

Morphological gaps in diminutive formation: Some observations on Alemannic*

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Abstract

In Alemannic, there is remarkable morphological gap with verbal diminutives: They lack forms of the 1SG and, accordingly, the imperative. I try to identify the source of this gap that lies in prosodic wellformedness conditions for morphological words. Among the several potential causes that can lead to defective paradigms (Sims 2015: ch. 3), this phenomenon thus clearly belongs to the class that is related to the morphology-phonology interface.

1 Introduction

In Vorarlberg Alemannic (VA), two subclasses of weak verbs can be distinguished: Class 1, going back to the OHG *jan*-verbs, shows syncope of schwa in the 2/3SG.PRES and the participle, whereas the reduced vowel is retained in class 2, pooling the old *ēn*- and *ōn*-verbs (Braune & Heidermanns 2018: 404–419 [§§ 355–369]; Jutz 1925: 305–307 [§ 99]). This contrast is demonstrated by (1a) vs. (1b).

- (1) a. *zella* ‘count’, *zellsch* (2SG), *zellt* (3SG); *zellt* (PTCP)
b. *folga* ‘follow’, *folgasch* (2SG), *folgat* (3SG); *kfolgat* (PTCP)

Class 2 comprises a subset of verbs with an unusual prosodic structure, most prominently verbal diminutives with umlaut and the suffix *-(a)la* that can end up with a dactylus foot structure (´σσσ). For the sake of brevity, I refer to these cases as *dactylus verbal diminutives* (DVDs). The distribution of the

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two allomorphs is as follows: *-la* occurs with monosyllabic heavy stems,¹ see (2c, d), and *-ala* with stems ending in *l* (2a) or bisyllabic stems where word stress falls on a light syllable (2b). We will slightly revise these conditions below. Of these examples, the ones bearing *-ala* exhibit a dactylus (2a, b) and those suffixed with *-la* a trochaic pattern (2c, d). Note that verbal diminutives can be derived both from nominal and verbal bases.

- (2) a. *mool+a* (V) ‘draw’ → *mööl-ala* (DIM) ‘doodle’
 b. *Su.na* (N) ‘sun’ → *sün-ala* (DIM) ‘sunbathe’
 c. *bloos+a* (V) ‘blow’ → *blöös-la* (DIM) ‘blow (gently)’
 d. *Huus* (N) ‘house’ → *hüüs-la* (DIM) ‘fumble’

Historically, *-ala* derives from the OHG suffix combination *il-ōn*, and typical functions of verbal diminution are signalling of aktionsart contrasts like (de-)intensivation or iterativity (3). Subsequently, such derivations also gave rise to pejorative meanings, e. g. *lümmeln* ‘slouch’, *frömmeln* ‘to be a bigot’ (Dammel 2011: 332–333). As in Modern Standard German (MSG), they are only very weakly productive.

- (3) a. *lachen* ‘laugh’ – *lächeln* ‘smile’
 b. *beten* ‘pray’ – *betteln* ‘beg’
 c. *zünden* ‘ignite’ – *zündeln* ‘play about with fire’

Inflected word forms with dactylus foot structures, which also occur in some other contexts like e. g. comparatives (4), are an apparent exception to the well-established generalization that the unmarked foot structure in German is bisyllabic and features a trochee. Wiese (2000: 109–110) analyzes these cases as involving an obligatory final schwa-syllable that is extrametrical. In his typology of foot structures, Hayes (1985) distinguishes a hybrid type that allows the dactylus as a marked option (“in certain positions”) beside the trochee; a similar assumption is put forward by Kaltenbacher (1994).

