

Contact-induced complexification in the gender system of Istro-Romanian

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One of the probably most widely accepted claims made in the language contact literature is that contact leads to the simplification of grammar. The basic assumption behind this claim is that the mixing of linguistic systems produces less marked structures and levels out irregularities towards “a kind of common core-grammar” (Mühlhäusler 1980: 28) (see also Givón 1979; Bickerton 1981). While counterexamples have been provided (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 29; Vanhove 2001; Aikhenvald 2003; Heine & Kuteva 2005; Loporcaro 2018), the simplification hypothesis still dominates not only research in creole languages (McWhorter 2001, 2007), but also in so-called regular contact-induced change (Kusters 2003; Trudgill 2009, 2011).

In this paper, we will present a case of contact-induced grammatical complexification adding to the not too many cases reported in the literature cited above. In particular, we will show that the introduction of a few lexical items encoding quantification has precipitated dramatic changes in the morphosyntax of the recipient language. Our case study focuses on Istro-Romanian (henceforth IR), a highly endangered Eastern Romance language, spoken today by a tiny number of speakers (about 8-9 dozen, most of them over 50 years old) northeast of the Istrian peninsula, Croatia. IR divides in two mutually intelligible, yet clearly distinct varieties: *žejanski* to the north (henceforth NIR) and *šušnjevski* to the south (henceforth SIR). One of the four branches of Daco-Romance, IR has been subject to heavy influence from Croatian (both standard and Čakavian), with which all Istro-Romanians are fully bilingual.

During recent fieldwork in Croatia, we found out that the borrowing of the collective (lower) numerals *dvoje* and *troje* from Croatian into NIR, turned a formerly binary option in the agreeing forms of the numeral ‘two’ (*do* vs *doj*), such as that in (1a-b), into a three-way one, through the addition of a third option (1c):

- (1)
- | | | | |
|----|---|-----------------------|---|
| a. | <i>češč-i</i> | <i>doj/*do/*dvoje</i> | <i>omir/dints/kər/kúvete</i> |
| | DEM.PROX-NA.M.PL | two.M/two.F | man/tooth/dog/elbow(M):PL |
| | ‘these two men/teeth/dogs/elbows’ | | |
| b. | <i>čvst-e</i> | <i>do/*doj</i> | <i>surár/vvč/metle/fçate</i> |
| | DEM.PROX-NA.F.PL | two.F/two.M | sister/cow/broom/little_girl(F):PL |
| | ‘these two sisters/cows/brooms/little girls’ | | |
| c. | <i>čvst-e</i> | <i>dvoje/*do/*doj</i> | <i>novin-e/postol-e/vil-e/škvr-e</i> |
| | DEM.PROX-NA.F.PL | two.X/two.F/two.M | newspaper/shoe/pitchfork/scissors(F)-PL |
| | ‘these two newspapers/shoes/pitchforks/pairs of scissors’ | | |

While *dvoje* and *troje* are specified as nominative feminine plural in the Slavic model, in NIR they are selected categorically by a handful of *pluralia tantum* nouns. We will argue that the numerals under examination took on a completely different structural specification in the Romance recipient language, introducing (sub)gender overdifferentiation (Corbett 1991: 168f.) into the paradigms of the two agreement targets at issue. This amounts to a net increase in complexity (i.e., number of contrasts) in this area of the grammar of NIR.

The illustration of this change is placed against the background of the other contact-induced changes that grammatical gender has undergone in IR during the 20th century, which have led to the rise of two separate defective gender values, each the replica of one number value of the Slavic neuter: a mass neuter, marked by the *-o*-ending borrowed from the Slavic neuter

singular and earlier described in the literature (see Kovačec 1963: 33-36, 1966: 67-70; Petrovici 1967), alongside a collective neuter, marked by the *a*-ending borrowed from the Slavic neuter plural, that had gone unnoticed so far.

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