

A diachronic account of stress shift in English conversion

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1. Introduction

The full history of stress-shifting in Middle English is an area which has not been fully researched yet; it is an inquiry that promises to throw light on the continuity and/or reintroduction of a prosodic pattern in English which has been growing steadily since the second half of the sixteenth century, as in ábstract – abstráct, récord – recórd, rébel – rebél, pólice – políce.

(Minkova 2014: 311)

1. Introduction

A preliminary Late Middle English (LME) probe

Motivation in a larger picture

- Structural background
 - Analytical means of grammar make up for lost inflectional morphology
 - Marginalisation of inflectional patterns (removal of allomorphy) in native word-formation
 - Conversion as a structural means of morphosyntactic marking:
 - as word-class change without formal identity
 - as word-class change with formal identity: functional stress-shifting
- Sociolinguistic background
 - Incipient standardisation (proliferation of genres in the vernacular, translated texts)

2. Background: Conversion

(A type of) morphological conversion can be described for a language or not, according to:

- i) the flexibility of the conditions under which it is defined (word-class change and formal identity), and
- ii) whether types of conversion are allowed, and which types.

Evidence of flexible interpretations of such conditions in the literature (cf. Valera 2015), for:

- i) the nature of word-classes, and
- ii) the specificities of the identification of word-classes in each language (cf. Floricic 2016: 2672).

2. Background: Conversion

Conversion as a dynamic word-formation process whereby a derivative is formed from a base such that morphological, syntactic and semantic properties of a new word-class are substituted without a formal change.

Other approaches available in the literature, e.g. category underspecification or precategoriality.

Interpretations in the dynamic approach:

- i) Conversion as word-class change **with** formal identity
- ii) Conversion as word-class change **without** formal identity
- iii) Conversion **without** word-class change, **with** formal identity
- iv) Conversion **without** word-class change or formal identity

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(Supra-)segmental contrasts: stress shift, vowel or consonant alternation, deletion, voicing, etc.

En. /daɪ' dʒest/ vs. /' daɪdʒest/

2. Background: Conversion

Conversion with formal change attested cross-linguistically (e.g. Greek, Luganda, Slovene...; cf. Štekauer et al. 2012).

In English, viewed as conversion, or as a type of (*quasi-conversion*, Tournier 1985: 174), not often described otherwise:

Hockett (1994: 173)

Iacobini (2000)

Manova & Dressler (2005: 67 et passim) } (internal) modification¹

Carstairs-McCarthy (2006: 752-753)

1. Not entirely clear if as a separate process, or as an associated feature.

2. Background: Conversion in Middle English

Conversion with formal change: functional stress-shifting

Native vocabulary:

- shifting requires the presence of a recognisable prefix.

Loanwords:

- loan verbs in which the prefixation is transparent behave like the native prefixed verbs (back-stressed, i.e. main stress is on the first syllable of the root),
- prefixed transparent nouns vary,
- etymologically non-transparent prefixed nouns tend to follow the Germanic Stress Rule (GSR),
- synchronically monomorphemic loanwords: the direction of the shift in the loanwords is almost always from end-stress for verbs to fore-stress for nouns.

2. Background: Stress shift

A Late Middle English probe: disyllabic nouns converted from prefix-formed Romance loan verbs (Biese 1941, Marchand 1969)

Evolution:

- 14th century: first wave
- 15th century: rapid increase in a variety of texts
- 16th century: further increase, part of the rise in the number of conversions in general (especially those from French borrowings)
- 1600-1650: decrease: "After 1650 the suffix formations have completely gained the upper hand of the direct conversions of the disyllabic and trisyllabic words derived from French and Latin verbs." (Marchand 1969: 364)
- 19th century: new increase (little obsolescence, wide textual basis, few poetic uses)

2. Background: Stress shift

Structural preliminaries: Prosody

- Germanic Stress Rule (GSR): default root-initial stress in non-monosyllabic words inherited from OE (morphologically assigned)
 - The morphologically assigned fixed stress in OE blurred the distinction between prefix and root and consequently could obscure the predictability and the ‘fixed’ nature of the stress.
- Latin Stress Rule (LSR): stress falls on the penultimate syllable if it is heavy, otherwise, on the antepenultimate syllable (phonologically assigned)
 - Old French (OFr) and Anglo-Norman (AN) words stressed according to the weight of the final syllable.

2. Background: Stress shift

Structural preliminaries: Prosody

- ME prosodic system: LSR largely subsumed under the GSR
 - Most notable prosodic outliers in the loan OFr and AN vocabulary (Minkova 2014: 308-309):
 - disyllables with a heavy final syllable, e.g. *pité*, *merchant*
 - trisyllabic words with penultimate stress, like *madáme*, *servíse*
 - also, OFr and AN trisyllabic words become backstressed disyllabics due to the loss of final schwa, well under way in the 13th c.(Short 2007)
- Strong tendency of disyllabic borrowings towards leftward stress-shifting, in line with the GSR (i.e. disregarding syllable weight).

