DRAWBACKS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF ANALOGY IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES. THE IRREGULAR PLURAL OF NOUNS

Lavinia Seiciuc, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Stefan cel Mare" University of Suceava

Abstract: Languages change over time due to a series of factors, wherein the most important is the influence of the substratum, which acts both on the form and the semantic contents of a word or grammatical structure. One of its most important aspects is the principle of analogy, the main cause for the "regularization" of irregular forms; this process was active diachronically, as we notice in the historical research of languages (e. g. the process that changed Latin into Romance languages), but is still active synchronically in foreign languages classes, when students tend to replace irregular forms with "regular" ones. Our study will try to identify the main issues concerning the principle of analogy in teaching Romance languages by comparing them to the historical changes in Romance linguistics.

Keywords: linguistic change, substratum, ethnolinguistic factor, analogy, foreign languages.

1. Linguistic changes are due to a series of historical circumstances, but mostly to the ethnolinguistic factor, which is associated with the linguistic and cultural particularities of the substratum. Concretely, the named factor consists of two aspects called *bases*: the *phonological* one which generally concerns the form, and the *psychological* one which mostly concerns the meaning of a word. Such an assertion would nevertheless be extremely simplistic and incomplete, as both bases can affect both linguistic plans (for example in isolated changes, folk etymology, complementarity, etc).

The latter of the two bases is most relevant to our discussion, as human psychology represents one of the most important causes for linguistic change. It appears in a wide range of forms, but mostly under the form of analogy, which is the manifestation of the need for logical understanding and usage of language.

In other words, when learning a foreign language we tend to: a. adapt it to our own linguistic habits that are specific to our own mother tongue, and b. adapt unknown foreign forms to the 'older' foreign forms we already know. While the former tendency mostly affects the syntactic and lexical levels, the latter is more visible in morphology.

2. The principles we have just formulated apply both to the history of modern languages and to the process of acquiring a foreign language in class. From a historical viewpoint, the comparison to one's native language has produced specific forms which set apart one language from the genetically related ones, causing divergent evolutions; let us compare, for example, the compound numeral *eighty* in Latin and the corresponding forms in several Romance languages:

Latin	*octoginta*[1]

1 See our analysis in Gina Măciucă (ed.), *Identitatea lexicală şi morfologică a limbii române în contextul multilingvistic european. Consonanţe şi disonanţe*, II: *Substantivul*, chap. II: *De la latină la limbile romanice* (p. 301-357), Editura Universităţii „Ştefan cel Mare", Suceava, 2013.

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)

Catalan	*vuitanta*
French	***quatre-vingts***[2]
Italian	*ottanta*
Portuguese	*oitenta*
Romanian	***optzeci***
Spanish	*ochenta*

The forms in the table are quite relevant: while Catalan, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish conserve the Latin form *octoginta* (with the corresponding phonetic changes), in French and Romanian we encounter different forms, created under specific pattern, while using the Latin linguistic material.

The vigesimal system is considered to be of a Celtic origin in French, as proved by the similarities with the systems in some modern Celtic languages (Welsh, Irish, Scottish, Breton), with the traditional English numbers (a *score* means "twenty") or with other European languages that had a certain Celtic element during the era of their formation or consolidation (s. a. Basque and possibly Danish, some Slovenian and certain Albanian dialects, etc.)[3]. On the other hand, the Romanian term *optzeci* is a compound word whose elements are *opt*, "eight", and *zeci*, "tens". A similar pattern can be found in Albanian, with some exceptions, and in Bulgarian and other South Slavic languages, so we can only point to the manifestation of the Balkan Sprachbund in the Romanian area.

