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

CĂTĂLIN ANGHELINA

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 1st conjugation class, e.g., *a lăudá* 'to praise', runs as follows: *eu laúd* 'I praise', *tu laúzi* 'you praises', *el laúdă* 'he praises', *noi lăudắm* 'we praise', *voi lăudáți* 'you praise', *ei laúdă* 'they praise'.[1]

One can see that the 1st person plural has a non-etymological stressed [ə́] as ending: Lat *laudámus* should have given Rom *lăudám, not *lăudắm*.[2] 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: 3rd SG IMPF *lăudá* is to 3rd SG PRES *laúdă* what 1st PL IMPF is to 1st PL PRES. Thus, the 1st PL PRES becomes *lăudắm* and differentiates itself from the imperfect *lăudám*.[3]

[1] The Latin paradigm runs: *laudo, laudas, laudat, laudamus, laudatis, laudant*.

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

[3] 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…".

RRL, **LIII**, *4*, p. 529–532, Bucureşti, 2008

BDD-A300 © 2008 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 02:44:07 UTC)

I do not consider this solution very compelling for two reasons: first, the accent is situated on *ă* in the 1st person plural, but not on *ă* in the 3rd 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 1st person plural of the present and imperfect forms from the 1st and 2nd 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:

1st CONJ	PRES *laudamus*	IMPF *laudabamus*
2nd CONJ	PRES *videmus*	IMPF *videbamus*

Common Romanian

1st CONJ	PRES *lăudámu*	IMPF *[ləudə(b)ámu]
2nd CONJ	PRES *vedému*	IMPF *[vede(b)ámu]

In this situation, the alternation *e*/*ea* between the present and imperfect of the 2nd conjugation may have influenced the 1st conjugation class and its alternations. The imperfect of the 1st 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 2nd conjugation, then **ăa* could alternate only with *ă* in the 1st 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 1st person plural is the result of this analogy, why did the 2nd 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.[4] In addition, this dialect innovated in the imperfect paradigm, where the 4th conjugation formed the basis for all the other conjugation types: IMPF *audiiam* 'to hear' (< Vulg. Lat. *audibam*) was the basis for *scapaiam* 'to drop' (Lat. *excapere*) from the 1st conjugation.

[4] See note 3.

BDD-A300 © 2008 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 02:44:07 UTC)

Another *crux* of the Romanian verbal morphology is the form of the 3rd person singular perfect for verbs belonging to the 1st conjugation class.[5] These forms have an accented *ă* = [ə]as ending. For example, Rom. INF a lăuda [aləwudá] < Lat. *laudare* 'to praise' has 3rd SG PERF *lăudă* = [ləwudə] < Lat. PERF *laudáuit.*[6] 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.[7]

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

4th CONJ	PRES *aúdĭ[8]	PERF *audī[9]
1st CONJ	PRES *laúdă*	PERF X

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

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*,[10] 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*.[11]

[5] This is the Romanian 'perfectul simplu'.

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

[7] Densusianu (1997: 221) correlates this ending with that of the 1st 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).

[8] The keystone of this demonstration is that the analogy took place before *ĭ* in *aúdī became *e* (Rom. *aúde*).

[9] This form gave in Common Romanian, after fricativization, *audzí > Rom. *auzí*. Aromanian still has *audzi*.

[10] Cf. Rom. *neagră* < Lat. *nĭgra*.

[11] Sala (1976: 194) argues that the phoneme *ă* occurred with the contrastive pair *casă* - *casa*.

BDD-A300 © 2008 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 02:44:07 UTC)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Densusianu, O., 1997, *Histoire de la langue roumaine*, Bucureşti (original edition 1901, Paris).
Dimitrescu, F., E. Barborica, C. Calaraşu, M. Cvasnîi, M. Marta, L. Ruxăndoiu, V. Pamfil, M. Theodorescu, E. Toma, 1978, *Istoria limbii române*, Bucureşti, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică.
Rossetti, Al., 1978, *Istoria limbii române*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică.
Sala, M., 1976, *Contributions à la phonétique historique du roumain*, Paris, Klincksieck.

BDD-A300 © 2008 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 02:44:07 UTC)