

Suppletion

G Boyé, Université Nancy 2, Nancy, France

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The term ‘suppletion’ is used to describe two distinct but related phenomena. In its original use, suppletion designates the diachronic process by which the inflectional paradigms of two unrelated words are fused to give rise to a new word with a mixed paradigm. This is what happened, for example, when the Old English verbs *gaþ* ‘to go’ and *wendan* ‘to turn’ mixed their paradigms to give rise to the modern *go* with the *go/went* alternation. In more recent literature, suppletion is often used to describe a type of allomorphy, where some forms of a word are based on different stems that are not synchronically related.

Note that suppletion in the first sense is one of the factors that can give rise to suppletion in the second sense, but that there is no one-one relationship; a paradigm may become synchronically suppletive because of the loss of some productive phonological alternation, in which case it is not suppletive in the diachronic sense. In the remainder of this article, we concentrate on suppletion in the more recent, synchronic sense.

The Types of Suppletion

The most common variety of suppletion is ‘stem suppletion’: the inflectional paradigm is split in areas containing inflectional forms based on the same stem. In each area, the forms of the word appear with the usual inflectional affix, but the stem is different from one area to the next. In French, for instance, the irregular verb *aller* ‘to go’ uses the stem *i* for the future and the conditional (FUT 1SG *i-rai*, 2SG *i-ras*, 3SG *i-ra*, etc.) but the stem *aill* for present subjunctive singular (1SG *aill*, 2SG *aill*-s, 3SG *aill*), presenting a suppletive alternation, where a regular verb like *aimer* uses the stem *aime* for both areas (FUT 1SG *aime-rai*, 2SG *aime-ras*, 3SG *aime-ra*, etc.; SUBJ 1SG *aime*, 2SG *aime*-s, 3SG *aime*).

In some cases, suppletion can target an isolated form such as the English present 3SG form *is* in the paradigm of *be*. In this particular case, the inflectional form could be analyzed as a suppletive stem *i* followed by the present 3rd singular affix *s*. But an isolated suppletive form can also resist analysis in terms of stem and inflectional affix: in Spanish, even though the 1SG of the present indicative is uniformly marked by a final *-o* (*-oy* for monosyllabic verbs), the verb *saber* ‘to know’ displays a suppletive form *sé* without the suffix *-o*. This form cannot be decomposed into a suppletive stem and a regular affix; the entire form is

suppletive. This type of irregularity can be described as ‘inflectional form suppletion.’

Suppletion is usually considered to be an inflectional phenomenon because it presupposes the presence of a paradigm in which the suppletion takes place. Nevertheless, suppletive stems can also be found in word formation. In Latin, for example, the deverbal noun ending in *-or* derived from *ferre* ‘to bear’ is *lator*. This is formed on its suppletive 3rd stem *lat-*, which is also used to build *ferre* supine *latum* (an inflectional form). In this example, suppletion occurs in word formation as well as in inflection. In this light, stem alternations such as *Glasgow/Glaswegian* or *Indianal/Hoosier* could be contrived as stem suppletion; however, without an inflectional paradigm, the distinction between suppletion and synonymy is difficult to define: *Australia/Aussie* is parallel to the previous pairs while *Aussie* is merely a synonym of the nonsuppletive *Australian*.

Linguists considering affixes as signs also apply the concept of suppletion to inflectional or derivational affixes. For inflection, in English, the regular inflectional affix for plural is *-s* (*cat/cats*) while some plurals are formed with the suffix *-en* (*ox/oxen*). For word formation, in French, inhabitant names are derived from the city names through different suffixes (*-ien*: *Paris* → *parisien*, *-ais*: *Marseille* → *marseillais*, *-ois*: *Lille* → *lillois*, *-ain*: *Toulouse* → *toulousain*, etc.). These suffixes could be analyzed as suppletive allomorphs of a single morpheme.

Suppletion and Stem Allomorphy

Among cases of stem allomorphy, suppletion is the extreme case where no synchronic relation can be found between the allomorphs. Alternatively, some stem allomorphies can be reduced to phonological alternations. In German, word final obstruents are devoiced creating predictable allomorphies in the paradigm of nouns *Tag* [tak] ‘day’, *Tage* [tagə] ‘days’.

Linguists disagree about the adequate description of intermediary cases where the stems are phonologically similar, but no productive phonological rule can account for the alternation. At one end of the spectrum, some linguists propose that all variations of shape (*feellfelt*, *make/made*, *ring/rang*, etc.), should be considered rule-governed allomorphies, and only the cases of complete dissimilarity (*go/went*, *belwere*) should be considered suppletive (Chomsky and Halle, 1968). At the other end, others make no distinction between nonpredictable allomorphies, and treat all irregularities on a par with each other (Pinker, 1999). This amounts to treating alternations such as *make/*

made as suppletive. Under such a view, suppletion has nothing to do with phonological dissimilarity. It may even be argued that two identical stems can enter a suppletive relation: the irregularity of an English verb like *cut* resides precisely in the absence of stem change between present and preterit (*cut/cut* and not *cut/cutted*).

