



Ablaut and transitive softening in the Russian verb

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Russian transitive softening as ablaut

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Transitive softening

A kind of mutation arising from a [Cj] cluster in several environments:

- (1) a. pros- i- l- a → [pro*s*ila]
ask TH PAST FSG
*asked, requested*_{FSG}
- b. pros- i- ěn- a → [pro*s*ena]
ask TH PPP FSG
*requested*_{PPP.FSG}

The [CiV] sequence turns into [CjV] and the [Cj] cluster mutates:

	consonant	transitive softening	infinitive	1sg
a.	s, z	š, ž	pros-í-tʲ ‘to beg’	proš-ú ‘ beg-1SG ’
b.	t, d	č, ž	obíd-e-tʲ ‘to offend’	obíž-u ‘ offend-1SG ’
c.	x, k, g	š, č, ž	max-á-tʲ ‘to wave’	maš-ú ‘ wave-1SG ’
d.	p, b, m, v	plʲ blʲ, mlʲ, vlʲ	ľub-í-tʲ ‘to love’	ľubl-ú ‘ love-1SG ’
e.	l, r, n	ľ, rʲ, nʲ	bel-í-tʲ ‘to whiten, tr.’	bel-ú ‘ whiten-1SG ’

See Bethin 1992 for an analysis of this transformation

Transitive softening with the thematic suffix -a-:

Some sixty verbs (non-productive), the usual example is *pisátʲ* ‘to write’ (→ *pišet* ‘writes’)

(1) is expected, given the thematic suffix -i-. (2b) is unexpected, given the thematic suffix -a-:

- (2) a. murlík-a- l- a → [murlíkala]
purr TH PAST FSG
*purred*_{FSG}
- b. murlík-?- ě- t → [murlíčet]
purr TH PRES 3SG
*purr*_{3SG}
- c. na.murlík- a- (ě)n- o → [namurlí*k*ano] (this is a nonce word)
on.purr TH PPP NSG
*full of purring*_{NSG}

Issue: there are **other a-thematic suffixes that do not do this**:

- (3) a. sos- a- l- a → [sosála]
suck TH PAST FSG
*sucked*_{FSG}
- b. sos- a- ě- t → [sosíót]
suck TH PRES 3SG
*suck*_{3SG}
- (4) a. čít- a- l- a → [čitála]
read TH PAST FSG
*sucked*_{FSG}
- b. čít- aj- ě- t → [čitáj*e*t]
read TH PRES 3SG
*read*_{3SG}

Prior research

Intuition: the thematic suffix -a- somehow turns into -i-

Halle 1965: [j] is inserted before an [a] followed by a lax vowel, [a] is deleted because vowels are deleted when they appear before another vowel

Lightner 1965, Lunt 2001: a tense vowel turns into [j] if followed by a lax one

Flier 1972: some vowels turns into glides when followed by some other vowels

Coats and Lightner 1975: the underlying form is -aj-, the vowel is deleted by a minor rule

Bethin 1992, Boyd 1997: an adjustment rule

Rubach and Booij 2001: allomorphy

Proposal: the thematic suffix undergoes ablaut

Non-productive, 26 verbs, most involving one feature value change:

- (5) [α back]: [m*é*let] ‘grind.3SG’ [m*o*lóla] ‘ground.FSG’
- (6) [α ATR]: [b*j*ót] ‘hit.3SG’ [b*í*la] ‘hit.PAST.FSG’

The **featural change can go in both directions** or the **trigger can be either [+PAST] or [-PAST]**:

- (7) [α high] (primarily with underlying yers)
- a. [d*er*ót] ‘tear.3SG’ [d*ra*lá] ‘tore.FSG’
- b. [u*m*rót] ‘will die.3SG’ [u*me*rlá] ‘died.FSG’

More than one feature can be involved (further evidence from the five verbs with the [o]/[i] ablaut):

- (8) [α back] [α ATR]
[p*o*jót] ‘sing.3SG’ [p*é*la] ‘sang.FSG’

The nitty-gritty

The thematic vowel change would involve the same ablaut as (5): fronting (a → e):

- (9) murlík-a-ě-t
↓ ← ABLAUT (link the floating [-front] feature, cf. Wiese 1996)
murlík-e-ě-t
↓ ← GLIDE FORMATION
murlík-j-ě-t
↓ ← MUTATION
[murlíčet]

This way we keep the same thematic suffix -a- and only change one feature

Thematic suffixes should determine the conjugation class, and the second conjugation is characterized by the suffixes [e] and [i]

Before vowels [e] turns into a glide and yield transitive softening: second conjugation e-verbs:

- (10) a. vert e- l- a → [vertéla]
spin TH PAST FSG
*span*_{FSG}
- b. vert- e- ěn- a → [véřena]
spin TH PPP FSG
*spun*_{PPP.FSG}

The same approach would work for the five verbs with the thematic suffix -o-

On the nature of ablaut

Evidence for ablaut triggered by both [+PAST] and [-PAST]: predictable vowel tensing: the back yer [ũ] turns into [i]:

- (11) a. dospát’ ‘to finish sleeping_{PRF}’
b. dos*í*pát’ ‘to finish sleeping_{IMPRF}’

Both verbs in (7) surface with the stem [i] in the secondary imperfective, irrespective of where the yer is lowered:

- (12) a. [d*er*ót] ‘tear.3SG’ [d*ra*lá] ‘tore.FSG’
*razd*ir*átʲ* ‘to tear apart_{IMPRF}’
- b. [u*m*rót] ‘will die.3SG’ [u*me*rla] ‘died.FSG’
*um*ir*átʲ* ‘to die_{IMPRF}’

Assuming that the secondary imperfective operates on the underlying representation, **both [+PAST] and [-PAST] seem to be capable of triggering ablaut**

Some verbs involve the difference of more than one feature between present and past, and a more conservative analysis would postulate an intermediate underlying representation

There is one verb whose behavior suggests the opposite change in the thematic vowel:

- (13) a. rev e- l- a → [revéla]
bellow TH PAST FSG
*bellowed*_{FSG}
- b. rev- ?- ě- t → [revíót]
bellow TH PRES 3SG
*bellows*_{3SG}

Despite the thematic suffix -e- in the past this verb belongs to the first conjugation (and does not undergo transitive softening that would be predicted by the prevocalic *ě*, cf. (9))

Straightforward solution: fronting in the past: underlying -a- to -e-

No evidence for the apophonic path (*pace* Ségéral & Scheer 1998)

Further issues:

- it would be nicer to have only one trigger and different features, but how?
- can the second conjugation -e- also undergo ablaut to yield -i- in the present?
- thematic change: the TS-theme is being replaced by the regular -aj- (4). Can it be the same thematic suffix with and without ablaut?

Summary

Thematic vowel change is ablaut.

Pro: the process is needed anyway, and its other instantiations can explain other instances of thematic vowel changes

Contra: There is no suitable formal account of ablaut that I am aware of.

If we want to connect the conjugation class to the thematic suffix and/or have the proper underlying representation for secondary imperfective formation, **the direction of ablaut would be determined by different suffixes in function of the lexical stem**

This one is (also) for Morris Halle

Disagreement about how to treat TS-verbs was the reason why he and I have never followed up on developing an account of the Russian verbal inflection. I hope he likes this take where he now is. With undying gratitude.



For a detailed handout and references 📄