3. Comparison to the previously acquired forms of a foreign language usually produce changes that may be similar in various related languages, as the common mechanism is based solely on two aspects: model and intuition. If repeated in different contexts, the model becomes a pattern; any form that does not fall into the pattern is perceived as insolite or just wrong, so there is a tendency to "correct" such forms. We see it clearly if we compare, for example, some forms adapted in Vulgar Latin to the ones used in Classical Latin; in our example, the "mould" consists in the declension of the numerals and adjectives of three terminations, and the "raw material" in the declension of the demonstrative pronoun *ille*, the etymon of both the 3rd person personal pronouns and definite articles in Romance languages (and some demonstrative forms, too), as well as the declension of the possessive adjectives *noster* and *vester*:

	Classical Latin	Vulgar Latin
one (m., f., n.)	*un**us**, -**a**, -**um***	*un**us**, -**a**, -**um***
tall (m., f., n.)	*alt**us**, -**a**, -**um***	*alt**us**, -**a**, -**um***
that (m., f., n.)	*ill**e**, illa, ill**ud***	*ill**us**, illa, ill**um***
our (m., f., n.)	*nost**er**, nostra, nostrum*	*nostr**us***[4]*, nostra, nostrum*

2 Though "regular" forms such as *septante, oitante/octante/huitante* or *nonante* have been in use in France alongside the vigesimal ones, and still are, at least some of them, in some countries such as Switzerland or Belgium

3 Stig Eliason, *Old Danish vigesimal counting: A comparison with Basque*, in Antje Hornscheidt *et. al.* (coord.), *Grenzgänger. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Jurij Kusmenko*, Berlin, Nordeuropa-Institut, 2006, pp. 91-110.

4 The change is facilitated by the oblique or objective forms, such as *nostrum, nostro* or *nostri*, etc. Nevertheless, we need to accept that Western Romance languages tend to inherit the accusative forms (fused with prepositional ablative in

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)

your [pl.] (m., f., n.)	***ve*st*er***, ***ve***stra, ***ve***strum	***vo*str*us***, ***vo***stra, ***vo***strum

The change we see in the Nominative desinences is due to the analogy with what appears to be "regular forms", i. e. words that establish a recurring pattern for the three genders: *-us, -a, -um* respectively for masculine, feminine and neutral. This linguistic change is common to all the areas where Romance languages appeared, as we can conclude from the following table:

English	*your* [pl.] *son*
Classical Latin	*filius vester* or *vester filius*
Vulgar Latin	*filiu- [ille] vostru-* or *[ille] vostru- filiu-*
Catalan	*el vostre fill*
French	*votre fils*
Italian	*il vostro figlio*
Portuguese	*o vosso filho*
Romanian	*fiul vostru*
Spanish	*vuestro hijo*

All the examples we have shown above are related to the principle of analogy, albeit to one's native tongue or to certain structures one has already learned in a foreign language (in our case we refer to our ancestors who needed to learn Latin). Fortunately, things have changed for the better in the last two thousand years, so studying a foreign language in our times is not as challenging as it used to be; the risk of applying incorrectly the principle of analogy is fairly diminished due to the huge amount of information available in textbooks and online pages.

Still, the temptation of leveling will lead some of the students directly into the linguistic trap of, let's say, regular declension or conjugation; it is not uncommon to hear or see forms like *oxes, gooses, mouses* or *singed, eated, holded* instead of the correct forms *oxen, geese, mice, sang, ate, held*, etc. And if we go back to the Romance languages, three major issues prevent the students from speaking them correctly: the plural of nouns, the irregular verbal forms and the sequence of times. Our paper will try to examine the first issue, i. e. the irregularities in the formation of plural and the tendencies of leveling in both native speakers and foreign students.

4. While certain languages such as Catalan, Portuguese and Spanish put little or no problems to the "apprentice" where the plural of nouns is concerned, French, Italian and especially Romanian can discourage anyone from learning them as foreign languages. The irregularities in the former group are very few. In Spanish and Catalan, the changes are mostly seen in writing: Sp. *una raíz – unas raíces, el corazón – los corazones*, Cat. *la dona – les*

Vulgar Latin), so the forms we mention in the table might have had a scarce circulation in Western Romania; in Eastern Romania, though, their former presence is fully justified by the forms in Italian and Romanian, two languages that tend to inherit the nominative case, as shown by the nominal declension in the plural (Lat. *lupus-lupi*, It. *lupo-lupi*, Rom. *lup-lupi*).