3. A Late Middle English Probe (1300-1500)

Research questions and some answers (1)

I. Obsolescence and survival

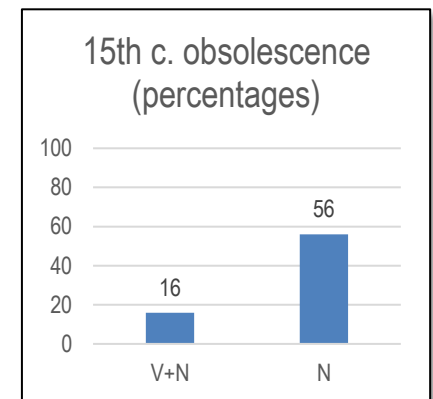
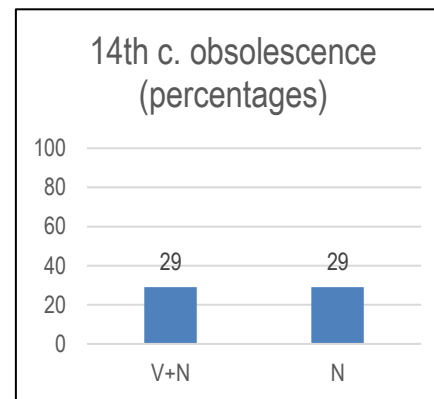
What is the rate of obsolescence in the deverbal nouns and their verbs of origin?

Is there a correlation?

How is obsolescence linked to the frequency and generic/textual spread of LME attestations?

Results:

- 14th century rate of obsolescence:
 - V+N obsolescence: 7/24 (29%)
 - N (only) obsolescence: 7/24 (29%)
- 15th century rate of obsolescence:
 - V+N obsolescence: 7/43 (16%)
 - N (only) obsolescence: 24/43 (56%)
- of the 12 V+N obsolescent pairs, in only 3 the N survived beyond 1600,
- of the 31 obsolescent nouns, only 6 survive beyond 1700,
- there is no direct correlation to frequency in LME texts,
- correlation to generic/textual spread: a distinct segment of nouns was used in rhyming positions of iambic metrical structures in the genre of romance.



3. A Late Middle English Probe (1300-1500)

Research questions and some answers (2)

II. Competition of word-formation patterns

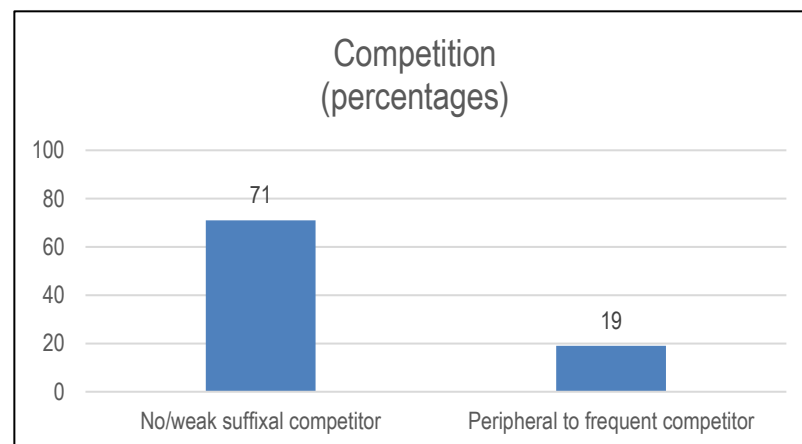
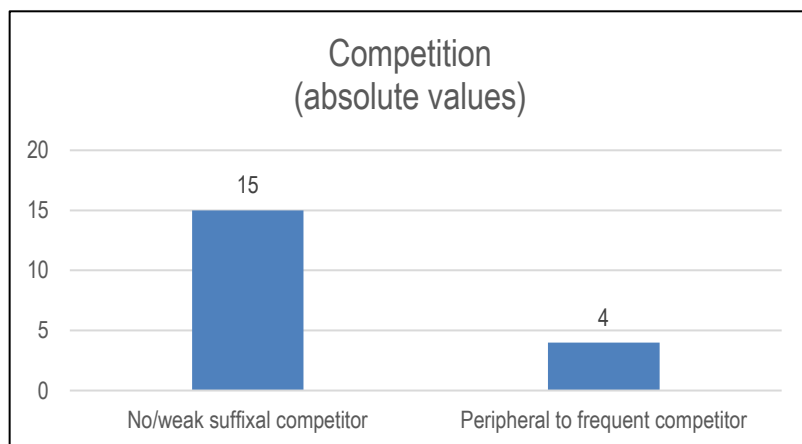
Is there a suffixal inheritor attested to the nominal item?

If yes, is it linked to obsolescence (cf. the implied question in Biese 1941: 246-250)?