- (4) a. *dumm* ‘stupid’ – *düm.me.r+er* (NOM.ST.MASC.SG) ‘more stupid’
 b. *lang* ‘long’ – *län.ge.r+e* (NOM.ST.FEM.SG) ‘longer’
 c. *schön* ‘beautiful’ – *schöne.r+es* (NOM.ST.NEUT.SG) ‘more beautiful’

2 Mind the gap

Turning to DVDs in Alemannic, this unusual prosodic structure leads to a remarkable morphological gap in that a synthetic 1SG.PRES form and, accordingly, the syncretic IMP.SG is missing (5). The other forms of the PRES.IND are unproblematic since the respective flexives *-asch* (2.SG) *-at* (3.SG), *-an* (PL) always ensure the same prosodic structure as the infinitive, viz. a dactylus.²

¹ I follow the standard definitions of syllable weight where light syllables feature short vowels and an empty coda while heavy syllables consist either of a long vowel or diphthong or short vowel plus coda consonant(s) (Hall 2011: 249). Note that many Alemannic dialects allow both ± long vowels and ± geminate consonants within a syllable (Seiler 2009: 239, 241–43 and the references quoted there).

² Most Alemannic dialects show complete person syncretism in the plural (König, Elspaß & Möller 2019: 158).

- (5) a. *mööläla* (INF) ‘draw (casually)’ → **möölal* (1SG/IMP.SG)
 b. *sünala* (INF) ‘sunbath’ → **süinal* (1SG/IMP.SG)

Let us take a short look at nominal diminutives for the sake of comparison. They show a parallel allomorphy between *-le* (< OHG *-līn*) and *-ile* (< OHG *ilīn*), leading to the familiar dactylus pattern in the latter case. In this context, however, syllable weight cannot be the relevant criterion because heavy CVC(C) stems can be combined with either suffix (6c, d). More specifically, long stressed vowels seem to preclude *-ile* (6a, b). Bisyllabic stems show some variation, e. g. with geminate obstruents (7a, b), but stem final *l* always triggers *-ile* (7c).

- (6) a. *Muus* [mu:s] ‘mouse’ → *Müüs-le* [ˈmy:s.lə] (DIM); **Müüs-ile*
 b. *Schoof* [ʃɔ:f] ‘scheep’ → *Schöf-le* [ˈʃœ:f.lə] (DIM); **Schöf-ile*
 c. *Has* [has] ‘rabbit’ → *Häs-ile* [ˈhɛ.sɪ.lə] (DIM); **Häsle*
 d. *Schnaps* [ʃnaps] ‘liquor’ → *Schnäpsl-e* [ˈʃnɛps.lə]; **Schnäpsile*
- (7) a. *Ketta* [ˈkʰet.tɐ] ‘chain’ → *Kettile* [ˈkʰe.tɪ.lə] ‘bracelet’ (DIM); **Kett-le*
 b. *Fläscha* [ˈflɛʃ.ʃɐ] ‘bottle’ → *Fläschle* [ˈflɛʃ.lə] ‘bottle’ (DIM); **Fläsch-ile*
 c. *Vogel* [ˈfɔg.l̩] ‘bird’ → *Vögile* [ˈfø.gɪ.lə] (DIM); **Vög-le*

Returning to verbal diminutives, I assume that the gap in the 1SG is caused by a prosodic clash that emerges due to the following conflicting demands:

- As with many High German dialects, Alemannic shows apocope of word-final schwa (König, Elspaß & Möller 2019: 146–147; see also Lindgren 1953 for some historical background). Therefore, the 1SG usually has a zero ending as a correspondence to *-e* in MSG.
- By contrast, the infinitive suffix shows a reduced vowel (either [ə] or [ɐ]) for MSG *-en*. This is due to *n*-apocope, a characteristic of many Alemannic dialects.
- Thus, the expected form of the 1SG would involve clipping of *-e*, yielding a trochee. This result, however, is ill-formed because it doesn’t fit the prosodic template for this inflectional form, which only allows a heavy and at most one additional light syllable.

