

The peculiar (yet not so peculiar) history of Spanish *caber*

1. The peculiarity of *caber* in Spanish morphology

Modern Spanish *caber* stands out for its almost unique kind of allomorphy.¹ Regular verbs such as *barrer* or *recibir*, have invariant lexical roots *barr-* and *recib-* and their future and conditional tense forms share a thematic vowel with the infinitive (from which the future and conditional are historically derived). In contrast, *caber* has the allomorph *cab-* only in the present indicative and imperfect indicative, the future and the conditional, the infinitive, and past participle; but it has *quep-* throughout the present subjunctive and in the first person singular present indicative, and *cup-* in the preterite and in both series of imperfect subjunctives; moreover, unlike most verbs, its future and conditional (*cabrá*, *cabría*) do not share a thematic vowel with the infinitive (*caber*).

The morphology of *caber* is practically unique in Spanish,² with one major exception, namely that *caber* shares almost all of its morphological idiosyncrasies with *saber*. In fact, the two verbs are well-nigh identical, differing only in respect of their initial consonant ([s] vs [k])³ and in the form of their first person singular present indicative (Table 1):

Table 1: The inflexional paradigms of Spanish *caber* and *saber*

infinitive	<i>s/caber</i>					
gerund	<i>s/cabiendo</i>					
past participle	<i>s/cabido</i>					
	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
pres. ind.	<i>sé / quepo</i>	<i>s/cabes</i>	<i>s/cabe</i>	<i>s/cabemos</i>	<i>s/cabéis</i>	<i>s/caben</i>
pres. subj.	<i>s/quepa</i>	<i>s/quepas</i>	<i>s/quepa</i>	<i>s/quepamos</i>	<i>s/quepáis</i>	<i>s/quepan</i>
fut.	<i>s/cabré</i>	<i>s/cabrás</i>	<i>s/cabrá</i>	<i>s/cabremos</i>	<i>s/cabréis</i>	<i>s/cabrán</i>
cond.	<i>s/cabría</i>	<i>s/cabrias</i>	<i>s/cabría</i>	<i>s/cabríamos</i>	<i>s/cabríais</i>	<i>s/cabrían</i>
imperfect ind.	<i>s/cabía</i>	<i>s/cabías</i>	<i>s/cabía</i>	<i>s/cabíamos</i>	<i>s/cabíais</i>	<i>s/cabían</i>
impf. subj. in -se	<i>s/cupiese</i>	<i>s/cupieses</i>	<i>s/cupiese</i>	<i>s/cupiésemos</i>	<i>s/cupieseis</i>	<i>s/cupiesen</i>
impf. subj. in -ra	<i>s/cupiera</i>	<i>s/cupieras</i>	<i>s/cupiera</i>	<i>s/cupiéramos</i>	<i>s/cupierais</i>	<i>s/cupieran</i>
(old fut. subj.	<i>s/cupiere</i>		<i>s/cupiere</i>			<i>s/cupieren</i>)
preterite	<i>s/cupe</i>	<i>s/cupiste</i>	<i>s/cupo</i>	<i>s/cupimos</i>	<i>s/cupisteis</i>	<i>s/cupieron</i>

In modern Spanish, *caber*, with *saber*, also belongs to a group of about a dozen verbs that have a special root allomorph distinctively shared by the preterite and non-past subjunctives, involving vocalic and consonantal differences in the root and root-stress in the first and third persons singular preterite. The root-allomorph of *caber*, namely *cup-*, shares a vocalic alternant, [u], with six of the verbs in this group, but the [-p]-, is shared uniquely with *saber* (*sup-*).

Taking the long historical view, the allomorphy seen in *caber* (and *saber*), for all its complexity, is unremarkable, because it displays the expected effects of certain regular early Romance phonological and morphological changes. Precisely because this allomorphy is mostly regular and unexpected, I shall not go into much detail here. Its etymon is Latin CAPERE “to take, grasp” was subject to regular early Romance sound change such that intervocalic [p] underwent voicing (whence the modern forms in *cab-*). This voicing was blocked, and [p] retained, when [p] by an adjacent early Romance glide, so 1SG.PRS.IND CAPIO > *['kapjo]; 3SG.PRS.SBJV CAPIAT > *['kapja]. Subsequent metathesis between the glide and the preceding consonant, followed by monophthongization of the resultant diphthong in the lexical root, accounts for the modern root alternant [e]: *['kapjo], *['kapja] > ['kepo] *quepo* and ['kepa] *quepa*. The early Romance preterite root form appears to have been *['kapw]: again, the glide blocked voicing of the labial, and was subsequently subject to metathesis, producing a diphthong in the stressed vowel, which was later monophthongized as [o] (*['kapwi] > *['kaupi] > *['kope]). The preterite root in all Spanish forms is always shared with the forms of the imperfect subjunctives and the old Spanish future subjunctive (see Maiden 2001). Analogical changes affecting all irregular preterite roots containing a back vowel led to later replacement of [o] in preterite and related roots by [u], whence modern *cupe* etc. In the future (and conditional) forms, built historically on the infinitive, the absence of the thematic vowel of the infinitive (e.g., 3SG.FUT *cabrá* rather than ***caberá*), is attributable to a widespread phonological process of syncope of intertonic vowels in early Ibero-Romance. Exactly the same story applies to *saber*, derived from Latin SAPERE; the sole point of morphological divergence between the two verbs, the first person singular present indicative (e.g., Sp. *sé* vs *quepo*), reflects an ancient phonological reduction of the continuant of Latin SAPIO to *['sajo], “I know” attested in many Romance languages (cf. Lapesa 2000, 762).

¹ This study is dedicated to Franz Rainer, whose contributions to Spanish morphology, and much else in Romance linguistics, have been so great.

² As are its cognates in Portuguese and Galician. For reasons of space I shall not consider these here, but they merit similar attention.

