

Morphologization of phonological vowel length in some Romance varieties of Northeastern Italy

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This paper focuses on a case of morphologization of vowel length found in some persons of the present subjunctive and present indicative forms of verbs of the first conjugation in some Romance varieties spoken in Northeastern Italy (namely in the Friulian variety of the Lower Valley of Gorto and in a surrounding area whose geographic extension is not known due to the limited dialectological data available).

The varieties of Friulian spoken in the Lower Vally of Gorto display a phenomenon that is not known in most dialects of the same language: in the rhizotonic persons of the present tense in the subjunctive mood and the 1PS of the present of indicative of the verbs of the first conjugation, the stem vowel is long, while it is short in all other persons of the same tenses. Crucially, one should note that the length of a vowel of the stem is distinctive; for example, the length of the vowel of the stem is the only difference between the 3PL of the present tense in the indicative mood [a 'nadiŋ] ‘they swim’ and in the subjunctive mood [a 'na:diŋ] ‘they swim’.

While a satisfactory synchronic formalization of this phenomenon requires further analysis, the diachronic process that lead to its birth can be reconstructed with a good degree of approximation. The presence of the contrast between long and short stem vowels in present-day Friulian is the effect of a series of changes that took place between the 14th and the 18th centuries (Maschi, 2000; Roseano, 2015). Such changes can be described in terms of analogical readjustments and are briefly summarized in Table 1.

In the pre-change stage (14th century), only a few verbal forms displayed a long vowel in the stem (Table 1, left panel). This long vowel was due to a phonological lengthening process that has been described in detail for Friulian (Baroni & Vanelli, 2000; Finco, 2007; Hualde, 1990; Prieto, 1992; Torres-Tamarit, 2015; Vanelli, 1998), and that is still active nowadays. In the 15th century, the phonological nature of this lengthening in the conjugation of verbs started to become obscure due to a morphological analogical readjustment: in order to have the same number of syllables in all verbal forms, an epenthetic vowel was added to the 1SG of the indicative (Table 1, central panel). After six subsequent changes, which are not reported in Table 1 due to space constraints, the final result of the de-phonologization of the long vowel in the stem of the verb is the full morphologization of the vocalic quantity in that context (Table 1, right panel).

The final result of this process is, thus, that a feature (i.e. vowel length) that was originally due to a phonological process has moved from the phonological field to the morphological domain.

	14th century				15th century				18th century			
	verb [ne'ta:]		verb [na'da:]		verb [ne'ta:]		verb [na'da:]		verb [ne'ta:]		verb [na'da:]	
	IND	SBJV	IND	SBJV								
1 SG	['net]	['net]	['na:t]	['na:t]	['neti]	['net]	['na:di]	['na:t]	['ne:ti]	['ne:ti]	['na:di]	['na:di]
2 SG	['netas]	['nets]	['nadas]	['na:ts]	['netas]	['nets]	['nadas]	['na:ts]	['netas]	['ne:tis]	['nadas]	['na:dis]
3 SG	['neta]	['net]	['nada]	['na:t]	['neta]	['net]	['nada]	['na:t]	['neta]	['ne:ti]	['nada]	['na:di]
3 PL	['netiŋ]	['netiŋ]	['nadiŋ]	['nadiŋ]	['netiŋ]	['netiŋ]	['nadiŋ]	['nadiŋ]	['netiŋ]	['ne:tiŋ]	['nadiŋ]	['na:diŋ]

Table 1. Selected verbal forms in the Friulian variety of the Lower Valley of Gorto in three stages of the morphologization of vowel quantity.

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