Results:

(Methods: *-ing* suffix excluded; semantic continuity; “weakness” measured by OED frequencies)

- 21 N survivors
 - 15/21 (= 71%) have had no or a weaker suffixal competitor
 - 4/21 (19%) exist peripherally to a high-frequency competitor by a parallel French/Latin borrowing (i.e. derivation in source language; type *complain* : *complaint*)



3. A Late Middle English Probe (1300-1500)

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II. Competition of word-formation patterns

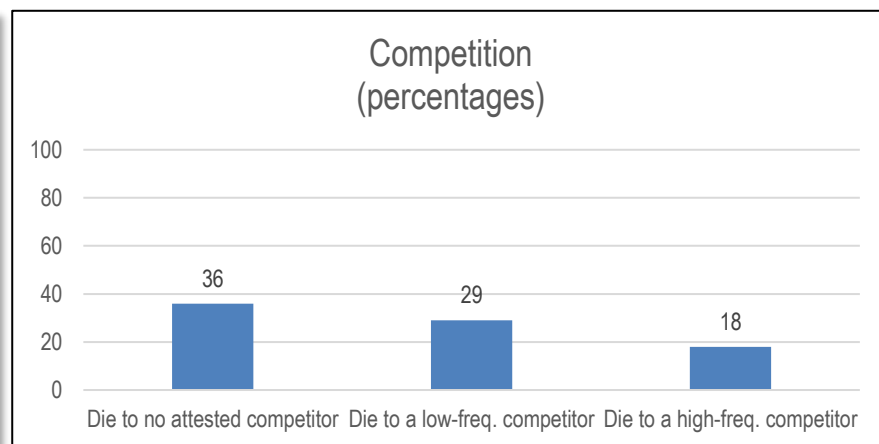
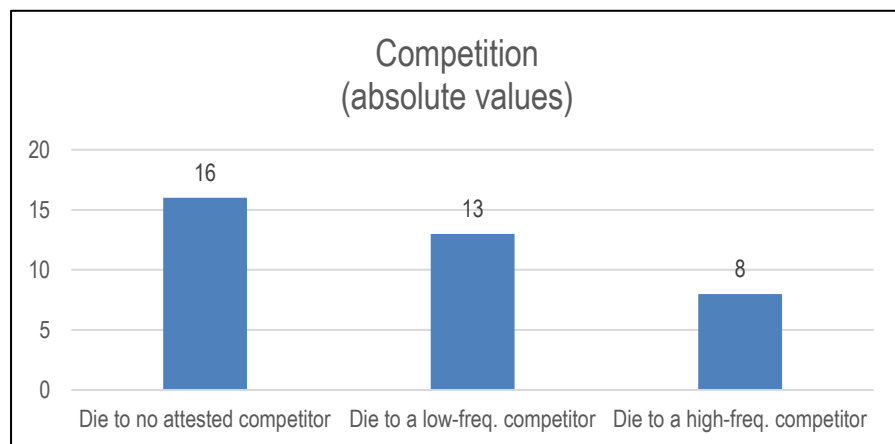
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Results:

(Methods: *-ing* suffix excluded; semantic continuity; “weakness” measured by MED frequency)

- Obsolescent items
 - 16/45 (36%) died without an attested competitor
 - 13/45 (29%) succumbed to a competitor of OED frequency band 4+
 - 8/45 (18%) succumbed to a frequent competitor by a parallel French/Latin borrowing (i.e. derivation in source language; type *enclose* : *enclosure*)



3. A Late Middle English Probe (1300-1500)

Research questions and some answers (3)

III. Stress shift

Is there stress shift in the deverbal nouns?

How widespread is the stress shift?

Is there a competition between forestressed and backstressed items?

Is stress shift linked to the morphemic structure of the noun?

Results:

- there is no evidence of *sustained* variation between forestress and backstress in poetic texts.
- in consequence, there is no tangible evidence of links between stress shift and morphemic structure
- methodological difficulties with LME non-poetic texts: no means of identifying stress pattern due to lack of lexicographic evidence, because late medieval glossaries (e.g. *Promptorium Parvulorum* (c1440)) do not cover pronunciation

3. A Late Middle English Probe (1300-1500)

Research questions and some answers (4)

IV. Semantic change

Is there asymmetry in LME semantic marking between the verb and the noun, i.e. does the semantic structure of converted nouns exhibit semantic innovation (cf. the semantic (a)symmetry in Castanier (2023: 98-110) for PDE)?

Results:

- Of Castanier's broad typology of semantic N-V relations (Castanier 2023: 98), cases when the noun does not denote verbal action but rather its result have been found in the sample (e.g. *acquit* meaning *acquittance*),
- they differ from Castanier's PDE cases by the lack of stress shift (cf. PDE *permít* : *pérmit*; *suspéct* : *súspect*),
- for stress shifting to take place, it appears that more profound lexicosemantic change is needed (such as obsolescence of action meanings in *permit* and *suspect*).

3. A Late Middle English Probe (1300-1500)

Research questions and some answers

Preliminary conclusions

- Even though the systemic requirements and conditions (need for morphosyntactic marking; subsumption of the LSR under the GSR) for a systemic operation of conversion (with formal change) are set in Late Middle English, a more robust presence (including wider textual base) and a longer time of integration for Romance words and affixes in English is needed.
- Indirectly, this helps explain the high rates of obsolescence in the V-N pairs of Late Middle English.