³ The alternation between *c* and *qu* is merely orthographic: both represent [k].

What is surprising about *caber* is not, then, its morphological complexity. Indeed, it seems to be precisely the historically expected nature of the verb which has rather lulled historians of the language, with the distinguished recent exception of Joel Rini, into taking it for granted (cf. Rini 2020b, 731f.). Yet as Rini (2020a,b) has clearly shown, our verb is remarkable because that morphological complexity has *survived* to this day, despite the extensive analogical “levelling out” since the Middle Ages of root allomorphy in the verb (cf. also Maiden 2001; 2018, 50-53). Modern Spanish retains only about a dozen really irregular verbs and these are semantically basic, very high frequency, lexemes (some of which are also the basis of derived verbs), such as “be”, “have” (auxiliary), “have”, “come”, “go”, “say”, “do”, “know”, “want”, “can”, “give”, “bring”. *Caber* is a “stow-away” in this company: we shall see it has significantly lower frequency than these other verbs, and is completely isolated in that it is not the basis of any derived forms. How and why has it survived? In what follows, I shall attempt to answer this question from a slightly different perspective from that offered by Rini, and in one respect (specifically concerning the history of the form *quepo*) I shall differ sharply from his interpretation.

2. The place of *caber* in Spanish historical morphology

How is *caber* morphologically similar to other modern Spanish verbs? To begin with the future (and conditional, with which the future always shares a stem) *caber* is “irregular” and unlike virtually all other Spanish verbs, in not sharing the thematic vowel with the infinitive: thus *comer* ~ *comerá*, *perder* ~ *perderá*, but *caber* ~ *cabrá* (not ***caberá*). This “syncope” of the theme vowel is a property now shared with just eleven other verbs:⁴ *decir* ~ *dirá*; *haber* ~ *habrá*; *hacer* ~ *hará*; *poder* ~ *podrá*; *poner* ~ *pondrá*; *querer* ~ *querrá*; *saber* ~ *sabrá*; *salir* ~ *saldrá*; *tener* ~ *tendrá*; *valer* ~ *valdrá*; *venir* ~ *vendrá*. Such syncope in the future and conditional was once very widespread, despite now having been almost universally eliminated (Penny 2002, 212f.; Rini 2020a, 112f): e.g., *comer* ~ *combrá*, *perder* ~ *perdrá*, *doler* ~ *doldrá*, *aducir* ~ *adurá*, etc, but now *comerá*, *perderá*, *dolerá*, *aducirá*, etc. *Caber* is also one of about a dozen verbs (excluding derived forms) whose preterite has a distinctive allomorph and one which is always stressed on the root, rather than the ending, in the first person singular and third person.⁵ Thus *caber* ~ 3SG.PRET *cupo*; also *andar* ~ *anduvo*; *decir* ~ *dijo*; *-ducir* ~ *-dujo*;⁶ *estar* ~ *estuvo*; *haber* (auxiliary) ~ *hubo*; *hacer* ~ *hizo*; *poder* ~ *pudo*; *poner* ~ *puso*; *querer* ~ *quiso*; *saber* ~ *supo*; *tener* ~ *tuvo*; *traer* ~ *trajo*; *venir* ~ *vino*. In contrast, special allomorphy in the preterite (and related tenses) pertained to multiple verbs in old Spanish (cf. Penny 2002, 223-230; Maiden 2018, 46), such as *escribir* ~ *escriisso*; *plazer* ~ *plogo*; *nascer* ~ *nasco*; *vivir* ~ *visco*; *yazer* ~ *yogo*; *ceñir* ~ *cinxo*; *conocer* ~ *conuvo*; *meter* ~ *miso*, and others. These are all now regularized in the preterite, *escribió*, *plació*, *nació*, *vivió*, *yació*, *ciñó*, *metió*, etc. The alternation between [a] in the present indicative and [e] in the present subjunctive, (*caber* ~ *quepa*), which *caber* still shares with *saber* ~ *sepa*, was once displayed by at least one other verb (Menéndez Pidal 1982, §113c), old Spanish: *plazer* ~ *plega*. In the latter, the alternation has now been levelled out (*placer* ~ *plazca*).

The reason why these once far more widespread types of allomorphy are generally eliminated but still survive in a dozen or so verbs has an intuitively clear general explanation (cf. Rini 2020a, 114f.), namely that the loss of alternation is a matter of analogical levelling, possibly motivated by the general semiotic principle that the maximally transparent relationship between meaning and form is one to one rather than one to many. In the modern language the select “club” of the super-irregular is almost entirely limited to semantically and very high frequency basic verbs of “being”, “motion” (“going (out)”, “coming”, “walking”, and “bringing”), “doing”, “giving”, “having”, “modality” (i.e., “wanting”, “being able”, “knowing how to”), “knowing”, and auxiliaries. The survival of their irregularity can plausibly be attributed to their extremely high frequency of usage, a reflection in turn of their very basic meanings. Yet accounts of Spanish historical morphology sometimes smuggle *caber* as well into this class. Fernández Martínez (2009, 80) actually argues of the modern irregular verbs that:

Desde un punto de vista estrictamente semántico, estos verbos denotan conceptos básicos de la expresión humana (aquí puede estar la razón de ser de su robustez léxica): la existencia (*ser, estar, haber*), la posesión (*haber, tener*), la modalidad o probabilidad (*querer, poder, saber, caber*), el acto del lenguaje en sí mismo (*decir*), la actuación por antonomasia (*hacer*) y el movimiento (*ir, venir*).

In fact, *caber* is certainly not a verb of “modality” or “probability” nor, in fact, does it share any semantically basic features with the other verbs preserving irregularity. So what is it doing in such company?

