Zero ≠ emptiness: a case study from Piedmontese

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In this talk, I claim that zero (Ø) is distinct from emptiness (Є). In morphology, zero corresponds to a phonologically null morpheme: this results from spell-out of specific feature-matrix, it may either trigger or block allomorphy, and is linearized as any non-null morphemes. Emptiness, in turn, is invisible to morpho-phonological operations and, therefore, cannot influence allomorphy, nor be linearized. Evidence can be found in Piedmontese verbs, in which the root triggers allomorphy of outer affixes: given the verbs in (1a)[1], observe the corresponding present indicative forms in (1b) 3sg and (1c) 1pl, respectively.

(1) Infinitive[2]
a.   *but-é*   [byˈt-e]   *sent-e*   [ˈseŋt-e]   *fin-ì*   [fiˈni]
         Present Indicative (PresInd)
b.   3sg *but-a*   [ˈbyt-a]   *sent*   [ˈseŋt]   *finiss*   [fiˈnis]
c.   1pl *but-oma*   [byˈt-uma]   *sent-oma*   [seŋˈt-uma]   *fini-oma*   [fiˈnj-uma]

Allomorphy involves the exponent of 3sg (*-a* vs. nothing) and, in one case, the root (*finiss-* vs. *fin(i)-*). It may be assumed (see Embick 2010, 2014 interalia) that the exponent of 3sg undergoes allomorphy when in a local relation with the root, i.e. when it is adjacent to it. Compare this data with those in (2), in which 3sg is regularly *-a*.

(2) Imperfect Indicative
a.   3sg *but-av-a*   [byˈt-av-a]   *sent-ì-a*   [seŋˈt-i-a]   *fin-ì-a*   [fiˈn-i-a]
b.   1pl *but-av-o*   [byˈt-av-u]   *sent-ì-o*   [seŋˈt-i-u]   *fin-ì-o*   [fiˈn-i-u]

The root, in turn, does trigger allomorphy: its target is the exponent of TAM, *-av-/-ì-*. Interestingly, the presence of intervening morpheme between the root and person/number morpheme allows for the presence of a distinct marker of 1pl: *-o* (2b) vs. *-oma* (1c).

 Both data in (1) and data in (2) seem to indicate that the root contains lexical, idiosyncratic information which spells-out as distinct, specific markers. This situation corresponds to inflectional classes that, in case of Romance, derive from Latin verbal conjugations. At first sight, data in (3) contradicts this hypothesis:

(3) Present Subjunctive (PresSubj)
a.   3sg *but-a*   [ˈbyt-a]   *sent-a*   [ˈseŋt-a]   *finiss-a*   [fiˈnis-a]
b.   1pl *but-o*   [ˈbyt-u]   *sent-o*   [ˈseŋt-u]   *finiss-o*   [fiˈnis-u]

In (3a), the exponent of 3sg is -a in the three conjugations: since the root is adjacent to it, we expect allomorphy be triggered as in (1b). Similarly, the exponent of 1pl should be -oma, which is selected for in the present indicative when it is adjacent to the root (as it seems to be the case in 3b).

 Data in (3) are no longer problematic once we postulate the presence of a zero morpheme between the root and the inflectional makers. In other words, I argue that, despite appearances, the root is not adjacent to the inflectional marker *-a* in the PresSubj: a phonetically null exponent that marks PresSubj intervenes between the root and the inflectional marker, and thus prevents allomorphy of 3sg from appearing (3sg PresSubj *buta* /byt+Ø+a/, *senta* /seŋt+Ø+a/, etc). In contrast, PresInd forms are underlyingly as follows: 3sg PresInd *buta* /byt+Є+a/, *sent* /seŋt+Є+Ø/, etc. Emptiness, as such, does not block allomorphy.

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[1] I abstract away from subject clitics, which occur adjacent to each inflected form. See Clivio (2002), Maiden & Parry (1997: 108-ff.), Ricca (2016) for an overview on data.

[2] The glosses are as follows: *buté* [byˈte] 'to put', *sente* [ˈseŋte] 'to feel, to hear' and *finì* [fiˈni] 'to finish'.