This template restriction leads to clear ungrammaticality with DVDs (8); with trochaic ones like (9), the contrast is less clear but an additional syllabic lateral seems to be fine in principle.³

- (8) a. *blööterla* ‘dawdle’ → **blöö.terl* [tɔɪl]
 b. *mööläla* → **möö.lal* [lɐl]
 c. *sünala* → **sü.nal* [nɐl]
- (9) a. *vogla* ‘fuck’ → *vogl* [g.l̩]
 b. *zünsla* ‘play about with fire’ → *zünsl* [ns.l̩]

³ Verbs ending in *-(ə)rə* like *schtänkere* ‘badmouth’ seem to cause no problems: clipping of *-e* in the 1SG yields regular trochaic structures, viz. *schtänker* [ˈʃtɛŋkɐ].

c. *bröötla* ‘fry (gently)’ → ? *bröötl* [t.ɪ]

Three native-speakers consulted by me circumvent 1SG forms like (8) by using the *tun*-periphrasis, while they more readily accept the ones in (9). This analytic strategy consists of an inflected form of the verb *tun* ‘do’ and the (prosodically well-formed) infinitive. It is widely attested in German dialects, yet banned from the standard language;⁴ among its wide range of syntactic and semantic functions, it has also been hypothesized to be a repair strategy along these lines (see Fischer 2001: 147).

Another angle to look at this state of affairs is the concept of *word design* that is couched in a declarative approach to morphological exponence (Neef 1996): The idea is that there are two classes of wellformedness conditions that constrain the shape of the word as a basic category of linguistic analysis. While phonological constraints apply to all words of a given language, morphological constraints are only effective for a certain subset. A relevant example from MSG, which bears some resemblances to DVDs, would be the shape of the infinitive. In its canonical form, it must end with one reduced syllable featuring a nasal as final element ([+sonorant + nasal] / ___ #), e. g. *lesen* ‘read’ [le:zŋ], *sinken* ‘sink’ [zɪŋ.kŋ], *haben* ‘have’ [ha:bŋ], etc.⁵ Also from a crosslinguistic perspective, there is evidence that phonotactic constraints are sensitive to morpheme boundaries (Gouskova 2018).

3 Verbal diminutives and devectiveness

To wrap up our discussion, the missing 1SG.PRES with verbal diminutives in VA is an instance of a grammatical gap that belongs to the wider realm of morphological defectiveness. In her seminal monograph on this topic, Sims (2015: 26) defines this phenomenon as follows:

Definition 3.1. (A working definition of inflectional defectiveness)

1. IF there exists a set of morphosyntactic and/or morphosemantic feature values F that is well-defined and morphologically encoded for at least one lexeme belonging to part of speech C ;
2. AND IF there exists a well-formed syntactic structure S that requires F in combination with some lexeme L belonging to C ;
3. BUT any form of L_C that is inserted into S produces an ungrammatical construction;
4. THEN the paradigm cell defined by $\langle L_C, [F] \rangle$ is defective.

⁴ In MSG, the *tun*-periphrasis is only licit in VP-topicalization contexts with a single lexical verb, see (i) vs. (ii):

- (i) *Bügeln tut Simon sehr gerne.*
iron does Simon very gladly
“Simon does really like ironing.”
- (ii) ?? *Simon tut gerne bügeln.*

⁵ Note that the alternative realization of the infinitival suffix *-en* as [ɐŋ] usually can only be found with explicit pronunciation. Of course, I ignore cases where schwa has to be realized, e. g. with phonotactically defective stems like *atm* → *atmen* ‘breathe’ or those ending with a nasal. In the latter case, total assimilation of the infinitival suffix can be found as an alternative realization, e. g. *rennen* [rɛn(·)] ‘run’, *kämmen* [kʰɛm(·)] ‘comb’, *singen* [zɪŋ(·)] ‘sing’ (see Pröll 2021 on this phenomenon, which seems to also have a morphological directedness).