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)

dones; graphic alternations are also present in certain Portuguese nouns ended in *-m*: *um homem – uns homens*. Some phonological changes may occur in Portuguese: Port. *uma canção – umas canções*. Other than that, the plural of nouns is perfectly regular. But while an analogical form such as *canções* is, obviously, wrong, for Portuguese nouns the plural is hesitant, so multiple variants are accepted and/ore used by native speakers: *ancião – anciãos/ anciães/ anciões*, *ermitão – ermitãos/ ermitães/ ermitões*, *sultão – sultãos/ sultães/ sultões*, etc. So the principle of analogy is still at work in the living language, in a hesitant attempt to regularize such forms.

5. In French things become somewhat more complicated, as certain nouns receive the desinence *-x* instead of *-s* in the plural, sometimes causing changes in pronunciation: Fr. *un travail – des travaux, ciel – cieux, un château – des châteaux, un feu – des feux*, etc. Not to mention *oeil – yeux* or the nouns with a regular plural in writing, but with a different pronunciation from what we would expect: *oeuf – oeufs*, *boeuf – boeufs*, *os – os*, where the final consonant [f], respectively [s], is pronounced in the singular, but muted in the plural. Analogy would make students in French classes follow the *-s* rule, adding the desinence to any noun, independently of its type: *travails*, *ciels*, *feus*, etc. The *-x* orthography is a conventional one in French, as it was used in ancient text as an abbreviation for *-(l)us* after a vowel, in certain manuscripts (and later prints). It later replaced the desinence *-z* (pronounced [ts]) in the plural of certain words, such as *neveu* (< Lat. **nĕpōtem**), whose plural form in the oblique case (*cas régime*) was *neveuts* > *neveuz* > *neveux*. The next fragments[5] will show some samples:

Del déport du viel antif,
*De deus **biax** enfans petis,* [*biax = biaus*, in modern French: *beaux*]
Nicholete et Aucassins,
Des grans paines qu'il soufri,
Et des proueces qu'il fist
Por s'amie o le cler vis ?
***Dox** est li cans, **biax** (est) li dis,* [*dox = dous*, in modern French: *doux*]
Et cortois et bien asis.

Aucassins li biax, li blons,
*Li **gentix**, li amorous.* [*gentix = gentilus*, in modern French: *gentil*]

*Si nos dona tant del sien, que nos li eûmes en covent, se vos veniés ci, nos vos desisiens que vos alissiés cacier en ceste forest ; qu'il i a une beste que, se vos le potiés prendre, vos n'en donriiés mie un des 40 menbres por cinc **cenz** mars d'argent, ne por nul avoir* [*cenz = cents*, in modern French: *cents*]

6. Some irregular plural forms appear in Italian, too. The rule of thumb for the formation of plural forms in Italian is to replace the *-a* with an *-e*, while the *-e* and the *-o* are replaced with an *-i*, following the situation of the nominative forms in Latin. But things are far more complicated. Masculine nouns ending in *-a* take *-i* in the plural: It. *tema – temi*. When a noun ends in a stressed vowel or *-i*, it is invariable: It. *città – città, gioventù – gioventù, crisi* -

5 From *Aucassin et Nicolete*, F. W. Bourdillon (ed.), Manchester University Press, London-New York-Bombay, 1919, available on http://archive.org/stream/aucassinetnicole00bouruoft/aucassinetnicole00bouruoft_djvu.txt.

