

Workshop

Theme vowels in V(P) Structure and beyond

Background

A characteristic feature of (Proto-)Indo-European verb morphology is the occurrence of formatives traditionally known as theme vowels (*thematischer Vokal*, Brugmann 1933: 490; cf. Meier-Brügger 2010: 290–311 and Oltra-Massuet 2020 for extensive literature reviews), as exemplified by Homeric Greek verb forms like (1), where “ Θ ” glosses the thematic formative (cf. Watkins 1998).

(Homeric Greek)

- (1) a. *líssōmai*
b. *lit- jo- o- mai*
ROOT- Θ - SBJV- MEDP.1SG
'I will entreat (sbd.).'

A grammatical contribution commonly ascribed to formatives like *-jo-* in (1-b) is that of building a verb stem, here informally intended as a grammatical unit that can combine either with Tense/Mood/Aspect (yielding a well-formed inflected verb form) or with category-changing morphemes (e.g. yielding a well-formed noun stem). In this function, thematic formatives productively surface in those contemporary Indo-European language families that have preserved or re-created a sufficiently rich verb morphology, e.g. Romance and Slavic, here exemplified by Italian (2) and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (B/C/S) (3) respectively.

(Italian)

- (2) *rid- e- v- a- mo*
laugh- Θ - IMPF- Θ - 1PL
'We used to laugh.'

(B/C/S)

- (3) a. *ugrađuje*
b. *u- grad- i- u- je- Ø*
PFX- build- Θ - IPFV- Θ - 3SG
'S/He is building (sth.) in.'

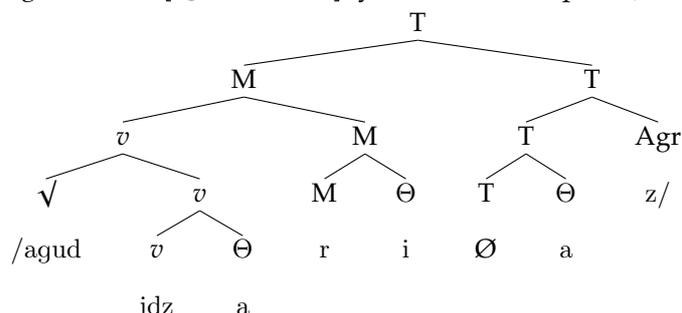
Aronoff (1994: 31–87) worked out an analysis of Latin theme vowels which has come to be dominant in formal morphological theory (and which also reflects insights of

traditional grammar): the theme vowels appearing in verb conjugations are empty morphs, inflectional class markers devoid of syntactic and semantic content, formatives pertaining to morphology as an autonomous component of grammar. This approach can be extended to nominal theme vowels (distinctly appearing e.g. in Attic Greek and Latin), and predicts patterns of distribution (potentially) idiosyncratically cross-cutting phonological, syntactic and semantic categories, referred to as morphemes (cf. a.o. Luis & Bermúdez-Otero 2016).

The influential work by Oltra-Massuet (1999, 2000), couched within Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994), contributed a novel view on the topic. The author shows that thematic formatives in Catalan verb and noun morphology directly and systematically interact with syntactic and phonological structure. The resulting account explains the distribution of theme vowels in terms of markedness, correctly predicting the attested stress patterns (cf. also Oltra-Massuet & Arregi 2005 on Spanish), and in general enables an understanding of thematic formatives as a morphological signature of Extended Projection (in Grimshaw’s 2005: 1–71 sense). More precisely, theme vowels are modeled as dissociated morphemes, adjoined to F(unctional) heads at Morphology after (core) syntactic computation. The resulting well-formed structure for a Catalan verb form like *aguditzaries* ‘you would sharpen’ is exemplified in (4-b) (cf. Oltra-Massuet 2000: 13–14).

(Catalan)

- (4) a. *aguditzaries* [əgudidzə'riəs] ‘you would sharpen’ (2sg Conditional)
 b.



More recently, the characterization of theme vowels as purely “ornamental” pieces of morphology has also been challenged in a variety of contributions on Romance and Slavic (Antonyuk-Yudina et al. 2020, Arsenijević 2020, Fábregas 2017, Kastner & Martin 2020, Mišmaš & Simonović 2021, Taraldsen Medová & Wiland 2018; see also the discussion in Oltra-Massuet 2000: 20). In particular, some patterns of alternation have been noticed that point to a correlation between theme vowel (selection) and argument-structure. This was most arguably the case already in ancient Indo-European languages (cf. Meier-Brügger 2010: 301–307, Watkins 1998, Yakubovich 2014), and similar correlations have been pointed out for Dravidian, too (cf. Lehmann 1993: 48–90 on the distinction between “affective” and “effective” conjugations in Tamil). The relevant data include the existence of doublets with two distinct structures in syntax and semantics, like (5) in Polish (Jabłońska 2004, 2007; Taraldsen Medová & Wiland 2018), (6) in Serbian and (7) in Slovenian (Arsenijević 2020, Marvin 2002), (8) in French (Kastner & Martin 2020) and (9) in Italian.

