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Ablaut and transitive softening in the Russian verb

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Transitive softening

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

- (1) a. pros- i- l- a → [prosíla]
ask TH PASTFSG
asked, requested FSG
- b. pros- i- ěn- a → [próšena]
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-ti 'to beg'	proš-ú 'beg-1SG'
b.	t, d	č, ž	obid-e-ti 'to offend'	obíž-u 'offend-1SG'
c.	x, k, g	š, č, ž	max-á-ti 'to wave'	maš-ú 'wave-1SG'
d.	p, b, m, v	plʲ blʲ, mlʲ, vlʲ	ľub-í-ti 'to love'	ľublʲ-ú 'love-1SG'
e.	l, r, n	ľ, rʲ, nʲ	bel-í-ti 'to whiten, tr.'	belʲ-ú 'whiten-1SG'

See Bethin 1992 for an analysis of this transformation

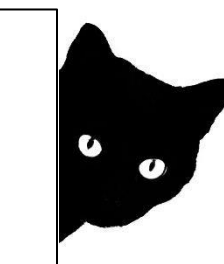
Transitive softening with the thematic suffix -a-

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 → [namurlíkano] (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 PASTFSG
sucked FSG

- b. sos- a- ě- t → [sosíot]
suck TH PRES 3SG
suck 3SG

- (4) a. čit- a- l- a → [čitála]
read TH PASTFSG
sucked FSG

- b. čit- aj- ě- t → [čitájjet]
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 turn 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^élet] 'grind.3SG' [molóla] 'ground.FSG'

- (6) [α ATR]: [bjót] 'hit.3SG' [bíla] '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' [dralá] 'tore.FSG'
b. [umr^ót] 'will die.3SG' [umerlá] 'died.FSG'

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

- (8) [α back] [α ATR]
[pojót] 'sing.3SG' [péla] '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 PASTFSG
span FSG
- b. vert- e- ěn- a → [vérčena]
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. dospátʲ 'to finish sleeping PRF'
b. dospíatʲ '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' [dralá] 'tore.FSG'
razdirátʲ 'to tear apart IMPRF'
- b. [umr^ót] 'will die.3SG' [umerla] 'died.FSG'
umiráatʲ '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 PASTFSG
bellowed FSG
- b. rev- ?- ě- t → [revíot]
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 ↗