4. Methods

Data sample: Iordăchioaia & Melloni (2022)

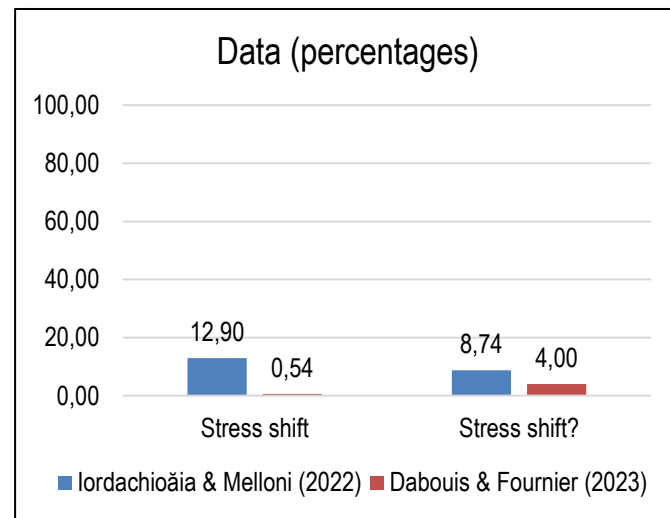
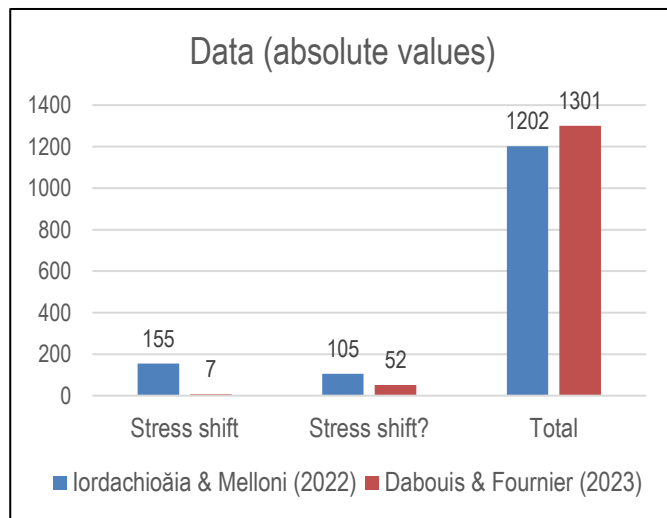
Zero-derived nouns and deverbal nominalization: Databases for English and Italian

[1200-item collection of contemporary English deverbal zero-derived nouns]

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Data source: Data of entries sampled from Iordăchioaia & Melloni (2022) tracked down in OED

Data processing: Includes:

Dialectal variation (*brevet*: BrE /'brɛvɪt/ - AmE /brə'vet/)

Notes on attested stress shift

Discards:

Entries marked *obsolete*

Entries not attested in the OED

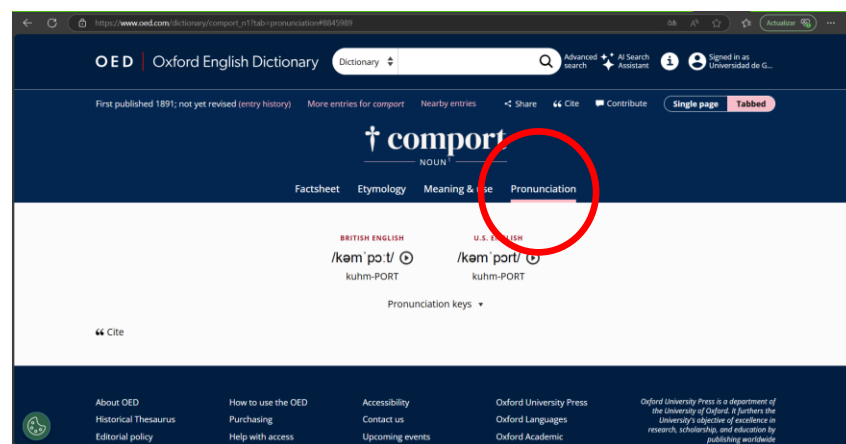
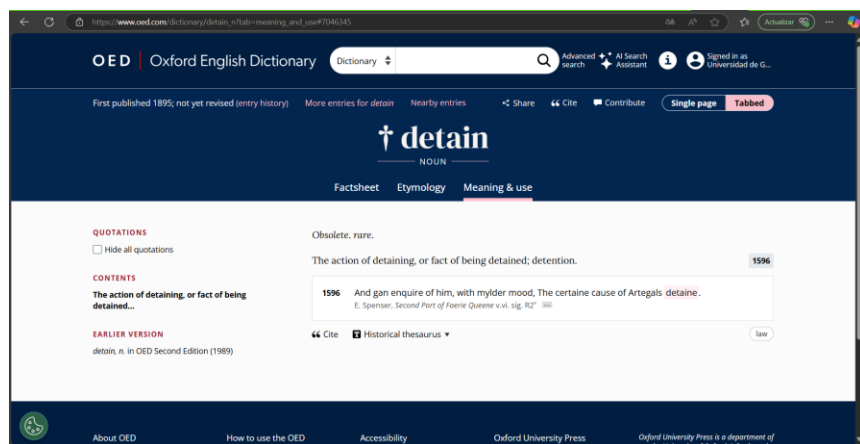
Directionality disregarded

5. Questions

I. Obsolescence and survival

detain-type³ (Biese 1941: 247) '[...] in many cases [...] becoming obsolete and being replaced by the suffix formation'

What is the extent of obsolescence?