One possibility is that the survival of the irregularities of *caber* could be due simply to a high frequency of occurrence determined by some other cause than semantic basicness. But this is extremely implausible. *Caber* actually has markedly lower text frequency than other verbs in which the allomorphy has been eliminated. For example, for the future tense, the CREA database for modern Spanish⁷ show that tokens of the future of *caber* are by orders of magnitude less frequent than those of the other irregular verbs and of some verbs (e.g., *vivir*, *vencer*) that in old Spanish did show special future

⁴ Some of these, as can be seen, also display various kinds of stem allomorphy. I exclude here verbs derived from these by prefixation (e.g., *contener* ~ *contendrá*, *exponer* ~ *expondrá*).

⁵ The unstressed preterite root allomorph is also systematically found throughout the non-present forms of the subjunctive. This point is not immediately relevant to the present argument, but discussion can be found in Maiden (2001).

⁶ For the *-ducir* verbs, see below.

⁷ I am making the uniformitarian assumption that the relevant verbs would have had broadly similar relative frequencies in the Middle Ages.

allomorphs (see Rini 2020a, 117).⁸ Table 2 shows the number of attestations of the third person singular future forms of the relevant verbs.

Table 2. Tokens of the third person singular future tense form in the modern Spanish *CREA* corpus

<i>caber</i>	59
<i>vencer</i>	103
<i>valer</i>	179
<i>vivir</i>	367
<i>querer</i>	596
<i>saber</i>	1348
<i>salir</i>	1773
<i>venir</i>	1812
<i>poner</i>	1876
<i>decir</i>	2207
<i>hacer</i>	8954
<i>tener</i>	16344
<i>poder</i>	16570
<i>haber</i>	20223

The same is true of tokens of special preterite allomorphy in the *CREA* corpus, with *caber* showing noticeably lower frequency than many verbs (e.g., *ceñir*, *escribir*, *vivir*) that since the Middle Ages have lost that allomorphy (Table 3).

Table 3. Tokens of the third person singular preterite form in the modern Spanish *CREA* corpus

<i>caber</i>	75
<i>ceñir</i>	99
<i>escribir</i>	537
<i>andar</i>	1196
<i>traer</i>	4167
<i>venir</i>	4203
<i>vivir</i>	5424
<i>nacer</i>	8241
<i>conocer</i>	8638
<i>saber</i>	11299
<i>querer</i>	14066
<i>poner</i>	23139
<i>estar</i>	27845
<i>poder</i>	32514
<i>tener</i>	55980
<i>hacer</i>	75635
<i>decir</i>	132679

In sum, while *caber* belongs to the coterie of verbs that have managed to preserve their idiosyncratic morphology, this can neither be because of its meaning nor of its frequency. What, then, is the explanation?

3. “Analogical retention”?

Rini correctly highlights the anomalous and unexpected nature of the survival of the peculiar allomorphy of *caber*. To account for it, he invokes what is surely a useful notion in historical morphology generally,⁹ that of “analogical retention”. Thus the future of *caber*, *cabrà*, finds itself among the small group of verbs which still preserves syncope of the thematic vowel (Rini 2020a, 119–121) particularly because it resembles—and is therefore analogically “retained” under the influence of—the futures, *sabrà* and *habrà* of the verbs *saber* and auxiliary *haber*. *Caber* also retains the syncopated future because its present tense shares other morphological peculiarities with the group of verbs showing syncopated futures. Rini (2020a, 121n23; 2020b, 744f.) also indicates that the survival of the root allomorph *quep-* in the present subjunctive principally reflects “analogical retention” due to the allomorph *sep-* of *saber*. Yet Rini stops

⁸ A similar observation holds in this case for *valer*, as Rini (2020a, 116) comments. *Valer* would merit a separate study, but it has been historically subject to the analogical influence of *salir*, to which it had by the Middle Ages become morphologically identical, except for the infinitive. I suspect, with Rini, that *valdrà* survives by association with the very high frequency and morphologically similar verb *salir*. In some Asturian dialects and Galician dialects of Asturias, the infinitive clearly shows the influence of *salir*, because it becomes *valir*. See, for example, *Conjugación de verbos asturianos* (1989, 109;152); Babarro González (2003, 415f.;424f.); *ALGa* maps 129, 131.

⁹ He invokes the notion also to explain some other anomalous morphological survivals in Spanish (see also Rini 2001).

short of making the most obvious generalization about the historical morphology of *caber* and that is that *all* its morphological peculiarities (save the first person singular present indicative) are exact “copies” of *saber*, not only in the future and the present subjunctive, but *through the entire inflexional paradigm* and he fails (Rini 2020a, 118) to make the point that the survival of the specific irregular preterite root in *caber* is surely also an effect of “analogical retention” exercised by *saber*.¹⁰ In fact, the inescapable and simple generalization is that *caber* has preserved its morphological idiosyncrasies specifically under the influence of the much more frequent verb *saber*, to which by chance it was historically almost identical. I will return later to the exact nature of the influence exercised by *saber* over *caber*. First, we need to consider the history of these two verbs in the wider context of the Romance languages of Iberia.

Not just in Castilian and Portuguese, but in very many modern Romance varieties of the Peninsula and beyond (cf. Alibert 1976, 140f;184 for Occitan), *caber* is a perfect “copy” of *saber*.¹¹ There are in fact instances of analogical levelling affecting *caber* but not *saber* (never the reverse), but those cases are not widespread.¹² Such “exceptions that prove the rule” serve to remind us, at least, that there is no fundamental or necessary factor binding these two verbs together morphologically. In fact, they are “twins” not only in respect of retention of allomorphy, but also in respect of innovations. In rare cases where *saber* undergoes total or partial levelling, *caber* follows suit. In the Asturian of Cabranes (Canellada 1944:40f.;45), *saber*, and with it *caber*, undergo levelling, although other irregular verbs do not (Table 4).¹³

