Cyclical suppletion in Slavic: What priming effects reveal about velar alternations in Czech and Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian

In this paper, I present results from my psycholinguistics experiment on stem alternations in Czech and Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian that arose as a result of the Common Slavic "Second Palatalisation of Velars", e.g. BCS *momak*M.NOM.SG. 'boy' ~ *momci*M.NOM.PL 'boys'. This resulting stem allomorphy, while initially productive and thus automatic, like many morphonological alternations, would eventually become defunct, as the phonetic motivation for the alternation would be lost on subsequent generations – a situation otherwise known as stem suppletion (e.g. Corbett 2007).

Suppletion has been considered "scandalous" by some morphologists due to its defiance of morphological naturalness (Dressler 1985:97); others wave a flag of caution, calling it "hostile terrain" (Corbett 2007: 8), due to its inability to be neatly captured through rule-based derivation typical of the predominant, 20th-century generative tradition of linguistics (often due to complex diachronic developments, as in the classic case from English go_PRS ~ went_PST [Janda & Joseph 2003: 109]). Nonetheless, despite the significant challenges suppletion poses to linguistic theory, both historical and synchronic linguists continue to be drawn to the enigmatic topic.

In my experiment, I solicited Czech and BCMS native-speaking consultants for online surveys using Ibexfarm, in which I supply suppletive "wugs" (Berko 1958) of my own creation (which deviate from existing Czech and BCMS words solely by one arbitrarily added or swapped segment but which still land squarely in the same phonological neighbourhood that underlies the alternation), e.g. BCS *brog ~ *brozi.

The results of my experiment suggest that suppletion in Slavic can be considered "cyclical", in the sense that irregular patterns in language (like the Czech and BCMS velar alternations) are learnt, unlearnt, and relearnt within a single generation (Steinberg and Sciarini 2006: 31), which directly feeds the cross-generational extension of this cycle. One might ask, why do Czech and BCMS children reincorporate this irregularity in the third and final stage, eschewing a seemingly more reliable, maximally productive system without velar alternation? We need look no further than the notion of statistical preemption (Boyd & Goldberg 2011), which states that "speakers learn not to use a formulation if an alternative formulation with the same function is consistently witnessed" (ibid: 55). Language is after all, a social phenomenon, and part of being a member of a social group means playing by the same rules (even if in a latent fashion).

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