**Closing in on overabundance:**

**Combining corpus-based and experimental methods**

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Overabundance has been well described in Italian verb morphology (Thornton 2011, 2012), however how this rivalry between competing forms came about, why (and to what extent) these forms are still in competition, remains unclear, although different degrees of diachronic, diatopic and stylistic variation play a role (Thornton 2011, Da Tos 2013 and Maiden 2018). This paper addresses the realization of overabundance in Italian third conjugation verbs. These verbs in ­­-*ire* are a classic example of overabundance: some verbs have an augment in addition to a theme vowel which can be obligatory (1a), absent (1b) or optional (1c) in the inflectional paradigm.

(1) a. finire ‘end’ > (io) finisco ‘(I) finish’

b. dormire ‘sleep’ > (io) dormo ‘(I) sleep’

c. applaudire ‘applaud’ > (io) applaudisco vs. (io) applaudo ‘(I) applaud’

According to recent theoretical analyses, -*isc*- is a “purely morphological” (Aronoff 1994) element that functions as a strong identity marker for third conjugation verbs (Da Tos 2013, and Goryczka 2022). Despite this heightened iconicity and the high frequency of verbs of type (1a), Thornton (2011, 2012) observes that in Contemporary Italian overabundant cells containing the -*isc*- augment are rare. Her data thus point to a gradual loss of overabundance, suggesting that in this case overabundance is “just a transitional phase during diachronic change”.

We examine this claim by looking at this phenomenon from two angles: diachronically, to understand to what extent there is ongoing change, experimentally, we investigate whether there is a (processing) advantage for -*isc*- as a conjugation class identity marker. For this purpose, we conducted a corpus study, examining the occurrence of type (1c) verbs in two complementary diachronic corpora of Italian, MIDIA (Iacobini et al. 2014) and CODIT (Micheli 2022), focusing the 18 verbs investigated by Thornton (2011) documenting realized overabundance in diachrony (Aigro and Vihman 2023). Second, to test to what extent -*isc*- is perceived as identity marker by speakers today, we investigated preferences (i) in doublets as in (1c), and (ii) a potential extension of the augment to all third conjugations verbs through an acceptability judgement task. Speakers were asked to rate constructed sentences in present indicative containing each verb either with or without the augment, in 1SG or 3PL (e.g., *Mento* vs. *Mentisco soprattutto a me stesso/a*. ‘I mostly lie to myself’). If the augment functions as identity marker, we expect a preference for the verbs with augment especially for learners of Italian, as this may help in the identification of the conjugation class.

First results from our diachronic corpus study suggest a higher degree of overabundance than observed for Contemporary Italian, which supports the idea of overabundance being a transitory phenomenon. This is further corroborated by the results from the acceptability experiment: native speakers show a clear preference for augment-free verb forms. However, the L2 data show that at early stages of language learning the augment is indeed used to identify conjugation class. Overall, this appears to indicate that it is the speakers (different speaker groups) themselves that ensure that overabundance remains fairly stable over time.

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