Table 4

	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
PRS.IND	<i>quero</i>	<i>quieres</i>	<i>quer</i>	<i>querémos</i>	<i>querés</i>	<i>quéren</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>quéria</i>	<i>quéries</i>	<i>quéria</i>	<i>quériamos</i>	<i>quériaes</i>	<i>quérien</i>
PRET	<i>quíxi</i>	<i>quixisti</i>	<i>quíxo</i>	<i>quixémos</i>	<i>quixéstes</i>	<i>quixéren</i>
PRS.IND	<i>[pongo]</i>	<i>pones</i>	<i>pon</i>	<i>ponémos</i>	<i>ponés</i>	<i>pónen</i> ¹⁴
PRS.SBJV	<i>ponga</i>	<i>pongues</i>	<i>ponga</i>	<i>póngamos</i>	<i>póngaes</i>	<i>pónguen</i>
PRET	<i>pónxi</i>	<i>ponxisti</i>	<i>pónxo</i>	<i>ponximos</i>	<i>ponxéstes</i>	<i>ponxéren</i>
PRS.IND	<i>sabo</i>	<i>sabes</i>	<i>sabes</i>	<i>sabémos</i>	<i>sabés</i>	<i>sáben</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>sabia</i>	<i>sabies</i>	<i>sabia</i>	<i>sábiamos</i>	<i>sábiaes</i>	<i>sábien</i>
PRET	<i>[sabí]</i>	<i>sabisti</i>	<i>sabió</i>	<i>sabiémos</i>	<i>sabiestes</i>	<i>sabiéren</i> ¹⁵
PRS.IND	<i>cabo</i>	<i>cabes</i>	<i>cabes</i>	<i>cabémos</i>	<i>cabés</i>	<i>cáben</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>cabia</i>	<i>cabies</i>	<i>cabia</i>	<i>cábiamos</i>	<i>cábiaes</i>	<i>cábien</i>
PRET	<i>cabí</i>	<i>cabisti</i>	<i>cabió</i>	<i>cabiémos</i>	<i>cabiestes</i>	<i>cabiéren</i>

The two verbs can be seen also to proceed “in lockstep” in other types of innovation, as is particularly apparent from some Catalan varieties. Like many other Catalan dialects, the north-western dialects of La Litera (“zone 3” in Giralt Latorre 1998) have undergone wholesale analogical generalization of a root-final velar alternant into the first person singular present indicative and throughout the present subjunctive (and beyond). For the general origin of this phenomenon, and its paradigmatic distribution see Maiden (2018, 85-122). Briefly, the historical model for the analogical extension of the velar is a class of verbs such as *dir* “to say” (Table 5):

Table 5

	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
PRS.IND	<i>dic</i>	<i>dius</i>	<i>diu</i>	<i>diguem</i>	<i>digueu</i>	<i>diuen</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>diga</i>	<i>digues</i>	<i>digue</i>	<i>diguem</i>	<i>digueu</i>	<i>diguen</i>

In the relevant dialects, this pattern is massively extended into other verbs in which no velar was historically present, e.g., *vender* or *correr* (Table 6):

Table 6

¹⁰ Rini (2020a, 119n20) claims that the morphology of the preterite of *caber* is entirely due to the specific analogical influence of that of *saber*. I am not persuaded of this, but even if it were the case, we would still have to appeal to the influence of *saber* to account for the subsequent survival of the irregular preterite of *caber*.

¹¹ The usual exception has to be made for the first person singular present indicative.

¹² For Galician: Santamarina (1974, 89; 96f.). For Asturian: Menéndez García (1963, 235); Cano González (1981, 166); Vallina Alonso (1985, 171; 177). For Aragonese: Nagore Laín (1977, 130; 1986, 190); Mott (2000, 337; 347); Lozano Sierra and Saludas Bernad (2007:125).

¹³ Cf. also Grupo d’Estudios de la Fbla Chesa (1990, 153f.) and Quintana i Font (2007, 35; 37), Corominas (1991) for Aragonese.

¹⁴ The present indicative forms are not spelled out by Canellada, but the first person singular is strongly inferable from the present subjunctive, and the remaining forms are at least strongly implicit from other verb data given.

¹⁵ The preterite forms are not given by Canellada, but are strongly inferable from the forms of the imperfect subjunctive (*sabiéra*, etc.) with which the preterite always shares a root allomorph

	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
PRS.IND	<i>venc</i>	<i>vens</i>	<i>ven</i>	<i>venem</i>	<i>veneu</i>	<i>venen</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>venga</i>	<i>vengues</i>	<i>vengue</i>	<i>venguem</i>	<i>vengueu</i>	<i>venguen</i>
PRS.IND	<i>corgo</i>	<i>corres</i>	<i>corre</i>	<i>corguem</i>	<i>corgueu</i>	<i>corren</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>corga</i>	<i>corgues</i>	<i>corgue</i>	<i>corguem</i>	<i>corgueu</i>	<i>corguen</i>

Of the 27 non-first conjugation verbs that Giralt Latorre cites for this dialect area, four very high-frequency verbs lack the velar in the first person singular present indicative, namely auxiliary *haver* (1SG.PRS.IND *he* vs 1SG.PRS.SBJV *haiga*), *voldre* “to want” (1SG.PRS.IND *vui* vs 1SG.PRS.SBJV *vulga*), *fêr* “to do” (1SG.PRS.IND *fai* or *faic* vs 1SG.PRS.SBJV *faiga*), and optionally *anar* “to go” (1SG.PRS.IND *vai* or *vaic* vs 1SG.PRS.SBJV *vaiga*), while *sabre* “to know, be able to” completely escapes the extension of the velar.¹⁶ Now *haver* is exclusively used as an auxiliary, *anar* has a major auxiliary function in addition to being a basic verb of motion, *fêr* is grammaticalized in causative constructions, *voldre* is a modal verb, and *sabre* also has the modal meaning “know, be able”. These are semantically basic verbs performing major grammatical functions and therefore presumably have extremely high text-frequency. It seems plausible that their very frequency accounts for their resistance to the analogical generalization. Yet there is one further verb in their company, and exactly like *sabre* it completely lacks the velar. That verb is the cognate of Spanish *caber*, namely *cabre*. I give here (following Giralt Latorre 1998:231;289) their present indicative and subjunctive (Table 7) for the dialect of Albelda:

