

Latin deponents and Romance unaccusatives

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Introduction. This paper considers the synchronic properties of the Latin deponent verb class, and its relation to the unaccusative class in Romance, against the backdrop of the general development of passive and perfect morphosyntax from Latin to Romance.

Latin deponent verbs, though “active in meaning”, took the same morphological endings as passives and, identically to passives, had periphrastic perfects formed from *esse* “to be” plus the past participle:

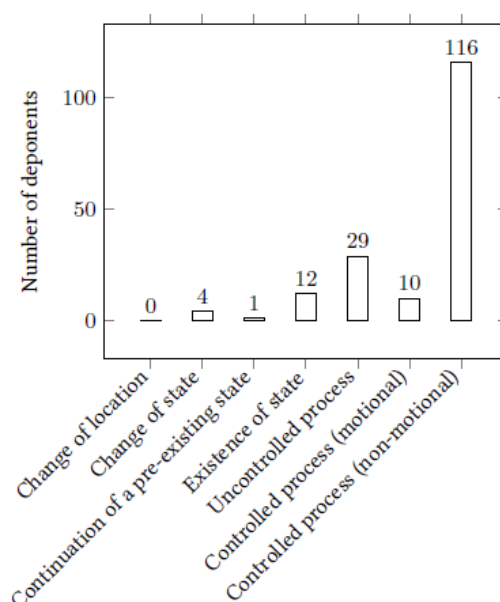
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| (1) a. Latin passive:
<i>am-or</i>
love-1S
“I am loved” | b. Latin deponent
<i>mori-or</i>
die-1S
“I die” |
| (2) a. Latin passive
<i>amatus sum</i>
loved am
“I have been loved” | b. Latin deponent
<i>mortuus sum</i>
died am
“I have died” |

Romance unaccusative verbs also form their perfect tenses using BE plus the past participle (all Romance examples are taken from modern French):

- (3) Romance unaccusative
je suis mort
I am died
“I have died”

These are typically held to have developed from the Latin deponent perfect. Here, this viewpoint is upheld, but it is argued that the development is not as straightforward as may be assumed. A timescale for the changes concerning passives/deponents/unaccusatives is also proposed

The relation of deponents and unaccusatives. In modern Romance languages with an auxiliary split, BE verbs are prototypically verbs of change (of location or state); stative verbs sometimes also take BE as do some other verbs in restricted contexts (Sorace 2000). Similar patterns can be observed in other Romance varieties historically – Old Spanish and Old French had systems similar to present-day Italian, as will be illustrated. However, it is shown numerically that (a) most Classical Latin deponents were not verbs of change or state (e.g. *loqui* “to speak”; such deponents include the sorts of verbs which are, in fact, least likely to take BE in Romance, as shown by comparison with Sorace’s Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy in the figure to the right), and (b) most verbs of change or state in Classical Latin were not deponent – including ancestors of present-day unaccusative verbs (e.g. *venire* “to come” > *venir*). Thus, we ought not to draw a straightforward correspondence between deponents and unaccusatives (cf. Migliori 2016). Deponents do group into various loose semantic classes (e.g. verbs relating to speech; to argument, fighting and war; to acts of procurement, to business transactions, etc.), though the composition is much less regular than that of the unaccusatives.



I suggest that the visibility of deponent morphology meant speakers could tolerate high levels of semantic unsystematicity in the make-up of the class. Once this morphology was lost (and the only morphosyntactic cue to class membership was the periphrastic form of the perfect), speakers sought out new, more regular patterns to define the class and reanalysed it along “unaccusative” lines: leading to major alterations in the composition of the class. The high frequency of the change-of-state deponents *mortuus est* “has died” and *natus est* “has been born” may have played a major role in determining the direction this reanalysis took.

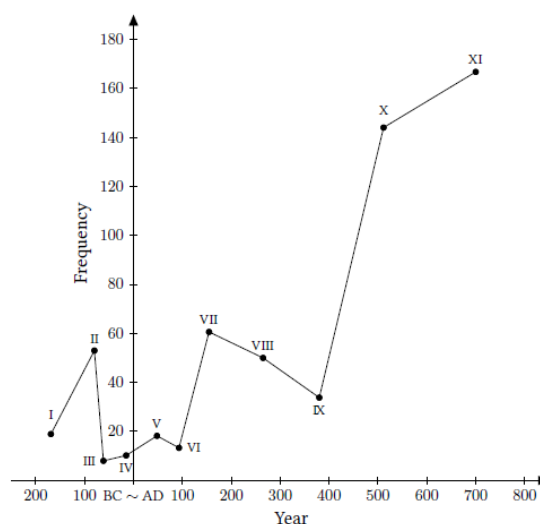
Chronology. An argument is also presented for the chronology of the reanalysis of the BE perfect as characteristic of the unaccusative class rather than of deponents, drawing on three main strands of evidence:

(I) Various forms in Latin and Romance are formed with an imperfective form of BE plus the past participle:

- (i) The Latin periphrastic passive (e.g. *amatus sum* “I have been loved”) – PERFECTIVE in sense;
- (ii) The Romance periphrastic passive (e.g. *je suis aimé* “I am loved”) – IMPERFECTIVE in sense;
- (iii) The Latin deponent perfect (e.g. *mortuus sum* “I have died”) – PERFECTIVE in sense;
- (iv) The Romance unaccusative perfect (e.g. *je suis mort* “I have died”) – PERFECTIVE in sense.

There is thus a discontinuity in the passive ((i)>(ii), shift from perfective to imperfective meaning) which is not found in the shift from deponents to unaccusatives ((iii)>(iv), perfective sense retained). This suggests the unaccusative perfect (iv) developed from the deponent perfect (iii) – i.e. that the unaccusative/deponent class came to be morphosyntactically distinct from the passive – *before* the Romance periphrastic passive (ii) developed from the Latin (i). I argue that the shift (i)>(ii) took place prior to the loss of the synthetic passive (this was only lost once the new periphrastic imperfective passive developed) – this loss can be dated in Gaul to around end of the seventh century (Herman 2002). Thus the transformation of the deponent class into the unaccusatives must also have preceded this date.

(II) Independent evidence suggests that deponents ceased to take passive morphology in around the fifth and sixth centuries: based on evidence from Flobert (1975), it is shown that it is in this period that deponents start to be very used much more frequently with active morphology (see figure to right), and (a little later) that historically non-deponent actives start to be written with deponent/passive endings (which suggests writers no longer have any clear idea of when to deploy these endings as they have ceased to be used in speech). This precedes the loss of passive morphology more generally (see above), again suggesting the deponent class was lost before the “new” Romance passive developed.



(III) The reanalysis of the deponent perfect as a general periphrastic BE perfect with unaccusatives would have been reinforced by the development of the HAVE perfect (HAVE + past participle, e.g. *j'ai mangé* “I have eaten”) with transitives and unergatives, which is already incipient in the classical period (Migliori 2016).

References

- Flobert, P. (1975). *Les verbes déponents latins des origines à Charlemagne*. Paris: Belles lettres.
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