

## ON SOME OF THE USES OF SCHWA (Ă) IN ROMANIAN VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

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**Abstract.** The emergence of the phoneme schwa (ă) in Romanian is still an ardently disputed topic. The paper analyzes some aspects of Romanian verbal morphology, in which the uses of schwa differentiate verbal morphemes in terms of person and tense. Although it has been stated that the origin of this phoneme had to be looked for in the alternation between the definite and indefinite nominal forms, the present study shows that the phoneme schwa might be older than this.

The present paper treats some aspects of Romanian verbal morphology, which have not been definitively solved yet.

In Romanian, the present indicative of a verb belonging to the 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation class, e.g., *a lăudá* ‘to praise’, runs as follows: *eu laúid* ‘I praise’, *tu laúzi* ‘you praises’, *el laúďă* ‘he praises’, *noi lăudám* ‘we praise’, *voi lăudáți* ‘you praise’, *ei laúďă* ‘they praise’.<sup>1</sup>

One can see that the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural has a non-etymological stressed [ə] as ending: Lat *laudámus* should have given Rom \**lăudám*, not *lăudám*.<sup>2</sup> This *ă* is present in the majority of the Romanian dialects, the most notable exception being Istro-Romanian.

The usual explanation given for this is an analogy between the present and imperfect: 3<sup>rd</sup> SG IMPF *lăudá* is to 3<sup>rd</sup> SG PRES *laúďă* what 1<sup>st</sup> PL IMPF is to 1<sup>st</sup> PL PRES. Thus, the 1<sup>st</sup> PL PRES becomes *lăudám* and differentiates itself from the imperfect *lăudám*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Latin paradigm runs: *laudo, laudas, laudat, laudamus, laudatis, laudant*.

<sup>2</sup> The first *ă* = [ə] is the result of the synchronic rule which turns, as in English for example, any unaccented *a* into ə.

<sup>3</sup> Dimitrescu *et alii* (1978:301) considers it as an independent innovation in all the dialects of Romanian; I would rather see it as a Common Romanian innovation that did not spread to the dialect that will eventually become Istro-Romanian. Along the same lines, Sala (1976:192) concludes that “il est très probable que c’est la morphologie qui est intervenue...à marquer la difference entre le présent, imparfait...”.

I do not consider this solution very compelling for two reasons: first, the accent is situated on *ă* in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural, but not on *ă* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular; second, it is not clear what the connection was between these persons so that the analogy could work.

I propose here a new solution, which is also based on an analogical process between the present and imperfect. Let us compare the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural of the present and imperfect forms from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> conjugation classes, focusing on what happened from Latin to Common Romanian. In this scheme, I will assume that the synchronic rule by which any unaccented *a* turns into *ă* was already present in Romanian at this stage:

**Latin:**

|                      |                      |                        |
|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> CONJ | PRES <i>laudamus</i> | IMPF <i>laudabamus</i> |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> CONJ | PRES <i>videmus</i>  | IMPF <i>videbamus</i>  |

**Common Romanian**

|                      |                     |                     |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> CONJ | PRES <i>lăudămu</i> | IMPF *[ləudə(b)ămu] |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> CONJ | PRES <i>vedămu</i>  | IMPF *[vede(b)ămu]  |

In this situation, the alternation *e/ea* between the present and imperfect of the 2<sup>nd</sup> conjugation may have influenced the 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation class and its alternations. The imperfect of the 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation would have had initially the suffix *-\*ăa-* < *-aba-*, where *ă* is the result of the original unaccented *a*. The analogical process then can be described as follows: if *ea* alternated with *e* between the present and imperfect in the 2<sup>nd</sup> conjugation, then *\*ăa* could alternate only with *ă* in the 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation for the same tenses. This analogy assumes the existence of a diphthong *\*ăa* at this stage of Romanian, which later contracted to *a*.

There is, however, a problem with this solution: if, indeed, *ă* in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural is the result of this analogy, why did the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural not participate in this? Why does Romanian not have *lăudăți*? The reason for this is obscure, but it may simply have to do with the sporadic character of the analogical processes in general.

As I said above, the case of Istro-Romanian is different since this process did not take place there.<sup>4</sup> In addition, this dialect innovated in the imperfect paradigm, where the 4<sup>th</sup> conjugation formed the basis for all the other conjugation types: IMPF *audiām* ‘to hear’ (< Vulg. Lat. *audibam*) was the basis for *scapaīam* ‘to drop’ (Lat. *excipere*) from the 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3.

Another *crux* of the Romanian verbal morphology is the form of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular perfect for verbs belonging to the 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation class.<sup>5</sup> These forms have an accented *ă* = [ə]as ending. For example, Rom. INF a *lăuda* [aləwudá] < Lat. *laudare* ‘to praise’ has 3<sup>rd</sup> SG PERF *lăudă* = [ləwudə] < Lat. PERF *laudáuit*.<sup>6</sup> The normal evolution should have been [ləwudá], which would have been identical to the imperfect. Romanian, however, displays a different form. While most opinions share the view that this has been an analogical process in order to distinguish the perfect from the imperfect, there is little agreement on how the analogy worked.<sup>7</sup>

A possible answer can be found in the paradigm of the 4<sup>th</sup> conjugation. A verb like Lat. *audire*, for example, had the 3<sup>rd</sup> PERF *audiuit*. This perfect type was parallel to that of the 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation class, i.e., having the suffix *u* added to the verbal root. Thus, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, *audiuit* was parallel to *laudáuit*. In the transition from Latin to Common Romanian, these two forms became very early *\*audi* and *\*laudá*. On the other hand, the present tense of such verbs must have been *\*[aúdí]* and [laúde]. This, then, may have offered the premise for the following analogy:

|                      |                                |                                |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 4 <sup>th</sup> CONJ | PRES <i>*aúdí</i> <sup>8</sup> | PERF <i>*aúdí</i> <sup>9</sup> |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> CONJ | PRES <i>laúde</i>              | PERF X                         |

The solution is exactly what we find in Romanian: *lăudă* [ləwudə].

The above facts show how old the phonemicization of [ə] may be. Given the fact that *i* > *e* (*\*audi* > Rom. *aude*) precedes the emergence of the diphthong *ea*,<sup>10</sup> it means that the phoneme /ə/ could appear even before it was used in the alternation between the definite and indefinite nominal forms, e.g. *casă* – *casa*, which is parallel to *parte* – *partea*. The perfect forms analyzed above, then, could be at the origin of the phoneme *ă*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is the Romanian ‘perfectul simplu’.

<sup>6</sup> The [w] in [ləwuda] is due to the fact that, synchronically, Romanian syllables must have onsets.

<sup>7</sup> Densusianu (1997: 221) correlates this ending with that of the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural of an old perfect *lăudăm*. It is, again, not clear what the connections are between these personal forms; cf. Dimitrescu *et al.* (1978: 309); Rosetti (1978: 154).

<sup>8</sup> The keystone of this demonstration is that the analogy took place before *ĩ* in *\*aúdí* became *e* (Rom. *aúde*).

<sup>9</sup> This form gave in Common Romanian, after fricativization, *\*audzí* > Rom. *auzí*. Aromanian still has *audzí*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rom. *neagră* < Lat. *nīgra*.

<sup>11</sup> Sala (1976: 194) argues that the phoneme *ă* occurred with the contrastive pair *casă* – *casa*.

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