Table 7

	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
PRS.IND	<i>sé</i>	<i>sas</i> ¹⁷	<i>sap</i>	<i>sabem</i>	<i>sabeu</i>	<i>saben</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>sèbia</i>	<i>sèbies</i>	<i>sèbie</i>	<i>sabiem</i>	<i>sabieu</i>	<i>sèbien</i>
PRS.IND	<i>quèbio</i>	<i>caps</i>	<i>cap</i>	<i>cabem</i>	<i>cabeu</i>	<i>caben</i>
PRS.SBJV	<i>quèbia</i>	<i>quèbies</i>	<i>quèbie</i>	<i>cabiem</i>	<i>cabieu</i>	<i>quèbien</i>

It seems clear, overall, that in the Romance languages of Iberia the morphological development of *caber* is somehow in thrall specifically to that of *saber*. But in what way, exactly? In what follows I shall speculate, briefly, that the notion of an analogical ‘retention’ exercised by one verb, *saber*, over the morphology of the other, *caber* may be misconceived.

4. A possible interpretation

To summarize my view, *saber* and *caber*, for reasons that are historically a matter of accident and coincidence, share an almost identical array of morphological idiosyncrasies. The survival of these idiosyncrasies in *saber* is due to the very high frequency of the forms of that semantically very basic verb. Their survival in the vastly less frequent *caber* is due to the fact that its idiosyncrasies happen to be almost identical to those of *saber*. *Caber* is, so to speak, “camouflaged” and thereby dodges the effects of otherwise general analogical levelling. It is important to stress that the resemblance between these two verbs is a matter of pure morphology. The facts presuppose a separation of the shared complex alternation pattern of the two verbs from any other lexical or argumental properties of those verbs. Absolutely nothing outside their morphology underpins their formal identity.¹⁸ *Saber* is a fundamental verb of cognition, is transitive, requires an animate and usually human subject,¹⁹ and also functions—in combination with a lexical infinitive—as an auxiliary, meaning “know how to, be able to” (e.g., *sabemos nadar* “we know how to swim”). *Caber* has no association with cognition and generally takes inanimate subjects, is fundamentally stative and always intransitive, and has no function as an auxiliary.

What we observe in the history of our two verbs is strikingly reminiscent of one of Aronoff’s classic synchronic illustrations of the kind of autonomously morphological phenomena which he calls “morphomic”, namely the English *-stand* verbs (*withstand* ~ *withstood*, *understand* ~ *understood*). Aronoff (1994, 28) observes that English verbs in *-stand* inherit irregular morphology from their head verb *stand*, even in the absence of semantic compositionality.²⁰ Thus

¹⁶ Why *sabre* in particular completely escaped the change in these dialects is a moot point. What matters here is that it did fail to take the velar, whatever the reason.

¹⁷ There is an additional discrepancy between the second person singular forms of the two verbs (cf. also Haensch 1960, 136f.). The status of this difference is unclear, however, and possibly more a matter of phonology than of morphology (see Giralt Latorre 1998, 233). There is also the consideration that a second person singular form of *caber* is extremely rare.

¹⁸ The onus is on anyone who doubts this claim to find an “extramorphological” connexion. It is true that the Italian cognate of *caber*, namely *capire*, has the cognitive meaning “understand”, but this represents a different line of metaphorical development of Latin *CAPERE* “grasp” from that followed in Iberia (and indeed in some Italo-Romance dialects) and there is no evidence that *caber* in Iberia has or ever had that meaning at any relevant historical period. Díaz González (1986, 173) mentions that *caber* in the dialect of Candamo can mean «Ser o no posible una cosa» but gives no other details as to its use in this sense. Even if this might be deemed a modal meaning, it is pretty remote from the meaning of *saber*.

¹⁹ It can also have the meaning “smell (of), taste (of)”, in which case it almost always takes an inanimate subject, but this hardly brings it much closer to *caber*.

²⁰ See also Maiden (2008, 311).

«all English verbs of the form *stand*, regardless of their sense, and all verbs whose root is *stand* have *stood* as their past tense and perfect participle». Aronoff goes on to say that «the set of irregular forms is obviously not a single lexeme (WITHSTAND and UNDERSTAND are not semantically related), so their unity must be expressed at a purely morphological level». A possibly parallel example is available closer to home, in Spanish. All Spanish verbs in *-ducir* inflect in the same idiosyncratic fashion (e.g., preterites in *-duj-*),²¹ but in this case no independent “head” verb **ducir* is attested at any point in the recorded history of Spanish (see Dworkin 2012, 171) (Table 8):

Table 8

infinitive	preterite (3sg)
<i>abducir</i>	<i>abdujo</i>
<i>aducir</i>	<i>adujo</i>
<i>conducir</i>	<i>condujo</i>
<i>deducir</i>	<i>dedujo</i>
<i>educir</i>	<i>edujo</i>
<i>inducir</i>	<i>indujo</i>
<i>producir</i>	<i>produjo</i>
<i>seducir</i>	<i>sedujo</i>
<i>traducir</i>	<i>tradujo</i>
<i>transducir</i>	<i>transdujo</i>

Now critics of Aronoff’s analysis of the *-stand ~ -stood* type (e.g., Nielsen 2019) have sought to argue—to my mind unpersuasively—that such lexically limited paradigmatic patterns are potentially analysable as retaining a (metaphorical) semantic motivation (cf. also Newman 2001) which might explain their enduring morphological cohesion. As for the *-ducir* verbs in Spanish, their extinct and unattested “head” verb **ducir* originated in Latin DUCERE “lead” and it might be possible still to detect in these verbs a residual meaning of “lead”: perhaps “lead forth” for *producir*, “lead over” for *traducir*, and so on. In contrast, I do not think that the identity between *saber* and *caber* shares any semantic motivation. Moreover, the pattern of identity between them is more complex and idiosyncratic than that involved in *-stand* or even in the *-ducir* verbs. Our two verbs are excellent testimony to the inherent and pervasive separability of form from lexical or grammatical meaning, and are truly “morphomic” — or perhaps “micro-morphomic” in that they alone in the grammar of Spanish share all the relevant properties.

