

A morphological freeloader: Ibero-Romance *caber*

Modern Spanish *caber* ‘fit, be containable in’ stands out for its almost unique kinds of allomorphy, mainly apparent in the lexical root. Relatively regular verbs such as *barrer* ‘sweep’ or *recibir* ‘receive’, have invariant lexical roots and their future and conditional tense forms that share a thematic vowel with the infinitive (from which the future and conditional are historically derived). In contrast, *caber* has the allomorph *cab-* only in the present indicative and imperfect indicative, the future and the conditional, the infinitive, and past participle; but it has *quep-* throughout the present subjunctive and in the first person singular present indicative, and *cup-* in the preterite and in both series of imperfect subjunctives; moreover, unlike most verbs, its future and conditional (*cabr , cabr a*) do not share a thematic vowel with the infinitive (*caber*).

Historically, the allomorphy seen in *caber* is unremarkable, presenting the expected effects of certain regular early Romance phonological and morphological changes. What is remarkable is that this allomorphy has survived intact when other inherited allomorphy of the relevant kinds was analogically eliminated during the Middle Ages (cf. Maiden 2018:50-53; Rini 2020a,b). Modern Spanish retains only about a dozen really irregular verbs and these are semantically basic, very high frequency, lexemes, such as ‘be’, ‘have’ (auxiliary), ‘have’, ‘come’, ‘go’, ‘say’, ‘do’, ‘know’, ‘want’, ‘can’, ‘give’, ‘bring’, ‘put’ and/or are the basis of a larger series of derived verbs. *Caber* is a ‘stow-away’ in this company: it has significantly lower frequency than the other irregular verbs, and is not part of any derivational ‘family’. It should, therefore, have lost its allomorphy to the otherwise general tendency for ‘levelling’ at some time in the Middle Ages.

The historical morphology of *caber* has been the subject of recent studies by Rini (2020a,b), on which I draw here, while also critically adjusting his analysis. Adapting and extending Rini’s idea of ‘analogical retention’ (also Rini 2001), which he applied to only part of the data for *caber* (Rini 2020a:744f.; 2020b:120-122), I argue that the survival of all the irregularities in *caber* is wholly and strictly dependent on the model of the very basic, high frequency, verb *saber* ‘know’, to which *caber* happens to have emerged in early Romance as inflexionally identical in every detail except for the initial consonant and for the the root of the first person singular present indicative form (*quepo* vs *s *). Thus *saber* has *sab-* in the present indicative and imperfect indicative, the future and the conditional, the infinitive, and past participle, but *sep-* throughout the present subjunctive and in the first person singular present indicative, and *sup-* in the preterite and in both series of imperfect subjunctives; unlike most verbs, its future and conditional (*sabr , sabr a*) do not display the thematic vowel of the infinitive (*caber*).

I show in detail how—not only in the history of Spanish, but in other Ibero-Romance dialects—*caber* has been repeatedly and minutely sensitive to the morphology of *saber* (except in the 1SG present indicative, where the two verbs have been different *ab antiquo* and have correspondingly diverged chaotically).

This ‘parasitic’ diachronic behaviour of *caber* will be argued to be a matter of pure morphology which cannot be explained in functional terms: *caber* and *saber* are utterly different in lexical meaning, argument structure, and syntactic frame. The paradigmatic distributional pattern involved is, equally, arbitrary and idiosyncratic. I argue that the observed diachronic behaviour of these verbs presupposes speakers’ ability to abstract paradigmatic distributional patterns of allomorphy from the inflexional paradigms of individual lexemes even when that allomorphy is idiosyncratically and almost uniquely associated with a particular lexical meaning. I shall compare the significance of such diachronic data to other ‘morphomic’ patterns, such as the English *-ceive* - *-ception* series cited by Aronoff (1994), or the idiosyncratic allomorphy of semantically disparate Spanish verbs in *-ducir*, and assess the relevance of such facts for Maiden’s recent discussion (Maiden 2021) of the minimum conditions necessary for the diachronic emergence of ‘morphomic’ patterns.

References

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