

Latin deponents and Romance unaccusatives

James Baker, University of Cambridge

Latin perfect—deponents:

(1) *mortuus sum*
died am
“I have died”

Romance perfect—unaccusatives:

(2) *je suis mort* (French)
I am died
“I have died”

⇒ Are structures like (2) derived from ones like (1) as is commonly assumed?

⇒ If so, what is the chronology of the development?



The relation between Latin deponents and Romance unaccusatives

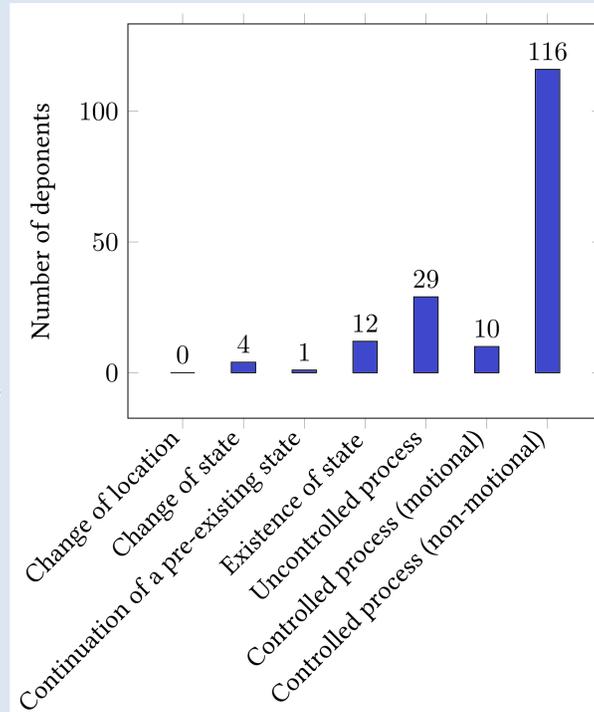
• Verbs taking BE perfect in Romance (“unaccusatives”): cluster toward the *left* of Sorace’s (2000) Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy.

• But Latin deponents are mostly found toward the *right* of the ASH as shown in chart ⇒

• Most Latin verbs of change or state are *not* deponent—including many ancestors of verbs which are unaccusative across Romance:

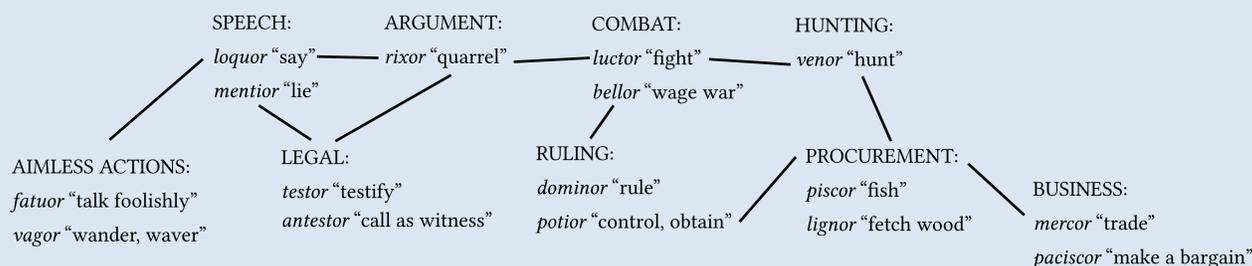
◇ e.g. *veneo* “come”, *descendo* “go down”, *intro* “enter” ...

⇒ **The relationship between unaccusatives and deponents is not straightforward.**



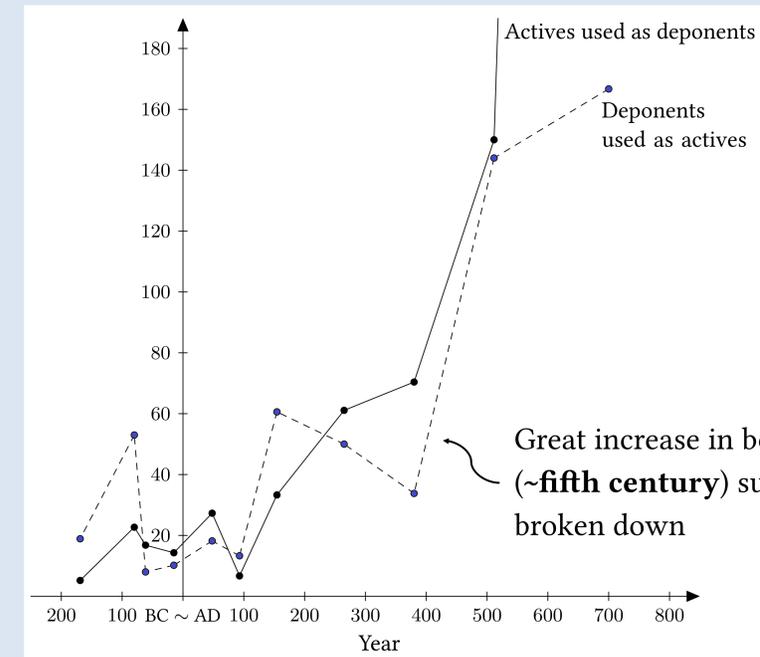
• Latin deponents do group into loose semantic classes, but composition much less regular than Romance unaccusatives.

◇ A selection of deponents in related semantic fields:



The timescale of development of unaccusatives

- Herman 2002: loss of synthetic passive around **end of seventh century**.
- Frequency of old *deponents* used for the first time with *active* morphology and vice versa (per 100 other deponents, based on data from Flobert 1975):



⇒ **Thus loss of deponent class precedes the loss of the synthetic passive.**

Proposal	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
Synthetic “active” endings	Actives & non-deponents	Transitive/unergative actives & imperfective unaccusatives	Transitive/unergative actives & imperfective unaccusatives
Synthetic “passive” endings	Imperfective passives & imperfective deponents	Imperfective passives	—
Participle +BE_{IMPERF}	Perfective passives & perfective deponents	Perfective passives & perfective unaccusatives	Imperfective passives; perfective unaccusatives

loss of morphological cues to deponent class membership ⇒ difficult to acquire

⇒ semantic regularisation / development of unaccusative class

- **New class formed on basis of frequent deponents *mortuus est* “has died” / *natus est* “has been born” being taken as its semantic prototypes.**

Baker, J. (2014). *Aspects of the evolution of the Latin/Romance verbal system*. MPhil dissertation, University of Cambridge. www.seven-fifty.net/2014_thesis.pdf.

Other references: ◇ FLOBERT, P. (1975). *Les verbes déponents latins des origines à Charlemagne*. Paris: Belles lettres. ◇ HERMAN, J. (2002). La disparition du passif synthétique latin: nouvel essai sur l’écrit et le parlé en latin mérovingien. *Estudios Romanicos* 24(1), 31–46. ◇ SORACE, A. (2000). Gradients in auxiliary selection with intransitive verbs. *Language* 76(4), 859–890.