Obviously, all the conditions for defectiveness are fulfilled: Firstly, the 1SG.PRES is well-defined and morphologically coded for the vast majority of verbs in Alemannic (as for all varieties of German). Secondly, all declarative clauses require a finite verb form, and finiteness minimally relies on the feature bundle [F person, number].⁶ Thirdly, inserting any form of the relevant lexemes yields ungrammatically. However, this final condition is somewhat hard to assess in the face of the fact that a periphrastic form of the 1SG is indeed well-formed. Sims (2015: 40) addresses the delimitation problem that arises with regard to defectiveness and periphrases and proposes two criteria for segregating them, i. e. (A) fully-conventionalized form, and (B) complementary distribution. Criterion A hinges on the question of how conventionalized this circumlocutory strategy is, i. e. whether there are formal alternatives that achieve the same goal. Criterion B circles around the question whether the *tun*-periphrasis is in complementary distribution with the synthetic present tense.

The answer to A is affirmative: The *tun*-periphrasis is highly routinized in terms of its exponence – it features a properly inflected form of *tun* plus the infinitive. In the context of the DVDs at the center of our attention, it seems to be the only available option for expressing the 1SG. As to B, things are more complicated because the semantic status of this analytic strategy is unclear due to its polyfunctionality (see Fischer 2001 and Weber 2017: ch. 2 for a recent overview). In Alemannic, *tun* + INF can be used for marking subjunctive mood, but it can also feature the habitual or progressive subtypes of imperfective aspect (Jutz 1925: 286 [§ 94]; Schallert 2010: 36). Crucially, these latter uses are not hard-wired into the grammatical system in the sense that they need to be obligatorily expressed, i. e. the simple present (and additional adverbial modifiers) achieves the same goal. Another potential means of circumventing the 1SG in this context would be the *am*-progressive construction, consisting of an inflected form of *sein* ‘to be’ and an infinitive marked by the particle *am* (see Ramelli 2015 for details). While this construction explicitly expresses an aspectual distinction (imperfectivity) that the simple present leaves open, it is also non-obligatory.

Sims (2015: ch. 3) discusses several potential causes that can lead to defective paradigms. Our phenomenon clearly belongs to the class that is related to the morphology-phonology interface. Another example would be the indefinite genitive ending *-s* in Swedish that cannot be suffixed to stems with final sibilants, e. g. *hus* ‘house’ or *svans* ‘tail’ (Karlsson 2000: 648). With the definite genitive singular, this problem does not arise because of the intervening definite marker *-et*, viz. *hus-ets* (this and other cases are discussed in Sims 2015: 59–63).

4 Conclusions and outlook

While grammatical gaps in a more broad sense have enjoyed some attention in the literature, their grammatical causality still remains poorly understood (Fanselow & Féry 2002; Reis 2017; Strobel & Weiß 2019, and others). Roughly speaking, one can distinguish *syntactic gaps* that arise via conflicting demands between different grammatical constraints and *paradigmatic gaps* that seem to be confined to the realm of morphology or interactions between phonology and morphology. Examples for the first class would be the infamous verbs that fail to undergo verb movement to C (mostly backformations

⁶ I leave aside the question whether verbal mood and in particular tense are canonical finiteness features (see Nikolaeva 2013: 105–107 for some discussion).

like *uraufführen* ‘premiere’ or *notlanden* ‘make an emergency landing’) or resolution problems with subject-verb agreement with disjunctive coordinations like (10), where differing person features in both conjuncts don’t allow for a suitable agreement form on the finite verb (Reis 2017: 261–267).

- (10) Ich oder ihr ?komm-e | ?komm-t zur Party
 I or you.2PL come-1SG come-2PL to=the party

Examples for paradigmatic gaps are missing preterite forms of *schinden* ‘strain’ (Reis 2017: 257–261), as exemplified by (11), or the inanimate interrogative pronoun *was* that has no dative form (12) (see Jäger 2000 for a detailed analysis).

- (11) Der Professor ?schund | ?schand | ?schindete seine Studierenden.
 the professor strain.PST his students

- (12) Wem hat er einen Absatz hinzugefügt? * Dem Kapitel.
 what.DAT has he one paragraph added the chapter

Against this background, dialects offer an interesting testing ground for exploring (inflectional) gaps because they show a wide spectrum of phonological rules that are well-known to interact with morphological (ir-)regularities. I would be eager to know if there are other cases like the present one documented for VA, but hardly surprised if they do exist.

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