

The Romance plural isogloss and linguistic change: A comparative study of Romance nouns

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Abstract

Romance nouns show a well-known morphological isogloss. There are two groups of languages: those pluralizing by suffixing -s (such as Spanish), and those pluralizing by changing the quality of the final vowel (such as Italian). In this paper, I propose an explanation of this isogloss. More precisely, I argue that the cross-linguistic diversity within Romance depends on morpho-phonological parameters on the structure of the noun. These parameters consist of language-particular restrictions on the form of the (nominal) roots and the exponents of gender and number. © 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Romance nouns display a well-known isogloss with respect to the expression of the plural. There are two groups of languages: those that pluralize by adding the suffix -s, and those that pluralize by changing the quality of the final vowel of the noun. Table 1 below illustrates such an isogloss providing examples from Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian and Romanian.¹

(1)	Romance noun plural isogloss				
Portuguese	Spanish	French	Italian	Romanian	
[loβ ^u]	[loβos]	/lɔz/, [lɔ] ²	[lupi]	[lup]	'wolves'

Literature on historical linguistics (cf. among others Tagliavini, 1972:131–139) has explained this situation by distinguishing a Western Romania (including Pt, Es, Fr, etc.) from an Eastern Romania (including It, Ro, etc.).³

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¹ I use the following abbreviations: Pt = Portuguese, Es = Spanish, Fr = French, It = Italian, Ro = Romanian, F = feminine, M = masculine, Num = number, sg = singular, pl = plural, Nom = nominative, Gen = genitive, Dat = dative, Acc = accusative, Voc = vocative and Abl = ablative.

² French [lɔ], spelled *leu*, is used only in the following idiom: *à la queue leu-leu* 'one-by-one line'. The plural *leus* existed in Old French. Modern French borrowed the form [lu], spelled *loup*, from Occitan. The phonemic transcription /lɔz/ is necessary to show the plural morpheme /z/, which surfaces only in the well-known context of *liaison* (Encrevé, 1988; Dell, 1973). I return to French plural in section 3.2.1.

³ Following a comment of an anonymous reviewer, I believe it is worth mentioning that the split between Eastern and Western Romania is a philological generalization based mainly on the existence of two isoglosses. The first one involves the above-mentioned plural in nouns. The other consists of the lenition of intervocalic voiceless stops, occurring only in Western Romania: Latin *ROTAM* 'wheel' > *rođa* (Pt), *rueda* (Sp), *roue* (Fr) vs. *ruota* (It), *roată* (Ro).

The Italian peninsula is cut into two parts: Northern Italy belongs to Western Romania, and Southern Italy to Eastern Romania. The isogloss goes from Massa to Senigallia (cf. Wartburg, 1936). Modern Italian is the result of vernacular Tuscan, thus belonging to Eastern Romania.

In this paper, I propose an explanation of the morphological isogloss. More precisely, I argue that this cross-linguistic diversity within Romance depends on morpho-phonological parameters on the structure of the noun. These parameters consist of language-particular restrictions on the form of (nominal) roots and on the exponents of gender and number. For the sake of clarity, I repeat the two main goals of this paper below:

- (2) Goals of the paper
 - a. To show that Romance noun structures share a unique set of functional categories.
 - b. To show how parameters on the structure of the noun account for cross-linguistic diversity.

The analyses presented in this paper are consistent with a syntactic approach to word formation, such as Distributed Morphology (Embick, 2010; Halle and Marantz, 1993; Marantz, 1995, 1997). In this theory, words are built in the syntax and each terminal node corresponds to a morpheme.⁴ Morphemes are feature matrices devoid of phonological content. The phonological exponents of each morpheme are inserted through an operation called *spell-out*. In addition, I adopt the general framework of Government Phonology (Kaye et al., 1985, 1990), and the more specific CV option (Lowenstamm, 1996; Scheer, 2004). Following Bendjaballah and Haiden (2008), I assume that each exponent surfaces according to one of the following phonological types:

- | | | | | |
|-----|--------------|-------------|---------------------------|------------|
| (3) | a. Segmental | b. Skeletal | c. Segmental and skeletal | d. Silence |
| | ka | | k a | ∅ |
| | | | | |
| | | CV | C V | |

In the first case, the exponent consists only of a sequence of (auto)segments. In an autosegmental framework, a segment is audible only if it is associated with a skeletal tier. Thus, exponents of type (3a) are not audible unless they find C and/or V positions. Conversely, type (3b) consists of a CV unit, and no segments. This is an exclusively skeletal type. Type (3c) is complex, i.e. a fully audible sequence of segments. Finally, (3d) consists of a null exponent, i.e. a phonological zero.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I present the historical explanation of the isogloss and my hypothesis on the origin of the vocalic plural. Italian is used as a case study. Section 3 shows the parametric choices made by each individual language with respect to the internal organization of the noun structure. I present first Latin nouns, then three case studies: French, Spanish and Italian nouns. Each language exemplifies a particular situation of the evolution from Latin nouns. Finally, section 4 concludes.

2. The isogloss

This section is divided into two parts. The first presents the traditional hypothesis concerning the origin of the isogloss; the second illustrates my own proposal, based on a particular phonetic evolution of the Acc marker -s.

2.1. The historical explanation of the isogloss

The situation shown in (1) originates, diachronically, from the Latin declensional system. It is traditionally accepted that Romance nouns derive from Latin Acc as far as singular is concerned, as shown in the table below⁵:

(4)	Singular nouns in Latin and Romance					
Latin	Portuguese	Spanish	French ⁶	Italian	Romanian	
Nom PONS	*	*	*	*	*	
ACC PONTEM	[põnt ⁹]	[pwente]	[põ]	[ponte]	[pod]	

The pattern shown in (4) accounts for the overwhelming majority of singular nouns in Romance.

⁴ Specific operations such as Fusion, Merger and Fission can change the correspondence between a terminal node and a given morpheme. Only Fission will be introduced, cf. section 3.1.

⁵ Latin nouns are spelled in small caps; vocalic length is marked by a dash on the vowel.

⁶ Latin COMES (Nom), COMITEM (Acc) 'mate' > Fr [kõt] 'count, earl' removes any doubt: French nouns continue Latin Acc forms. See below, fn 7.

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