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)

crisi, etc., and the same thing happens to foreign words such as *il sport – gli sport, il club – i club*, etc. Further, there are some nouns called "*sovrabbondanti*", i. e. nouns with two forms in the plural (and, obviously, two different meanings): It. *il braccio – le braccia* (the arms of a human) / *i bracci* (the arms of the armchair or parts of an object: a cross, a building, a chandelier, etc.). With masculine nouns ending in *-ci* or *-gi*, rules are rather complicated: It. *medico – medici, amico – amici, fago - fagi*, but *mendico – mendichi, dialogo – dialoghi*... And the exceptions do not end here[6].

The main issue caused by the principle of analogy in Italian classes concern the last two categories; in the case of the *sovrabbondanti*, students will be tempted to ignore the "irregular" form in *-a*, which follows the plural of neutral nouns in Latin (Italian grammars do not admit to the existence of a neutral category in this language). Many grammars speak instead of irregular nouns that change gender from singular to plural, but they are in fact a perfect example of neutral nouns ended in *-a* in the plural; they behave like masculine nouns in the singular, and like feminine ones in the plural[7], as we see from the agreement of the modifiers: *centinaio – centinaia, riso – risa, uovo – uova, mille – mila*, etc.

The second case is far more difficult to manage, as it does not appear to exist any reliable rule to follow. Generally, most grammars indicate that paroxytone words preserve the velar consonant in the plural (*palco – palchi*), while proparoxitonouswords suffer palatalization from velar to affricate (*medico – medici*). But there are some notable exceptions to both categories, such as: *amici, greci, laici, porci, fagi, carichi, pizzichi, analoghi, arcipelaghi, cataloghi, dialoghi, naufraghi*, etc. Besides, competing forms exist in some cases in Italian, as many names and adjectives ended in *-co* o *-go* have two forms of plural in use, with no semantic or syntactic differences between them: *cauco, greco, osco, caduco, lombrico, opaco, bolscevico, farmaco, parroco, stomaco, monarco, sindaco, traffico, chirurgo, demiurgo, mago, drammaturgo, esofago, sarcofago*, etc. Many of the exceptions we have mentioned are words that are used with high frequency in day-to-day conversation, which proves once more that leveling is a tendency that is still active.

7. Romanian is the most irregular among the Romance languages, as it not only has a vocalic system in plural declension (with at least 5 desinences: *-e, -le, -i, -uri* and *-ă*), but their usage is prone to a variety of exceptions in all nominal classes, and, besides, there are certain vocalic alternations within the root itself.

The rule of thumb in Romanian would be very similar to that in Italian, i. e. 1st declension nouns ended in *-ă* or *-a* take an *-e* in the plural form, while 2nd and 3rd declension nouns take *-i* in plural. But this is just the tip of the iceberg, as following such a rule would end in countless mistakes.

First, because inside every declension nouns vary in gender; second, because phonological changes and analogy have led to what is known as vocalic alternations or apophony, as well as to some consonantic changes.

7.a. The 1st declension in Romanian contains three types of nouns: feminine ones ended in *-ă*, feminine nouns ended in tonic *-a* and a few masculine nouns ended in *-ă*. Each type forms its regular plural in a different way, respectively in *-e*, *-le* and *-i*:

casă (fem.) – *case*
basma (fem.) – *basmale*

6 See also the nouns and adjectives ending in *-cia, -gia, -io, -cio, -gio, -glio, -cie, -gie, -glie, -ista, -llo*, etc.
7 This is exactly the behavior of neutral nouns in Romanian.

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)

tată (masc.) – *taţi*

There are some exceptions to the rule, as a number of feminine ones ended in *-ă* will take the desinence *-i* in the plural form, usually those nouns whose root ends in an occlusive dentoalveolar or velar sound: *stradă-străzi, barcă-bărci, vacă-vaci, dungă-dungi, poartă-porţi*, etc. Traditionally, certain feminine nouns ended in tonic *-a* used to receive an *-i* in plural, and some of these forms are still used sometimes: *manta-mantăi* or *măntăi*.

