

A note on the possible origins of Istro-Romanian (IR) verbs in **-[ɛi]** and **-[ui]**

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Istro-Romanian presents two novel conjugation classes without parallel in other Romance languages, of problematic origin. One class has novel thematic vowel [ɛi] and, restricted in the dialect of Žejane, there appears to be a further class with the thematic vowel [ui]. Thematic [ɛi] (see, e.g., Kovačec 1971:145;1984:574) is certainly a local IR innovation, but has the exact same paradigmatic distribution as the inherited theme vowel [i] of the fourth conjugation and, like the latter, it alternates with the ‘augment’ (corresponding to Romanian *-esc, -ești, -ește ... -esc*, but here in the forms *-'es, -'eʃ, -'ɛ*) in the cells of the singular and third person plural present, and in the second person singular imperative (1, 2):

(1) Istro-Romanian fourth conjugation verb in thematic [i] (and ‘augment’)

Infinitive	ko'si 'reap'					
Past part.	ko'situ					
Gerund	ko'sinda					
	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
Present	ko'ses	ko'seʃ	ko'sɛ	ko'sim	ko'sits	ko'ses
Imperfect	ko'sijam	ko'sijaj	ko'sija	ko'sijan	ko'sijats	ko'sija
Conditional	ko'sir	ko'siri	ko'sire	ko'sirem	ko'sirets	ko'siru

(2) Istro-Romanian verb in thematic [ɛi] (and ‘augment’)

Infinitive	ko'pei 'dig'					
Past part.	ko'peitu					
Gerund	ko'peinda					
	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
Present	ko'pes	ko'peʃ	ko'pɛ	ko'peim	ko'peits	ko'pes
Imperfect	ko'pejam	ko'pejaj	ko'peja	ko'pejan	ko'pejats	ko'peja
Conditional	ko'peir	ko'peiri	ko'peire	ko'peirem	ko'peirets	ko'peiru

The origins of thematic [ɛi] are murky (see Pușcariu 1926:170f. for discussion of some attempted explanations), but what is undisputed is that it is characteristic of loanwords and, specifically, of Italo-Romance loans from first conjugation verbs with thematic [a], and of Slavic loans with infinitives in *-ati*. Popovici (1914:95f.) appears to claim (see Pușcariu 1926:171) that the vowel [a] in the donor languages did not correspond to any vowel of IR (which has stressed [a] but not [a]), and that [ɛ] is an attempt to accommodate this new vowel to IR phonology. Pușcariu reasonably objects that loanwords in [a] in fact generally appear in IR with [a] or [a] preserved and that, in any case, Popovici does not satisfactorily explain why the result in the verb is a diphthong rather than a plain vowel. Pușcariu's own explanation, however, is arguably no less contrived (1926:171). He claims that these forms originate in Croatian 1/2PL imperatives in *-ajmo -ajte*. Given the general identity in IR between the 1/2PL forms of the imperative and those of the present, these forms also pass, allegedly) into the present, and subsequently replace the theme vowel of the relevant

verbs generally. The notion that imperative forms could lead to wholesale rebuilding of other parts of the paradigm is by no means implausible (cf. Maiden 2006, 2007) — even though one might ask why only this kind of Croatian imperative had such an effect, and not the other series of imperatives in *-imo*, *-ite*. A more substantial objection is that the outcome is [ɛi] rather than expected *[ai] — a problem which Pușcariu resolves by invoking the analogical influence of the 3SG form of the augment, namely -ε. What is signally not explained thereby is why the new theme vowel *[ai] should find itself alternating paradigmatically with the fourth conjugation augment in the first place, or why precisely the vowel of the 3SG of the augment should influence the new theme vowel *[ai], while it does not have the same effect on the usual fourth conjugation theme vowel [i].