No consistent stress data availability for obsolete entries

No consistent attestation of entries with stress shift becoming obsolete

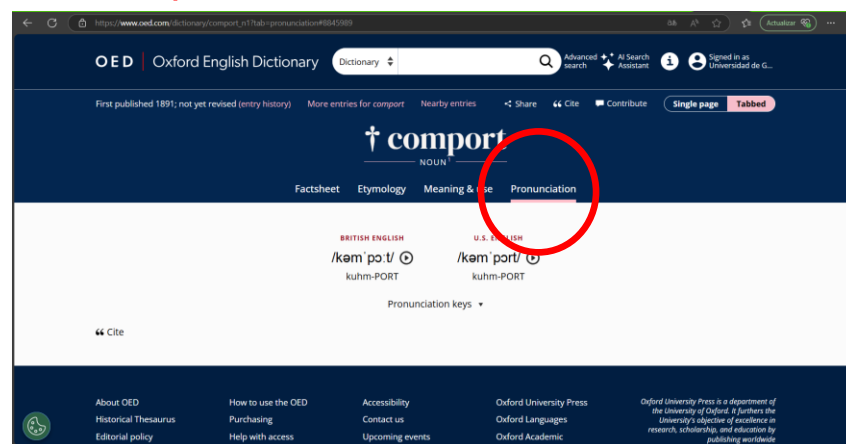
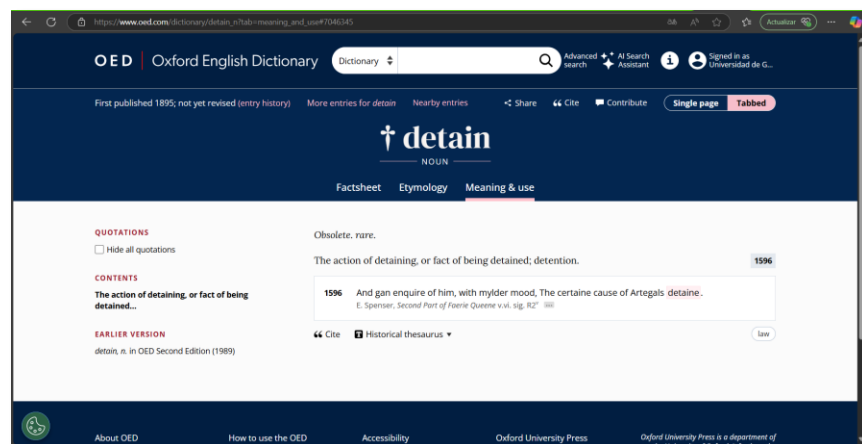
3. Disyllabic nouns converted from prefix-formed loan verbs in the 14th and 15th centuries ('[...] conversion-substantives derived from prefix-formed French and Latin verbs', Biese, 1941: 235).

5. Questions

II. Competition of word-formation patterns

‘[...] conversion-substantives [...] to a very great extent replaced by suffix-formations [-*ance*, -*ment*, -*ion*, etc.]’ (Biese 1941: 237, 240-241, 250)

Is there a suffixal inheritor attested to the N/V pair?



