

Morphemes in competition: Lexically-conditioned allomorphy, sociolinguistic variation, and change in progress

Silvio Cruschina
University of Helsinki

1. Introduction: Plurals in central Sicily. In central Sicilian dialects the nominal plural feature value [PL] can be realized by three different allomorphs (cf. 1):

$$(1) \text{ [PL]} \begin{cases} -i \\ -a \\ -ura \end{cases}$$

- (i) the morph *-i*, which is the most widespread plural ending across the island and realizes the plural for both masculine and feminine nouns (e.g. *carusu* ‘boy’ & *carusa* ‘girl’ → *carusi* ‘boys/girls’);
- (ii) the morph *-a*, etymologically connected to the plural of the Latin second declension neuter nouns (e.g. *jitu* ‘finger’ → *jita* ‘fingers’) (see Sornicola 2010);
- (iii) the morph *-ura* (< Lat. *-ORA*), which is characteristic of the outcomes of the Latin neuter nouns from the third declension (e.g. Lat. *corpus* ‘body’ → *corpora* ‘bodies’), together with those nouns from the fourth declension which form the plural by analogy with the same model (*jocu* ‘game’ → *jocura* ‘games’, Rohlf 1968: §370; see also Retaro 2013):

As described by Retaro (2013), the distribution of these three morphs in central Sicilian dialects is rather complex: several lexemes allow for two or even three options, yielding an emblematic case of overabundance (in the sense of Thornton 2011, 2013); only in very few cases is it possible to attribute the selection of, or the preference for, a given allomorph to semantic or lexical motivations. In addition, the high degree of inter- and intra-speaker variation makes it difficult to connect the alternations to precise extra-linguistic factors.

2. Aims of the paper. In this study, I investigate the allomorphy in the nominal plural formation in the central Sicilian dialect of Mussomeli, in the province of Caltanissetta, paying special attention to the *-ura* plurals. I show that the complex situation that characterizes this dialect is the result of an intricate interplay between lexical allomorphy, sociolinguistic variation, and on-going language change. There appears to be numerous factors governing the alternations in the realization of the plural morpheme, but none is phonological or morphological in nature. The three allomorphs realize the same morphosyntactic value, but are in fact in competition only with respect to a limited number of lexemes, indicating that this kind of allomorphy is to a remarkably large extent a matter of the lexicon. However, even with these lexemes, the plural allomorphs are neither in complementary distribution nor in free variation, calling for the need to resort to sociolinguistic variables such as the age of the speakers. The sociolinguistic variation, in turn, reflects a change in progress which is leading to a partial resolution of the allomorphic competition, resulting in the loss of the *-ura* allomorph.

3. Methodology. To investigate the distribution of the three plural allomorphs in the dialect of Mussomeli, I administered a questionnaire to 34 native speakers divided into three age groups:

Table 1: *Age groups*

GROUPS	AGE RANGE	NO. OF SPEAKERS
1	15–30	12
2	31–60	12
3	61–85	10

The questionnaire consisted of 45 lexemes, which were carefully selected on the basis of the following criterion: the attestation of the plural in *-ura* either from the relevant literature (in

particular, Retaro 2013) or from previous consultations with elderly speakers. (Note that in the dialect of Mussomeli the allomorph *-ura* is often realized as *-ira* (pronounced [ira] or [əra]), but I take this to be just a phonological variant.) In order to obtain reliable results, production data were elicited first: speakers were asked to provide the plural form of the relevant lexemes. However, since speakers may be unaware of some variation in their speech, their passive competence was also tested by eliciting grammaticality judgments on the alternative plurals on a scale from 0 to 3, where the lowest score 0 corresponded to impossible and unacceptable forms, whereas 3 qualified equally good alternatives.

4. Results. The results of the data collection can be summarized as follows:

- a) The results confirm Retaro's (2013) observations about inter- and intra-speaker variation, making it difficult to draw clear-cut generalizations. Indeed, in several cases speakers provided or accepted – although to different extents – more than one allomorph (e.g. *furnu* 'oven, bakery' → *furni*, *furna*, *furnira*; *viddricu* 'belly botton' → *viddrichi*, *viddrica*, *viddricura*).
- b) As expected, only speakers from group 3 spontaneously produced plurals in *-ura*. In this group, speakers above 80 years old provided *-ura* plurals with a higher number of lexemes (between 80% and 90%), while the rate is much lower (30%–40%) for speakers below 80. By contrast, speakers from groups 1 and 2 only have a limited passive competence of *-ura* plurals, which appears to depend on extra-linguistic factors connected to the closeness to the speech of the elderly people.
- c) The *-i* plurals seem to prevail in terms of productivity: they are very often provided as spontaneous answers, especially by speakers in group 1 and group 2 (between 60% and 70% of the cases), or at least accepted as good alternatives by all speakers.
- d) The *-a* plurals are still much alive in all groups, although the alternative *-i* plurals (with the same lexemes) were actually preferred or accepted as equally good by most speakers. Only with a few lexemes did *-a* plurals consistently obtain higher scores (e.g. *ligna* 'wood', *ossa* 'bones', *gruppa* 'knots', *jinocchia* 'knees').

5. Conclusions. In the domain of plural formation, central Sicilian displays an intricate case of lexically-conditioned allomorphy. Sociolinguistic factors, however, must be taken into account in order to explain the lack of a complementary distribution of the competing allomorphs and the high degree of variation: the frequency of the third variant (i.e. the *-ura* allomorph) differs within the same community according to age. These differences can be used as diagnostics of a change that is currently taking place and that is leading to the gradual disappearance of the *-ura* allomorph. The tendency towards the generalization of the *-i* allomorph is evident, especially among the younger generations –presumably due to the (partial) proximity of this allomorph to Italian plurals. The *-a* plurals are nevertheless still frequent and healthy, especially with specific lexemes, as already pointed out by Sornicola (2010).

References

- Retaro, Valentina. 2013. La morfologia del plurale nelle varietà della Sicilia centrale. *Bollettino del Centro di studi filologici e linguistici siciliani* 24: 179–211.
- Rohlf, Gerard. 1968. *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana e dei suoi dialetti. Morfologia (Vol. 2)*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Sornicola, Rosanna. 2010. I dialetti meridionali e la sorte del neutro: alcune riflessioni su una varietà siciliana. In M. Iliescu, H. Siller & P. Danler (eds), *Actes du XXVe Congrès International de Linguistique et Philologie Romane. Innsbruck, 3–8 septembre 2007, vol. 2*. Berlin/New York: 547–563.
- Thornton, Anna M. 2011. Overabundance (multiple forms realizing the same cell): A non-canonical phenomenon in Italian verb morphology. In M. Maiden, J.C. Smith, M. Goldbach & M.-O. Hinzelin (eds), *Morphological Autonomy: Perspectives from Romance Inflectional Morphology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 358–381.

Thornton, Anna M. 2013. La non canonicità del tipo it. *braccio // braccia / bracci*: sovrabbondanza, difettività o iperdifferenziazione? *Studi di grammatica italiana* 2930: 419–477.