Typological Divergence in Plural Formation between Latin and Gallo-Romance

John Charles Smith
University of Oxford

A general consensus concerning the evolution of Latin into Romance is that it involves a consistent shift in morphosyntactic typology, sometimes expressed in the over-simplistic formula: 'Latin is synthetic, Romance is analytic'; more subtly and accurately, Coseriu (1988) argues that, whilst Latin is essentially synthetic, Romance languages retain synthetic exponence for non-relational categories, whilst innovating by adopting analytic exponence for relational categories.

This paper examines a single phenomenon (plural formation in nouns) in a single branch of Romance (Gallo-Romance: i.e., French, Occitan, and Franco-Provençal) and shows that, contrary to claims made at the 'macrolinguistic' level, at this 'microlinguistic' level there is no coherent typological evolution between Latin and the modern languages. Dryer (2005a; 2005b), examining a sample of 957 languages, distinguishes eight mechanisms of plural formation — in descending order of frequency: plural suffix; plural word; plural prefix; no distinct plural; plural clitic; reduplication of stem; change of stem; plural tone. Most Latin nouns form their plural suffixally, (some give the impression of having no distinct plural — compare nom. sg. RES 'thing', nom. pl. RES 'things' — but this is true only of the nominative; if all case-forms are taken into account, singular and plural have distinct suffixal paradigms). Gallo-Romance, in contrast, arguably manifests all the types of plural formation enumerated by Dryer. Suffixal plurals of the Latin type are still frequent; they may involve a zero/suffix alternation, as in some Occitan and Norman varieties, or alternation between singular and plural suffixes, as in other varieties of Occitan and Franco-Provençal (Ronjat 1937). In contrast, following regular sound change (chiefly loss of final [-s]), most nouns no longer have a distinct plural form in standard French, many French dialects, and some Occitan varieties. However, plurality may often be marked by another element in the phrase, especially a determiner (Epstein 1994) — compare French [ləʃa] 'the cat' vs. [leʃa] 'the cats' — corresponding to Dryer's mechanism of a 'plural word' (which need not have the sole function of marking the plural). The few audible plurals in these varieties are best analysed as involving a change of stem (compare French [œj] 'eye', [jø] 'eyes'). Sauzet (2011) has shown that singular and plural in some Occitan varieties are distinguished by different phonological tones. I shall further demonstrate that the sandhi phenomenon of liaison in French (Encrevé 1988) can be analysed as creating a prefixal plural form in certain contexts and a plural clitic in others, and that reduplication is involved in the formation of emphatic plurals in several Gallo-Romance varieties.

Detailed study of the data shows that various phonological and morphological changes have resulted in great typological divergence in the exponence of plural number amongst the varieties traditionally referred to collectively as 'Gallo-Romance'. So, whilst this term may be a convenient label for the Romance languages which emerged from the Latin spoken in Gaul, we should be wary of interpreting it as implying that the varieties involved have necessarily undergone a consistent typological development from Latin and now possess typological unity or even typological coherence.

References

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