What of the single major respect in which our two verbs diverge, namely the first person singular present indicative forms *sé* vs *quepo*? As explained earlier, the difference is very ancient in the Romance languages and is overwhelmingly maintained²² in all the Romance varieties of Iberia. Actually these two forms are frequently observed to diverge even more, many dialects having replaced *quepo ~ sé* by the type *cabo ~ sé* (cf. Rini 2020b). Indeed, *cabo* (alongside subjunctive *quepa*) is the form used in the late fifteenth century by Antonio de Nebrija, a fact to which I return later. This pattern, where the inherited distinctive allomorph occurs throughout the present subjunctive but is absent from the first person singular present indicative, is found in Catalan as well, as Rini (2020, 740n7) also observes. Alcover and Moll’s detailed survey of the verb morphology of the Catalan dialects of a century ago confirms that this is also overwhelmingly true of Catalan dialects. Of 107 localities that retained the special allomorph in the present subjunctive,²³ only five also show it in the first person singular present indicative: ‘kepio (Pont de Suert point 71), ‘kepo (San Salvador de Toló point 78), ‘kepio (Balaguer point 82), ‘kapiro / ‘kapiyo (Pradell de Preixens point 83), and ‘kapiro (Granadella point 89). These localities are all, perhaps unsurprisingly, at the western periphery of the Catalan area and therefore geographically closest to Castilian.²⁴ Three of these (San Salvador de Toló, Balaguer, and Pradell de Preixens) also showed regularized ‘kaβo. The tendency for the forms of the first person singular present indicative to drift apart is, I suggest, a kind of “negative confirmation” of the general “morphomic” coherence of the two verbs. Our two verbs are liable to become further differentiated precisely and exclusively to the extent that they have never been morphologically identical, namely at just that one point in the paradigm.

²¹ Some of the rare and more abstruse verbs in this series, such as *abducir* or *educir* may be regularized in the usage of some speakers (e.g., *abdució* rather than *abdujo*), but the fact remains that all those which are analysable as comprising *-ducir* preceded by common prefixes such as *con-* or *pro-* behave in this way, and the set of verbs which consistently share the irregular morphology is highly disparate.

²² An exception is *saber* in the sense “smell, taste” which by its nature tends to have only third person forms. Some speakers, forced to produce a first person singular present indicative form, will actually produce *sepo* rather than *sé* (cf. Herce 2023:23).

²³ The principal hallmark of the “inherited” allomorph in Catalan is the presence of *[-pi]*- in the root, in opposition to *[β]* elsewhere in the paradigm, see, for example, Lausberg (1965, §473). I exclude from consideration cases where root-final *[-p]* is probably the result of devoicing in word-final position. Thus all third person singular present indicative forms of this verb are of the type *[kap]* (< **[kab]* < **[‘kabe]*). *[kap]* is also a frequent first person singular present indicative form, probably reflecting the development **[‘kabo]* > **[kab]* > *[kap]*.

²⁴ Similar forms are reported for the north-western Catalan dialect of Mequinensa by Moret i Coso (1990, 102): *càpio* or *càbio*, *càpia* or *càbi*. Plaza Boya (1990, 220f.n78) mentions a report that the Aragonese variety of Benasque has 1SG.PRS.IND *quepio* or *cabo*, PRS.SBJV *quepia*. Giralte Latorre (1998, 274f.) gives *quèpio* or *quèbio* and *quèpia* or *quèbia* at Albelda and Estopiñán, and *càpio* and *càpia* at Castillonroy and Baldellou.

In sum, the history of *caber* and *saber* fits well with a perspective on inflexional morphology in which “form paradigms” and the corresponding “realized paradigms” (the distribution of the set of forms over “content paradigms” or the set of morphosyntactically specified “cells”)—cf. Stump (2016)—can be wholly abstracted by speakers from the different lexemes with which they are associated. Indeed, it may even be a mistake to view the problem as involving two different “lexemes”, in which one lexeme (*saber*) is seen as exercising analogical “retention” or “control” over another (*caber*). A more appropriate perspective might be suggested by the notion of the “flexeme”, as originally developed for example by Fradin and Kerleroux (2003). In Thornton’s analysis of the development of this concept she states (Thornton 2018, 305): «[r]oughly, it seems to me, a flexeme now corresponds to the entities called form paradigm and realized paradigm in paradigm-linkage theory» (Stump 2016). The notion essentially involves lexemes that are morphologically identical but referentially different. *Saber* and *caber* of course differ from each other in respect of their initial consonant (and their first person singular present indicative), but they are nonetheless consistent with a view that paradigmatic material shared between lexemes, even in cases of extreme and idiosyncratic allomorphy, can have a status independent of the individual lexemes over which it happens to be distributed. In short, we may wonder whether “analogical retention” need be invoked here at all. The facts of *caber* and *saber* seem perfectly compatible with a scenario in which a complex array of alternations and its paradigmatic distribution survives in diachrony because of its extremely high frequency of occurrence. That its high frequency is in turn almost entirely attributable to just one of the associated lexemes may be a secondary and, in a way, accidental fact. It could be simply *the set of forms and the pattern of their paradigmatic distribution* which has been so robust in the history of Spanish. It may be not so much the case that *saber* is analogically ‘retaining’ *caber*, as that their unique set of alternants survives because it is so frequent and prominent (thanks to *saber*). The extent to which such an analysis may be applicable to other areas of the history of Spanish morphology (such as the *-ducir* verbs) awaits further enquiry, but it may be said that in that case it would be hard to identify a *lead* verb which was somehow exercising analogical retention on all the others.