No consistent stress data availability for obsolete entries

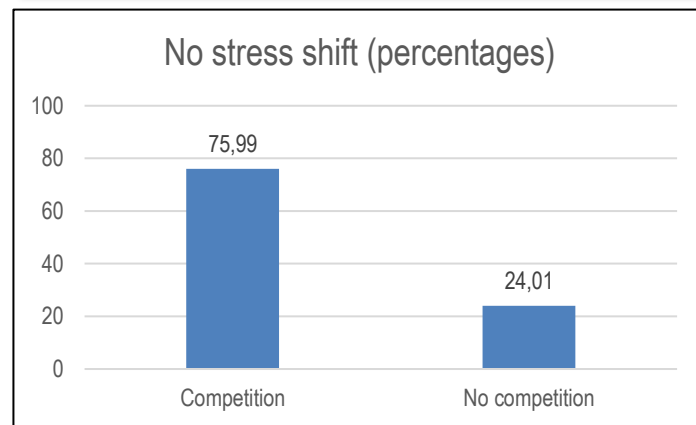
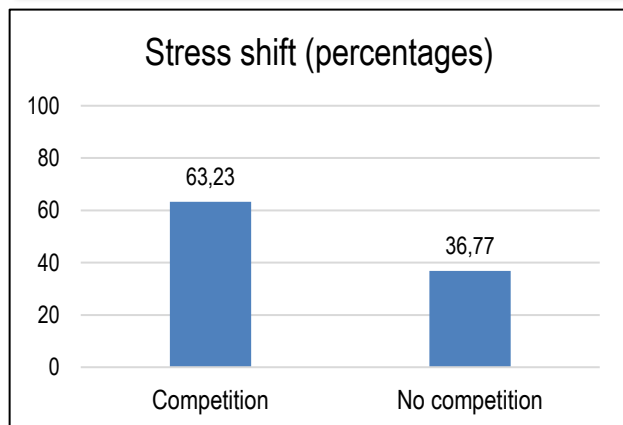
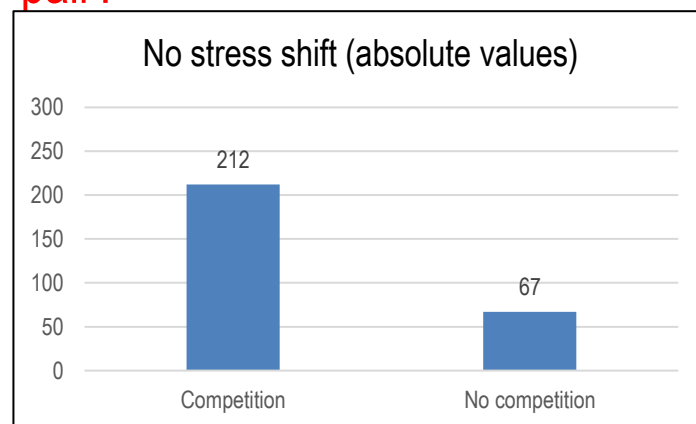
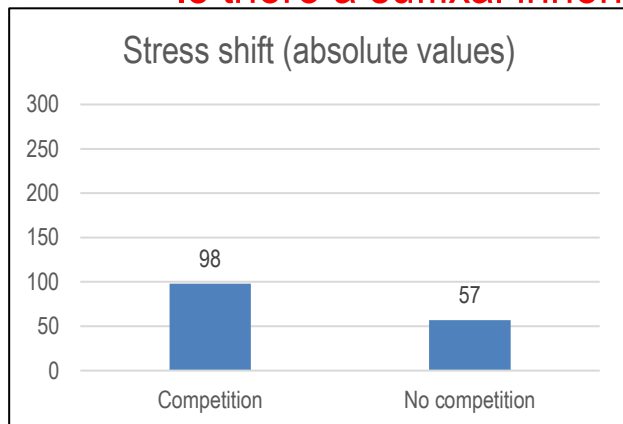
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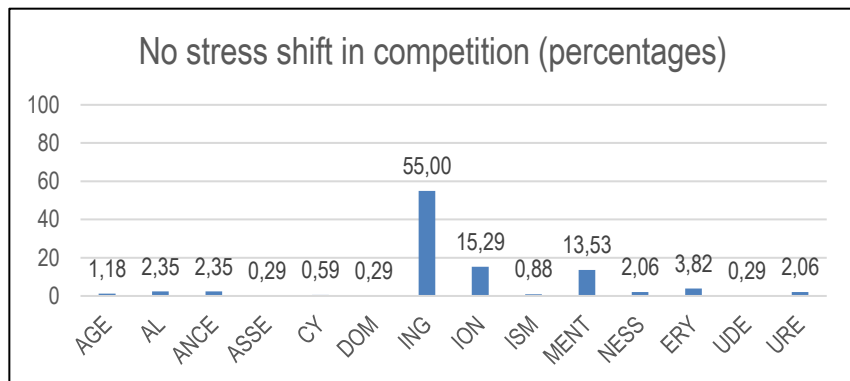
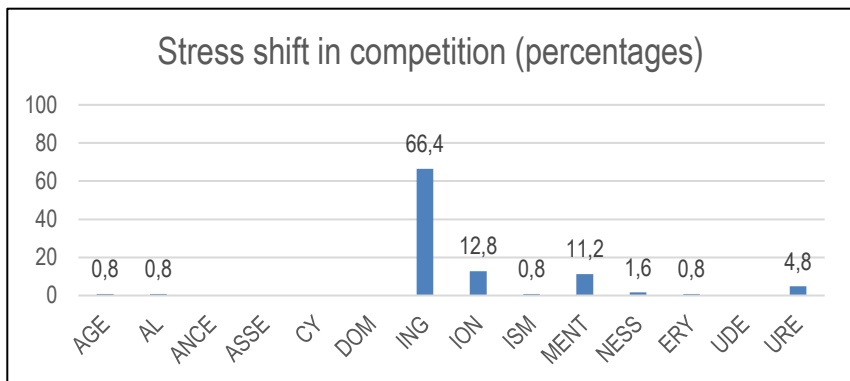
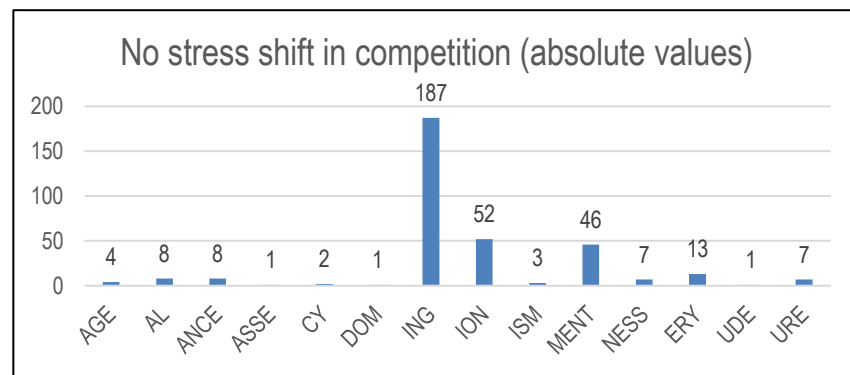
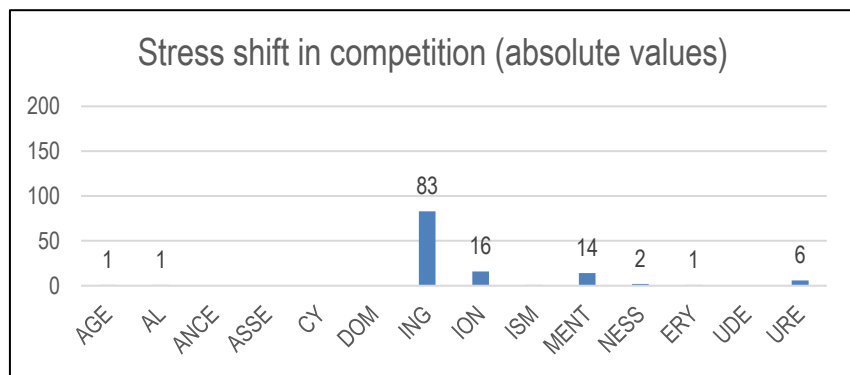
4. Data from Biese (1941) and Iordăchioaia & Melloni (2022) are contemporary English pairs as described in the OED

