

Lexical accent in Romance: The back and forth of fixed and free stress

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The present study sketches the evolution from Latin stress to modern Romance, exploring how lexical accent has arisen in some systems (Italian, Spanish), and how it got lost in others (French, Occitan, at least in certain varieties or in certain word classes). An optimality-theoretic analysis is developed, drawing on standard constraints on foot structure to account for regular stress and on lexically-indexed constraints for the representation of lexical accent. It is shown how the parametric variation attested in modern Romance may have arisen from a small number of constraints on foot structure via constraint indexing and constraint re-ranking.

While Classical Latin stress is said to be predictable on phonological grounds alone, taking into account the moraic structure of the penultimate syllable (Mester 1994), the stress system necessarily had to change in later stages of Proto-Romance, due to the loss of underlying segmental, and in particular vocalic length, which made stress assignment to an open penultima (containing a previously long vowel) largely unpredictable (Bullock 2001). In general, the locus of the stressed syllable in a word has not changed in the course of diachronic evolution (Wanner 1979).

Italian may be said to continue the Latin system, at least to some degree (e.g., Krämer 2009; D'Imperio & Rosenthal 1999). The Spanish system, in contrast, has undergone significant reorganisation (for recent proposals cf., e.g., Roca 2006; Ohannesian 2004; Harris 1995; Oltra-Massuet & Arregi 2005). In both languages, exceptions to regular stress assignment persist, so that a significant proportion of lexical items must be specified for lexical accent. For Italian, the present analysis assumes that paroxytonic stress on words with a light penultima must be lexically specified, while in Spanish it is mainly the proparoxytonic pattern that is based on lexical accent. In Italian, but not in Spanish, morphemes specified with a lexical accent are particularly abundant in derivational morphology. In both Spanish and Italian, stress in verb forms is heavily morphologized and cannot be assigned on the basis of metrical constraints alone; rather, paradigmatic structure has an important role to play (Meinschaefer 2011). The reasons for these changes from regular stress to lexical accent in some domains of the lexicon are mostly tied to patterns of vowel syncope and apocope, which had differential effects in Italian and Spanish, to be outlined in more detail in the proposed presentation.

In French, apocope has been far more productive than in Italian and Spanish, which has led to uniformly final stress, i.e., loss of lexical accent, throughout the lexicon (Di Cristo 1999; Di Cristo 2000). In particular, word-final apocope, together with other phonological processes that lead to the loss of much verbal inflectional morphology, may be said to be responsible for the loss of lexical accent in French. Finally, some varieties of Occitan are similar to Italian and Spanish in that they preserve lexical accent, in particular in proparoxytonic words (Roca 1999), while others have undergone substantial reorganization, mostly due to the re-introduction of distinctive vowel length as a result of compensatory lengthening. As an example for such varieties with an innovative fixed stress system, this presentation will consider the Lemosin variety (Javanaud 1981; Chabaneau 1876).

To account for these observations, the present study develops an optimality-theoretic analysis of Romance stress assignment which is based on standard constraints on metrical structure building (Kager 2007), complemented with the assumption that general constraints on metrical structure can also be lexically-indexed (Pater 2000; Pater 2009), which then accounts for lexical accent in specific domains of the lexicon.

Such domains may be based on lexical category (e.g., verbs as opposed to nouns and adjectives), on morphological function (e.g., derivational affixes), or on etymology (e.g., learned words of Latin origin). The crucial advantage of the proposed analysis lies in the fact that it can account for the patterns of regular stress and lexical accent in the Romance languages mentioned above via simple re-ranking of the same three basic constraints on metrical structure building.

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