The second declension is formed mostly of masculine and neutral nouns ended in consonant (and a handfull ended in *-i*, *-o* or *-u*); the general rule is that masculine nouns take *-i* and neutral take *-uri* in their forms of plural:

bărbat (masc.) – *bărbaţi*
picolo (masc.) – *picoli*
crai (masc.) – *crai*
fiu (masc.) – *fii*
cîmp (neut.) – *cîmpuri*[8]
solo (neut.) – *solouri*
beci (neut.) – *beciuri*
sacou (neut.) – *sacouri*

The first issue for the foreigner who wants to learn Romanian concerns the gender distinction. How do we know if a noun is masculine or neutral? Well, we don't, unless we open a dictionary. As simple (or complicated) as that. Furthermore, the rule we presented above has lots of exceptions, as nowadays many neutral nouns tend to take *-e* instead of *-uri* in the plural form, as neutral nouns in Romanian agree as masculine in singular and as feminine in plural: *act-acte, calculator-calculatoare, cabinet-cabinete, cuvînt-cuvinte*. Besides, in modern days we experience a strange phenomenon by which certain neutrals in technical terminology become masculine, thus changing their entire paradigm: *element-elemenţi, robinet-robineţi, segment-segmenţi*, etc., which complicates things even further. There are some neutral nouns which accept both forms in the plural with no semantic implications: e. g. *chibrit-chibrite/ chibrituri*.

Another desinence was frequent in Old Romanian for certain neutral nouns, preserved only in the declension of the word *ou* ("egg"), whose plural form is *ouă*; in older texts we can find numerous neutral nouns and adjectives forming plural with the help of this desinence *-ă* which was directly inherited from Latin neutrals: *cară, fiară, nouă*, etc.

The 3rd declension in Romanian nouns is a mixture of mostly feminine and masculine nouns (and some neutrals) ended in *-e* in singular, which normally form their plural with the desinence *-i*, directly inherited from the Latin nominative (as are all of the above): *floare* (fem.) – *flori*, *cîine* (masc.) – *cîini*, etc. Some of them, though, are invariable: *elice, carapace, iesle, nume*.

7.b. We have started the discussion about the difficulty posed by Romanian plurals by stating that there were two main issues, one regarding the gender of the nouns, as we have discussed above, and one caused by certain phonetical changes that take place during the declension of a noun.

8 Some nouns were traditionally masculine (or have undergone a period of accomodation) and they remain so in certain expressions, such as *a bate cîmpii*, "to beat around the bush", where *cîmp* is masculine instead of neutral.

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)

In Romanian, nouns apophony appears as an *e-umlaut* or as an *i-umlaut*, i. e. as a regressive metaphony triggered by the desinences *-e* or *-i* in the plural of these nouns, leading to the raising of the vowel *a* in the root (albeit as a solitary vowel or as the vowel of an ascending diphthong). Let us take a look at some examples:

fată – fete [*a>e*: e-umlaut]
iapă – iepe [*ja>je*: e-umlaut]
stradă – străzi [*a>ă*: i-umlaut]
seară – seri [*ja>e*: i-umlaut]
oaste – oşti [*a>ă*: i-umlaut]
băiat – băieţi [*a>e*: i-umlaut]
iarbă – ierburi [*ja>je*: i-umlaut]
blană – blănuri [*a>ă*: i-umlaut]

Things would be relatively easy to understand and memorize if we knew that every vowel will close due to the influence of the vowel in the desinence, except that it doesn't happen all the time. It sometimes occurs in patrimonial words and sometimes in neological words; but sometimes it just doesn't occur at all, so there isn't any reliable rule for such changes:

apă – ape
rază – raze
balustradă – balustrade
vacă – vaci
coapsă – coapse
soldat – soldaţi

Furthermore, there are some nouns that accept both plurals, with or without umlaut, but with semantic differences, s. a. *coardă – coarde* ("strings", as in *string quartet*, for instance) and *corzi* ("strings" in general, "ropes"). Historically speaking, the i-umlaut was far less generalized than it is today, as many feminine nouns in this category used to take an *-e* in their plural: *strade* instead of modern *străzi*, *şcoale* instead of *şcoli*, *boale* instead of *boli*, etc., according to the Latin pattern for the first declension.

