

The dominant-recessive hypothesis does not account for overlapping suppletion

Börjars & Vincent (2011) hypothesize that when two lexemes undergo suppletion, one is dominant and the other is recessive. The dominant lexeme is semantically more general and receives forms from the the recessive, which is less general semantically. For example, English *go* is more general than *wend*, and *go* is the lexeme that incorporated a form, *went*, of *wend*. This paper addresses several weaknesses of this proposal, especially as it relates to overlapping suppletion.

The first complication surrounding the dominant-recessive hypothesis (DRH) concerns the documentation of suppletion and its development. While many of the best-known cases of suppletion come from languages with ample historical documentation, not all examples of suppletion fit that model. Thus the DRH must be used with care so as not to become circular. A further issue with lower levels of documentation relates to situations in which some lexemes' forms survive only in suppletive paradigms. For example, the roots of English *am~be~was* are no longer represented elsewhere in the language, unlike the case of *go~went* vs *wend* mentioned above.

Cross-linguistically, separate survival of lexemes participating in suppletion is rare. Juge (1999, 2019) has identified a relatively small number of languages with overlapping suppletion, that is suppletion in which suppletive forms belong to two or more lexemes. For example, the Spanish copula *ser* 'be' and *ir* 'go' exhibit overlapping suppletion in the preterit and related paradigms (Table 1).

Such cases raise the question of how to gauge the semantic generality of the participating lexemes, in contrast with the relatively simple evaluation of verbs meaning 'go' and 'walk', for example, Juge (1999, 2019) has proposed that it is possible to correlate the semantic distance between lexemes with the non-overlapping, optionally overlapping, or non-optionally overlapping nature of the suppletive paradigms found in different cases. A key difference between these approaches is that the DRH is much more difficult to apply to situations in which the participating lexemes do not belong to the same semantic field (e.g. existence vs motion).

Furthermore, the DRH does not account for sound change as a source of suppletion. This reflects in part the traditional disregard of the various types of suppletion besides the best-known kind, incursion (cf. Juge 1999, 2013, 2019). In such cases, like the suppletive form of the present tense of the English copula, there is no evident role for semantics at all. Instances of analogically-created suppletion also challenge the DRH (along with ideas regarding the role of analogy as a regularizing process), as in the Galician (Fisterran dialect) form *iña* 'go (imperfect indicative) created on analogy with *viña* 'come (imperfect indicative)' (Juge 2013).

The Galician cases raises a broader difficulty found not only in suppletion studies but also in grammaticalization research, namely faulty lexical semantic analysis, especially concerning what it means for one lexeme to be more general than another and how to apply such an evaluation to cross-linguistic analysis.

While the DRH may contribute to the analysis of some instances of suppletion, it must be combined with more detailed lexical semantic analysis, including measures of semantic distance, and contextualized among the multiple types of sources of suppletion.

	<i>ser</i> [†] ‘to be’			<i>ir</i> ‘to go’		
	present	imperfect	preterit	present	imperfect	preterit
1s	soy	era	fui	voy	<i>iba</i>	fui
2s	eres	eras	fuiste	vas	<i>ibas</i>	fuiste
3s	es	era	fue	va	<i>iba</i>	fue
1p	somos	éramos	fuimos	vamos	<i>íbamos</i>	fuimos
2p	sois	erais	fuisteis	vais	<i>ibais</i>	fuisteis
3p	son	eran	fueron	van	<i>iban</i>	fueron

Table 1—Overlapping and non-overlapping suppletion (Juge 1999)

References

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Keywords

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