The Exponence of Suppletive Stems

In inflectional paradigms, suppletion typically targets a natural class of forms associated with a morphosyntactic or morphophonological property. The selected class usually involves the most salient semantic contrast with the rest of the paradigm (Bybee, 1985). Veselinova (2003) showed that this kind of split occurs mainly in terms of tense/aspect, suppletive imperatives, or verb number. There seems to be some bias in the distribution of this typical stem suppletion in terms of genetic (suppletive imperatives in Afroasiatic and Caucasian languages) and areal (tense/aspect in Europe and verb number in North America) groupings. As the split involves natural classes, this leads to considering the stems with marked exponence as suppletive and unmarked as the base.

However, some languages (20%, mostly concentrated in Europe according to Veselinova) exhibit stem suppletion where some sets of forms associated with a suppletive stem do not constitute a natural class in term of semantic, syntactic or phonological features. In Spanish, for example, the description of the verb *hacer* ‘to do’ needs two stems for sets of forms without clear common properties: *haga* for the present subjunctive and the present indicative 1st singular; and *hace* for the rest of present indicative, the imperfective, the imperative, the infinitive, and the gerund.

To describe this kind of stem suppletion, Aronoff (1994) proposed to consider these types of stems as forms without meaning, ‘morphemes.’ The morphemes are purely morphological objects: phonological sequences without associated semantic or syntactic features, indexed to appear in specific paradigm spaces.

The Distribution of Suppletive Stems

If suppletion were a random phenomenon, it should be possible that stem suppletion targets completely different sets of inflectional forms for different words giving rise to large number of irregular inflection patterns. However, irregular inflection patterns are usually a lot less varied than is *a priori* conceivable.

This limitation of suppletion has long been recognized for languages with rich inflectional morphology.

The paradigm of an irregular word is usually described by giving its ‘principal parts’: a set of forms sufficient to identify suppletive stems and infer the rest of the paradigm (e.g., in Latin, *fero, ferre, tuli*, and *latum* are the principal parts of *ferre* ‘to bear’). Manuals for teaching English as a foreign language all use the plain form, the preterit and the past participle as the principal parts of a verb (setting apart auxiliaries and modals). If principal parts are inflectional forms exemplifying potential suppletive stems, then they can be conceived as stem slots indicating possible suppletion patterns. Consequently, stem slots constitute a level of paradigmatic organization, grouping inflectional forms together with respect to stem suppletion.

In French, all suppletion patterns in verbs can be described using 12 stem slots, but massive gaps in the suppletion patterns are observed (less than 0.01% of possible patterns actually exist). Even though, for instance, three slots are needed to describe the present indicative (Slot₁: singular; Slot₂: 3rd plural; Slot₃: 1st and 2nd plural), no French verb exhibits the same stem in Slot₁ and Slot₃ while presenting a different stem in Slot₂. Bonami and Boyé (2003) proposed that these gaps in the suppletion patterns are the result of a further organization of the stem slots by a network of default relations. Each idiosyncratic stem occupies a connected territory in the network.

The Causes of Suppletion

As with irregularity in general, token frequency is an important factor favoring suppletion. On one hand, suppletion being an idiosyncrasy, it needs to be memorized; a language learner needs to be sufficiently exposed to the suppletive forms to be able to detect them and store them. On the other hand, the more frequent words being committed to memory, they are the most likely to become irregular.

Suppletion is meant to happen in two contexts: etymological suppletion, when two distinct words with similar meanings come to be used in the same sense but for different parts of the inflectional paradigm, while the rest of their paradigms drops in frequency, creating the impression of a unique word being used; and non-etymological suppletion, when a regular phonological alternation dies away and is reanalyzed as allomorphic alternation, and in turn as suppletive alternation.

Maiden (1992) showed that some cases of non-etymological suppletion were not the product of the reinterpretation of a phonological alternation but that of a novel allomorphy. In Old Italian, stem-invariant verbs such as *fuggire* ‘to flee’ were subjected to allomorphic alternation based on a proportional

analogy with *leggere* ‘to read’. In his observation of Romance languages, novel allomorphies seem to be correlated with stem slots. The same slots seem to be also used in etymological suppletion, and both types of suppletion appear to involve a high degree of solidarity between the inflectional forms based on the same slot.

See also: Inflection and derivation (00115); Paradigm (00124).

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