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‘[...] conversion-substantives [...] to a very great extent replaced by suffix-formations [-*ance*, -*ment*, -*ion*, etc.]’ (Biese 1941: 237, 240-241, 250)

Is there a competition between stress shift and a lack of it? (?YES)

Unclear data:

- entries without OED pronunciation,

- entries with pronunciation variants,

- entries without stress shift according to the OED pronunciation, but noting stress shift was attested at some point or for some senses

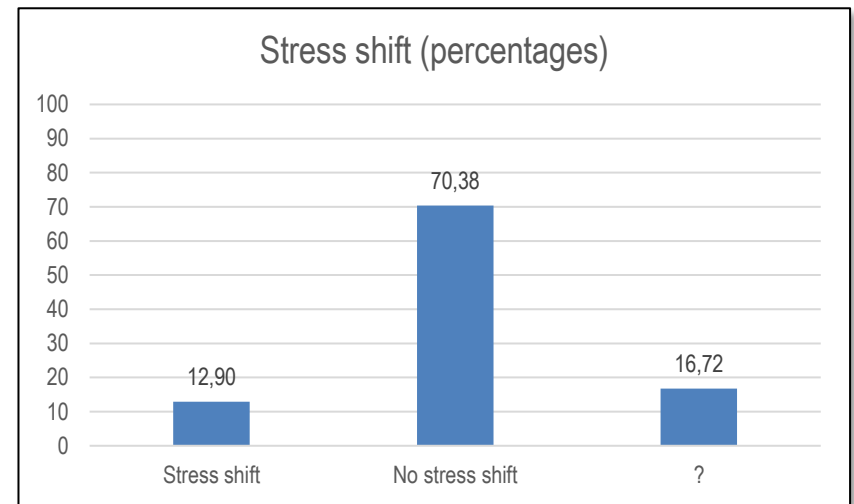
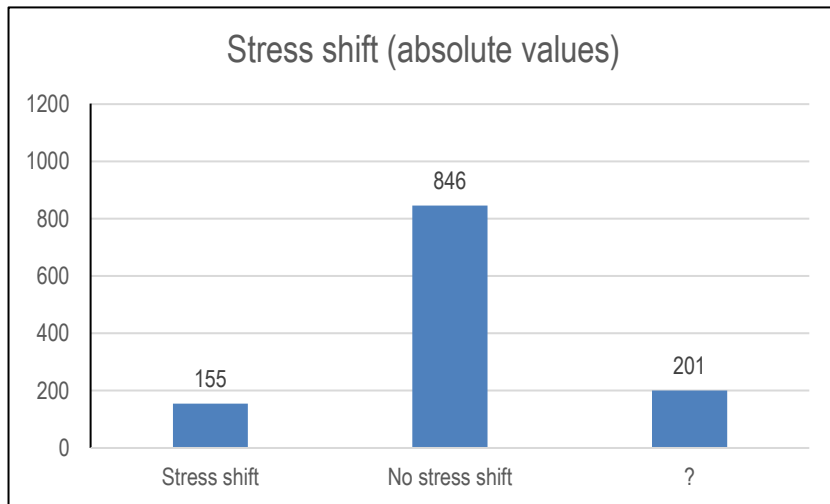
 - e.g. *blackguard*^N: second-stressed for senses A.I.1-A.II.5

 - first-stressed for senses A.II.6, A.II.7 and B

5. Questions

III. Stress shift

How widespread is stress shift?