A certain number of words (usually neutral nouns) suffer an e-umlaut that causes the lowering of the vowel in the root, producing the diphthongation of an *o* in the last syllable before the desinence: *ajutor-ajutoare, contor-contoare, tractor-tractoare*.

Some consonants suffer palatalization due to the palatal character of the plural desinence, especially in the case of the *yod*; as we see in the examples above, there are some patterns of change in the consonants: *t>ts, d>z, c>tʃ, g>dʒ*, i.e. occlusive consonants are replaced by their corresponding affricate (in the case of the consonant *d*, its corresponding affricate *dz* has disappeared from modern Romanian). Phonological changes in the consonants always lead to graphic changes, so another problem appears in the path of those who try to learn Romanian.

Leveling tendencies might be different in Romanian classes according to the native language of the students. Italians recognize the similarities between the two languages and they will be tempted to apply the rules of their own languages, especially in common words, which leads to unacceptable forms in modern Romanian such as *strade, şcoale, seare, ierbe*, etc. For the rest of the foreigners, the formation of the plural in Romanian will remain a

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)

mystery for a long time, as it does, unfortunately, for many Romanian native speakers who are unable of learning the correct forms of nouns in their mother-tongue.

8. Drawing the line, we have no choice but to accept that analogy is still at work in all the languages we have mentioned, especially in Italian and Romanian, where "regular" and "irregular" forms still compete in some cases. While the case is almost closed for the Western Romance languages, which solved the problem by simply adding the *-s* desinence to the nouns or adjectives[9], in Eastern asigmatic România different forms still compete when plural is concerned, as the leveling tendency competes with the historical evolution of words. While analogy may work in the benefit of the teachers and students in forming models and patterns (and this is how we usually teach and learn grammatical structures in foreign languages in an organized schedule), it can also become a "trap" in which students will fall every time they encounter an unknown word, so permanent contact with a foreign language and with its irregularities is the only solution to the problem.

References

Albright, Adam, *The morphological basis of paradigm leveling*, in Laura Downing, Tracy Alan Hall, Renate Raffelsiefen, (eds.), *Paradigms in Phonological Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 17–43

Eliason, Stig, *Old Danish vigesimal counting: A comparison with Basque*, in Antje Hornscheidt, Kristina Kotcheva, Tomas Milosch, Michael Rießler (coord.), *Grenzgänger. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Jurij Kusmenko*, Berlin, Nordeuropa-Institut, 1. Auflage, 2006, pp. 91-110

Hock, H. H., *Principles of Historical Linguistics*, Mouton de Gruyter, The Hague, 2nd edition, 1991

Hurford, James R., *Language and number. The emergence of a cognitive system*, Oxford / New York, Basil Blackwell, 1987

Klausenburger, J., *Morphologization: Studies in Latin and Romance morphophonology*, Max Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1979

Mánczak, W., *Tendences générales des changements analogiques*, "Lingua", 7, 1958. pp. 298–325 and 387–420

Penny, Ralph, *A History of the Spanish Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2nd edition, 2002

Pinker, Steven, *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*, Basic Books, New York, 1999

Seiciuc, Lavinia, *De la latină la limbile romanice*, in Gina Măciucă (ed.), *Identitatea lexicală şi morfologică a limbii române în contextul multilingvistic european. Consonanţe şi disonanţe*, II: *Substantivul*, Editura Universităţii „Ştefan cel Mare", Suceava, 2013, pp. 301

9 Also see Ralph Penny's *A History of the Spanish Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2nd edition, 2002, pp. 126 *et seq*.

BDD-A22296 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.82 (2026-11-18 08:16:04 UTC)