The loss of the Latin case system: a new morphological approach

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The loss of the Latin case system has been the subject of much research and, although many reasons for this development have been posited, none of them satisfactorily account for the diachronic facts. I suggest that recognition of morphological structures and how they are exploited in language use may shed light on this issue. In Latin, the fully-inflected wordform is the most informative morphological 'unit'; implicative relations that exist between these wordforms provide patterns which may be exploited in the production and interpretation of novel inflected forms. (Ackerman et al. 2009.)

The importance of the way these morphological structures are exploited in language use is best understood when compared to a typologically different language such as Finnish, which has been case-stable since the splitting of proto-Finnic. In this case system, there are many instances in which form and function are in a one-to-one mapping below the level of the word. Language-users may therefore rely on these sub-word units (as indicated by acquisition evidence - Niemi and Niemi 1987, Laalo 2009) *in addition to* abstract patterns, similar to those that exist in the Latin case system. Finnish language-users thus have additional, maximally-predictive information on which to rely in the interpretation and production of inflected lexemes. The morphological structures found in the Latin case system therefore provide language-users with less maximally-predictive information than is found in the Finnish case system. The lack, in Latin, of this extra 'layer' of information found in Finnish may offer some further insight into why the Latin case system has almost entirely disappeared from nouns and adjectives.

The explanations explored here are rooted in a 'Word and Paradigm' (Blevins 2016) approach. By considering the inflexional case systems of Latin and Finnish from this 'abstractive' (Blevins 2006) perspective, we can best understand the diachronic importance of the different morphological structures found in language.

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