5. Back from the dead? The problem of *quepo* and *cabo*

I mentioned earlier that *quepo* is sometimes replaced by *cabo*, and suggested that this fact tends to confirm my general explanation of the morphological coherence of the remaining parts of *caber* and *saber*. But for a correct understanding of the morphological history of *caber* it needs to be appreciated that such replacement has never been more than a tendency, contrary to a claim recently made by the scholar to whom is undoubtedly due the credit for realizing the remarkable nature of *caber*. Rini (2020b) makes what he himself calls an «astonishing» claim: that modern Spanish *quepo* is not, as universally assumed, the direct, phonologically regular, continuant of Latin *CAPIO*. Rather, he says that in old Spanish, and until the end of the sixteenth century, the first person singular of *caber* had been exclusively *cabo*, modern *quepo* being a special kind of later analogical formation, first attested towards the end of the sixteenth century and modelled principally on subjunctive *quepa*. This claim is, I fear, far too «astonishing» to be true.

The basis of Rini’s belief that *quepo* did not exist in old Spanish is that «[f]rom the earliest texts through 1500, one does not find a single example of *quepo*» (Rini 2020b, 735). To this one has immediately to object that—with the indeed significant exception of some comments by Nebrija to which I return later—there are practically no examples, either, of the form that allegedly replaced it, namely **cabo*, so the inference that speakers generally said *cabo* instead of *quepo* in the Middle Ages is at best shaky. However, there *is* one such example,²⁵ namely «No cabo en mí de prazer», from Lucas Fernández’s Leonese *Farsas y églogas al modo y estilo pastoril y castellano* (1514). Still this isolated, relatively late, Leonese, manifestation of *cabo*, cannot stand as proof that *cabo* was omnipresent in Castilian or that *quepo* did not also exist alongside it. The reason that we find no example of *quepo* before 1595 is that (almost) no example of the first person singular present indicative of *caber* is attested until then, and none at all before the end of the fifteenth century. When the form expressing that grammatical meaning does appear in writing thereafter it is, just as expected, *quepo*. Using Rini’s reasoning, by the way, one would also have to conclude that 1PL.PRS.SBJV *quepamos*, first attested in 1494, did not exist either until the end of the fifteenth century and indeed that it then disappeared again for another 450 years, since the next attestation dates from 1944. In short, we should not mistake absence of evidence for evidence of absence. Rini certainly anticipates this objection as far as *quepo* is concerned, but he does not offer a convincing answer. He argues (2020b, 736) that «[a]lthough one may think that perhaps *quepo* existed during the Middle Ages as a direct continuation of Lat. *CAPIO*, but that it simply does not appear in the written record until 1595 because the grammatical category of the first person singular of *caber* is, and always has been, of extremely low frequency [...] it is important to note that 1st pers. sg. subj. *quepa* does indeed appear in Medieval and Late Medieval Spanish, and significantly before the first appearance of *quepo* [...]». This would be an excellent riposte to a different, but quite implausible, proposition: that nobody ever used a first person singular present indicative form of *caber* until the end of the sixteenth century. Rini’s observation is evidence, if any were ever needed, that *some* form or other must have been used, but absolutely not that the form in question was *cabo* rather than *quepo*. In any case, it would seem unlikely in the extreme that an allegedly general and established medieval form, *cabo*, should, for some reason, subsequently have been replaced

²⁵ Nor can we be sure that, in the relevant variety with the verb-form *cabo*, *caber* did not also have subjunctive *caba*, as is the case in some modern dialects. It is a daunting task to scrutinize the over 20000 attestations of the word *cabo* in the CORDE database for the period between 1200 and 1600, but so far as I can see all but one of them appear to be the verb but rather noun derived from Latin *CAPUT*. Rini (2020b, 735) makes critical remarks about the other major corpus, the *Corpus del español*, but omits to say what light its data cast on the issue. However, there, too, it appears to me that the earliest examples of *quepo* are from the late sixteenth century and there, too, there are no examples of *cabo* before the end of the fifteenth.

wholesale in the sixteenth century by *quepo*. On this account, sixteenth-century speakers curiously chanced upon the “right answer for the wrong reason”, since the “new” form that they came up with happened to be exactly that regularly expected given the etymon *CAPIO*.²⁶ But there is no cause to believe that *quepo* was not alive and well throughout the Middle Ages, or that *quepo*, whenever and wherever it does occur in the historical record of Spanish, need be considered anything other than what it plainly is: the direct, *lautgesetzlich*, continuant of *CAPIO*.

However, Rini also considers what he calls “revelations” bearing on the issue from Antonio de Nebrija (*Gramática castellana* 1492 and *Reglas de ortographía española* 1517) and from Gonzalo Correas (*Arte de la lengua española castellana* 1625). I will begin with Correas, whose remarks Rini (2020b, 741) interprets as signalling that «[b]y 1625 *cabo* is replaced by *quepo*». I have to say that I do not think that Correas gives any grounds for us to think that *quepo* had “replaced” anything. He confirms that the first person singular form is *quepo*, but he also comments that «Quepo primera persona no es bien rrezebido: los niños dizen cabo con analoghia de las personas sighentes cabe, cabe, &., i fuera mucha rrazon usarla como mas propia: pero ni de la una manera, ni de la otra se admite en buen uso, ni se escribe». His remarks about the analogically-based behaviour of children carry no implication whatever that *cabo* had previously been general and his observation that neither *quepo* nor *cabo* is admitted in good usage may simply mean that both forms sound “odd” to speakers,²⁷ because *cabo* deviates from the prescribed *quepo*, while *quepo* itself is morphologically exceptional, no other verb having an allomorph of this kind in the first person singular. Rini’s rendering (Rini 2020a, 741) of «los niños dizen *cabo*...» as «children are still producing *cabo*...» introduces the word “still”—an expression absent in the original—which gives the impression that Correas implies the use of *cabo* in the past. Actually, there is nothing in what Correas says to support the assumption of a complete historical rupture between *CAPIO* and *quepo*.