(Polish)

- (5) a. *mroz- i- ć*
cold- Θ - INF
'to freeze (sth.)'
b. *marz- ną- ć*
cold- Θ - INF
'to get cold'

(Serbian)

- (6) a. *bel- i- ti*
white- Θ - INF
'to bleach (sth.)'
b. *bel- e- ti*
white- Θ - INF
'to get white'

(Slovenian)

- (7) a. *rumen- i- ti*
yellow- Θ - INF
'to make (sth.) yellow'
b. *rumen- e- ti*
yellow- Θ - INF
'to get yellow'

(French)

- (8) a. *af- fainéant- i- r*
PFX- lazy- Θ - INF
'to make sbd. lazy'
b. *fainéant- e- r*
lazy- Θ - INF
'to idle, to laze around'

(Italian)

- (9) a. *in- cener- a- re*
PFX- ash- Θ - INF
'to cover sth. with ash'
b. *in- cener- i- re*
PFX- ash- Θ - INF
'to incinerate sth.'

Although the interpretation of one of the alternants is sometimes not fully predictable, at least one of the alternating theme vowels is productively associated with a distinct argument-structure by the speakers. For example, Kastner & Martin (2020) provide experimental evidence that speakers of French consistently tend to associate a change-of-state meaning to *i*-conjugation verbs, a fact that is further confirmed by the overriding of non-frequent lexicographed meanings (e.g. *bonn-i-r*, whose lexicographed meaning 'to tell good stories' is overridden by the meaning 'to become better'). Variation in

interpretation, here understood as “allosemy” (Marantz 2013), is in fact predicted to occur –together with variation in form, i.e. traditional allomorphy– depending on the derivational makeup of a given complex word, and specifically depending on the (absence of a) locality relation between a category-typing functional head and a root. The Romance data in (8) and (9) also suggest that thematic formatives interact with prefixes in a non-trivial way, an issue which is related to the different composition of the VP/*v*P in verb-framed vs. satellite-framed languages (cf. Acedo-Matellán & Mateu 2013; Acedo-Matellán 2016; Folli & Harley 2020; Talmy 1985, 1991, 2000; Zubizarreta & Oh 2007).

A principled theory of the spectrum of grammatical contribution of theme vowels at the levels of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics is a desideratum also with respect to more specific areas of research. The study of grammaticalization paths from/to/of thematic formatives is one such area, and hypotheses can be easily tested here, given the availability of both data from specific language families (like Latin and Indo-Aryan) and analyses of the history of single formatives (cf. e.g. Schwarze 2009 on the development of Latin *-sk-* in French and Italian; Filipponio 2016 on the re-emergence of the Late Latin suffix *-idi-* as a thematic formative in Romanian, Istriot and Corsican). Another empirical domain involves language contact scenarios, in particular with respect to the mechanics of (re-)structuring of conjugation and declension classes (cf. Breu 1999 on Molise Slavic and Luís 2008 on Portuguese-based Creoles and Spanish Romani).

Call for papers

The workshop aims at bringing together researchers interested in the grammatical properties of theme vowels and thematic formatives, focusing not only on their morpho-phonology (as in the more traditional historical-comparative literature), but also on their contribution at the levels of argument structure, syntax and semantics. Contributions from generative as well as from formal approaches to morphology are particularly welcome. The issues at the heart of this workshop include, but are not limited to the following:

- syntactic and post-syntactic interaction of thematic formatives with categories in the VP/*v*P
- role played by thematic formatives in argument structure (alternations) and in semantic composition
- dynamics of the interplay between thematic formatives and phonological structure
- patterns of allomorphy involving thematic formatives (either as a trigger or as a target)
- patterns of allosemy involving thematic formatives
- parallels and differences between thematic formatives in V(P) and N(P)
- (constraints on) distribution of thematic formatives in lexical categories

- origin and dismantlement of thematic formative systems
- re-structuring of thematic formative systems in language contact

General information:

- workshop dates: April, 22nd (Thursday) and 23rd (Friday) 2021
- workshop place: online (via Webex: link tba)
- organization committee: Stefano Quaglia (Institut für Romanistik, University of Graz), Boban Arsenijević, Svitlana Antonyuk-Yudina, Stefan Milosavljević, Marko Simonović (Institut für Slawistik, University of Graz), Petra Mišmaš (University of Nova Gorica), Predrag Kovačević (University of Novi Sad)

Abstract submission:

- Abstracts (anonymous, max. 2 A4-pages inclusive of examples, tables, figures and references) for regular talks (45 minutes presentation + 15 minutes discussion) must be submitted via the EasyChair submission webpage:
<https://easychair.org/conferences/?conf=thv2021>
- Deadline for submission: March, 21st, 2021
- Notification of acceptance: April, 4th, 2021

Invited speakers:

- Itamar Kastner (University of Edinburgh) and Fabienne Martin (HU, Berlin)
- Ora Matushansky (CNRS/Paris VIII)
- Isabel Oltra-Massuet (Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona)
- Michal Starke (Masaryk University, Brno)

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Workshop website: tba

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