What is at work here is probably not, in fact, the introduction of a novel thematic vowel in conformity to an existing pattern of paradigmatic distribution of theme vowels, but rather, the emergence of a new conjugational class as an automatic consequence of sound change. In effect, the [ɛi] class is a phonologically explicable offshoot of the [i] class, and for that reason shares the latter's paradigmatic distribution (and its characteristic alternation with the augments). Conclusive proof is elusive, but in the absence of a convincing purely morphological argument, a phonological account seems a strong candidate. It is well established that in Istro-Romanian the 'default', most productive, conjugation class is that characterized by [i] and the augment. This is the class into which verbs borrowed from other languages are usually put. Indeed, Pușcariu (1926:171) observes that some verbs in [ɛi] also have attested variant forms in [i] (e.g., mi'seṭ or mi'si 'mix, crumble' < Cr. *mišati*). The [ɛi] class is simply the phonologically regular product of assigning verbs which in their source language (Italo-Romance or Croatian) have a theme [a] to the fourth conjugation. This [a] was analysed by IR speakers as a part of the root of the borrowed verb, and simply combined, on introduction into IR, with the native theme vowel [i].¹ Thus an infinitive such as ku'heṭ 'boil', from Croatian *kuhati*, would first have been borrowed as *kuha+'i (i.e., *kuha'i).² Correspondingly, in combination with the augment one would have obtained *kuha'es[k], etc. My claim is that subsequently, and for purely phonological reasons, the resulting *[a'i] became ['ɛi], while *[a'e] became ['e]. The difficulty in demonstrating such a line of phonological development is that the postulated *[a'i] and *[a'e] appear to have been unique in the phonological structure of IR as is, indeed, the modern diphthong [ɛi], which is apparently virtually restricted to fifth conjugation morphology, and seems otherwise to occur — significantly — only at the boundary between a theme vowel and inflexional ending, in imperfect tense forms of the type ka'deṭam (< ka'de 'fall' + imperfect ending -ṭa-). That [a] should undergo fronting³ when immediately preceding a stressed high vowel is wholly plausible on universal phonological grounds, and is an adjustment replicated across many languages, although it does not seem otherwise demonstrable for Istro-Romanian on internal evidence. As for the shift of stress implicit in the postulated development *[a'i] > ['ɛi], it must be noted that IR has no rising diphthongs with a high-vowel nucleus. Those that did have it in the past have

¹ This line of argument is ruled out as a possible synchronic analysis by Kovačec (1971:145), but he gives no reason to do so other than analytical convenience.

² Pușcariu (1926:171) indeed observes that there are some attestations of [ai], rather than [ɛi], as the theme vowel of this verb (e.g., stam'paṭu 'printed').

³ The outcome for *[a'i] is ['ɛi] (although ['eṭi] is also attested, for example in Brdo: see Pușcariu 1926:89;171f.; Kovačec 1971:36). Presumably for *[a'e] we could assume an initial stage *[e'e], followed by fusion to [e].

undergone stress-retraction: thus, *a'udu (cf. Romanian a'ud) > 'avdu 'I hear'. That a putative *[ɛ'i] (<*[a'i]) should end up as ['ɛi] is therefore far from implausible.

Some internal comparative support for this hypothesis comes from another quarter, one all but unknown⁴ to Pușcariu. In 'northern' IR (i.e., the dialect of Žejane) there exists yet another conjugation class, characterized by the theme vowel [ui] (3):

(3) Conjugation in theme [ui] in Žejane

INF	veri'vui 'come repeatedly'					
PST.PRT	veri'vui <u>tu</u>					
GER	veri'vui <u>nda</u>					
	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
PRS	veri'vui <u>s</u>	veri'vui <u>f</u>	veri'v ε	veri'vui <u>m</u>	veri'vui <u>ts</u>	veri'vui <u>s</u>
IPF ⁵						
COND	veri'vui <u>r</u>	veri'vui <u>ri</u>	veri'vui <u>re</u>	veri'vui <u>rem</u>	veri'vui <u>rets</u>	veri'vui <u>ru</u>

The source of [ui], a very frequent formative in this dialect, is a Croatian imperfective aspect-marking affix *-u-*. As is apparent from the above, this new theme vowel has the same paradigmatic distribution as theme [i] and [ɛi], but [ui] also occurs in the first and second person singular and third person plural of the augment (unlike verbs in [i] and [ɛi]). We could postulate again the combination of forms in *-u* with inflexional [i], yielding, for example, infinitives in *[u'i] and augmented forms in *[u'esk]. These diphthongs are rare (although not quite unknown) in IR, and again we may propose that they were resolved in favour of a statistically far more common type, namely [ui]. The only other resolution of diphthongs of this type involves the conversion of syllable-initial [u] into [v], and indeed the ending *-[vɛ]* frequently found in the third person singular of these verbs (e.g., Kovačec 1971:141) bespeaks an historically underlying [u'ɛ] (cf. also Pușcariu 1926:172 for an example of a 1SG form in *-vés*).

I cannot claim here to have developed a clinching argument in favour of the view that the novel theme vowels of Istro-Romanian are merely phonological offshoots of the fourth conjugation, but I may have done enough to show that there is a very plausible case to be answered. At any rate, the balance of evidence is against any notion of purely 'morphological' creation of these new conjugation classes, independently of phonology.⁶

References

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⁴ See Petrovici and Neiescu (1964:192n22). Pușcariu (1926:172) shows some acquaintance with this class, but without apparent knowledge of the particular characteristics which it has in Žejane.

⁵ In this dialect (see Kovačec 1984:576) the synthetic imperfect is no longer used.

⁶ For a possible example, from the Romanian dialects of the Banat, of the emergence of a new theme vowel [u], see Maiden (2009:80). The phenomenon is, however, circumscribed to one or two verbs, for reasons explained there.

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