What Nebrija says, however, is a different matter. As Rini shows, Nebrija (*Gramática castellana*. BNM I2142, Chapter 8) repeatedly indicates that *cabo*, not *quepo*, is the first person singular form, while *quepa* is the present subjunctive form:

El venidero del optativo en la primera conjugacion forma se mudando la .o. final del presente del indicativo en .e. como de amo áme. de enseño enséñe. En la segunda & tercera conjugacion mudando la .o. final en .a. como de leo lea. de oio oia. Sacan se de se sepa. de cabo quepa. de so sea. de e aia. de plago plega. de vo vaia.

Rini (2020a, 738f.) cites three further examples, from the *Reglas*, in which Nebrija again unambiguously gives *cabo* as the first person singular present indicative form. The conclusion (Rini 2020a, 740) is that «[f]or Nebrija, then, *cabo* was every bit the established (and only) first person singular present indicative of *caber*, as were (and are) *tengo*, *pongo*, *hago*, *quiero*, *puedo*, *he*, *vengo*, and *digo* of their corresponding infinitives». Now these remarks of Nebrija’s are indisputable evidence that there *were* late fifteenth-century speakers, clearly including Nebrija himself, who really did say *cabo* (yet still subjunctive *quepa*) and what Nebrija tells us must therefore figure in any complete description of the historical morphology of *caber*. But only if one believed that Nebrija offered an exhaustive representation of fifteenth century Castilian could one ever accept that the relevant form was, for all contemporary speakers, *cabo* and for nobody *quepo*, or that *quepo* as we encounter it since the late sixteenth century is anything other than a direct descendant of *CAPIO*. Nebrija’s silence about some particular form certainly does not signify its non-existence, despite Rini’s belief (2020b, 738) that «had *quepo* existed at the time of Nebrija, and it had been part of his linguistic competence, even passively, he most likely would have mentioned it, as he did in the case of *sabo* ~ *sé*». This is simply not a safe assumption, for Nebrija does *not* mention verb-forms that undoubtedly were current at his time. For example, he repeatedly gives *fue* *fueste* *fuemos* *fuestes* as the first and second person preterite forms of *ser* (and *ir*), never mentioning *fui* *fuiste* *fuimos* *fuistes*. Yet for the period 1400–1500 *CORDE* records 348 occurrences of second person singular *fueste* vs 81 of *fuiste* and 339 occurrences of *fuemos* vs 64 of *fuimos*. Clearly the *fui*-series really was “out there” somewhere, even if Nebrija does not mention it. Another example of Nebrija’s failure to allude to forms that most certainly existed in his time is identified by Herce (2020, 94): «Nebrija [...] gave *terné* and *ternía* as the 1SG future and conditional of *tener* but, surprisingly, *vendré* and *vernía* as the 1SG future and conditional forms of *venir*. Corpus evidence suggests, however, that, despite his description, Nebrija would have also been familiar with the alternative forms *tendré* or *verné*». We may surely assume that the same is true of *cabo* in relation to *quepo*. Moreover, the passage mentioned by Rini, where Nebrija provides the form *sabo*, comes from chapter 8 of the *Reglas*, and the whole point of that chapter is to demonstrate that numerous verb-forms are *not* used even though the analogy of regular verbs might reasonably lead one to expect that they should be. These include, by the way, such hypothetical non-forms as *sabí* for *supe*, or *cabí* for *cupe*. *Sabo* is cited by Nebrija as just another of those forms that one might expect to exist, but there is no more implication

²⁶ Because evidence for the alleged complete historical rupture between *CAPIO* and *quepo* is lacking, I do not need to discuss the various analogical mechanisms by which Rini argues that *quepo* made its alleged «miraculous appearance» (Rini 2020b, 743) from the late sixteenth century. But I will say that it is perplexing that those analogical mechanisms would have lain mysteriously dormant for several centuries beforehand, only to spring into life in the sixteenth century.

²⁷ That a first person singular form of this verb tends to be perceived by speakers as somehow odd or unusual is confirmed, for example, by the reactions of Moll’s informants (Alcover and Moll 1932, 20) for the localities of Bohí and Vilaller in western Catalonia each of whom, being asked to provide such a form for the present indicative in their dialect, declared that he did not use it. It is significant that they apparently only made this comment for the present indicative: the first person singular forms for other tenses and moods for this verb (e.g., the present and imperfect subjunctive, future and conditional) were given without comment but of course, unlike those of the present indicative, these forms are readily and easily predictable.

that it *does* exist than there is for any other of the pseudo-forms he invents. In fact, Rini (2020b, 739) points out that there actually are some attestations of *sabo* from texts of that period, but there is no reason to think that Nebrija, by citing *sabo*, means to evoke them as an alternative to *sé*. Rather, the fact that he lists *sabo* among forms that are not used, when we have independent evidence that it really was sometimes used, tends to confirm that he cannot be taken as a guide to contemporary morphological variation. Overall, we may say that while Nebrija's testimony is golden his silence is not.

6. Conclusion

No cabe duda. There is absolutely no room for doubt that the morphological history of *caber* cannot be taken for granted, as it has so often been in discussions of Spanish historical morphology, and we have Joel Rini to thank for awakening us to this fact and its theoretical implications. Close philological and theoretical analysis indeed confirms the very remarkable nature of *caber*, but this verb is quite «astonishing» enough without need for overstatements.

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