allomorphic variants of the participle when the latter is used as a predicative adjective: *Dit is (\*deur die polisie) verbode* 'That is forbidden (\*by the police)', in contrast to its use in the passive periphrasis: *Dit is deur die polisie verbied* 'That has been/was forbidden by the police'. Instead of the chaotic and totally idiosyncratic picture observed in Afrikaans (cf. Donaldson 1993: 259), I class verbs in Titsch display a clear-cut distribution, where the distinction has acquired a new extra-morphological motivation provided by the morphosyntactic environment in connection with the occurrence of overt agreement.

## 4 ICs as ballast or resource?

Such a dialectic tension between dismissing ICs as a useless ballast or exploiting them as an important resource within the lexicon (cf. Enger 2014 for a discussion) lies behind the actual distribution of ICs in Titsch. The solution adopted there, which clearly stands in contrast to the massive reduction observed in Afrikaans, is interesting because it exploits information of syntactic nature which is generally

considered to be outside of the reach of ICs and actually provides empirical evidence that the latter need not necessarily be the case: ICs can also be accessed by and wired to their morphosyntactic environment. This paves the way for a new consideration of periphrastic structures within inflectional paradigms (cf. in this regard Spencer 2001, Ackerman, Stump & Webelhut 2011).

Finally, Titsch is characterized – like Afrikaans – by massive language contact and is even exposed to significant processes of language decay. However, this did not bring about a simplification leading to the loss of a dysfunctional morphological ballast. The other aspect of the sociolinguistic milieu in which Titsch is immersed, namely its isolation in Romance-speaking surroundings, is likely to have favoured the processes of remotivation leading to the actual complex distribution of ICs. In this light, contact does not necessarily imply simplification, but can also lead to complexification if accompanied by isolation (cf. Baechler 2016).

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