

Phonologically Conditioned Allomorphy in the Morphology of Surmiran (Rumantsch)

Surmiran, like other forms of Rumantsch (and the Romance languages more generally) displays a great deal of stem-shape variation in its verbal morphology. Some of this is simply a matter of the “irregular verbs” whose memorization is the bane of the language learner. There is also a good deal of variation which is quite systematic, however. Although controlled by phonological factors, the variation in shape displayed by a majority of the verbal stems in Surmiran is nonetheless lexically determined and not simply the product of the operation of phonological rules. Such “phonologically conditioned suppletion” was first brought to the attention of generative phonologists by Carstairs (1986, 1988), and is now generally recognized as at least a logical possibility in most theories of phonology and morphology. To date however, few studies have appeared of systems in which this is a pervasive effect. The present paper attempts to fill this gap by providing an account of a language in which phonologically governed (but non-phonological) allomorphy is a fundamental organizing property of the morphology.

After a brief survey of the verbal system, I discuss the vowel alternations that appear within paradigms as a function of the difference between desinential and pre-desinential accent. I show that, while these have their origin in a straightforward principle of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, centuries of restructuring and re-analysis have led to a situation in which corresponding stressed and unstressed vowels are no longer mutually predictable. Even ignoring genuinely “irregular” alternations in shape, it appears that each stem must have its two alternants listed in the lexicon rather than deriving their difference by rule in the phonology. I show that no coherent morphosyntactic definition can be given for the choice between one and the other of these, while a quite straightforward phonological condition governs their use. We are dealing, that is, with a very general system of phonologically governed suppletion. I then demonstrate that the situation is not at all confined to verbs, but indeed pervades the morphology of the language. An analysis is provided of the structure of lexical entries for stems, and the way this structure relates to the phonological conditioning involved. The same structure generalizes naturally to a range of more blatantly “irregular” stem alternations, confirming the claim that the allomorphy involved is indeed suppletive in character, even if phonologically governed.

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