

The Role of Autonomous Morphology in Language Change

Aronoff (1994) identified with analytical rigour a phenomenon of which many morphologists already sensed the existence. Some aspects of morphology are autonomous — not (synchronically) determined by phonological, syntactic or semantic factors, but pertaining to a 'morphomic level' located between phonology and syntax yet independent of either. Aronoff's illustrations included the Latin 'third stem' (an irreducibly heterogeneous set of cells in the verb paradigm shares the same stem-shape, whatever the phonological identity of the stem) and the English 'past participle' (both phonologically and functionally heterogeneous). Aronoff called for a wider search for morphomic phenomena; evidence that many languages (at least of the 'fusional' type) exhibit them emerges in, for example, Stump (2001:169-211), Baerman et al. (2005:183-86).

Most work on 'morphology by itself' has taken a synchronic perspective. However, in his diachronic studies of Romance, Maiden (e.g., 2005, 2009) identifies 'morphomic' inflectional phenomena with twofold significance:

- First, they suggest such phenomena have psychological reality. Aronoff's prime examples are synchronic, and could possibly be seen as historically accidental remnants of some earlier stage (when the alleged 'morpheme' was still extramorphologically motivated), surviving through 'inertia', with the distributional regularities having no 'psychological reality' for speakers. Maiden's examples involve morphological changes which presuppose speakers' awareness of 'morphomic' distributional patterns.
- Second, the Romance examples suggest that the replication of morphomic structure can drive inflectional change. Indeed, the Romance evidence suggests speakers have no preference for extramorphologically motivated patterns of allomorphy over morphomic ones.

The diachrony of autonomous morphological phenomena raises major questions, including:

- How can we know that allegedly morphomic phenomena in diachrony are genuinely such?

- How do morphemes emerge?
- How and why does autonomously morphological structure persist?
- How and why do morphemes 'die'?
- Is there a discrete boundary between the autonomously morphological and the extramorphologically motivated?
- Can morphemes be sociolinguistically variable?