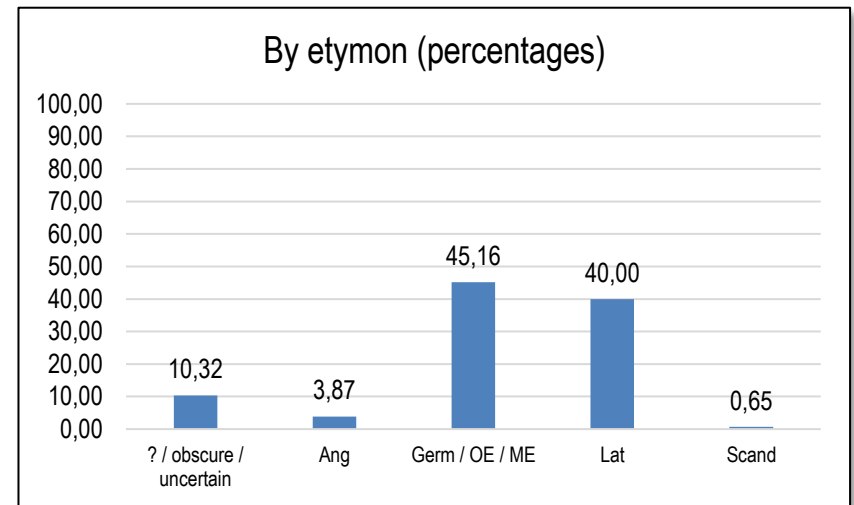
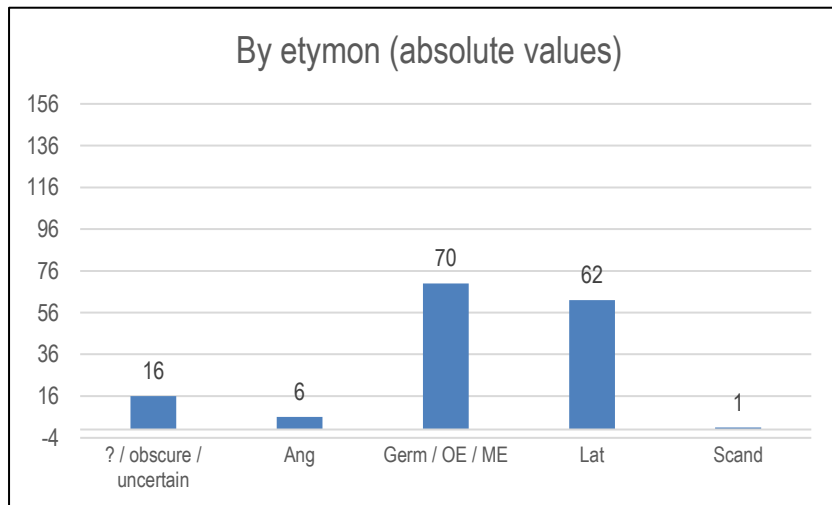
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III. Stress shift

It might be of interest to approach the problem [...] from a chronological point of view'
(Biese 1941: 250)

What is the chronological spread?

How long did analogous structures (the *detain*³ and the *mislike* types) coexist?



3. '[...] conversion-substantives derived from prefix-formed French and Latin verbs' (Biese, 1941: 235)

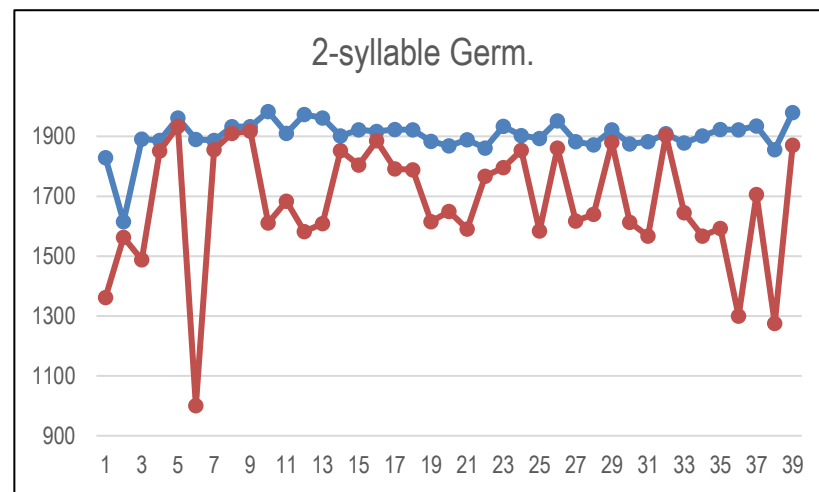
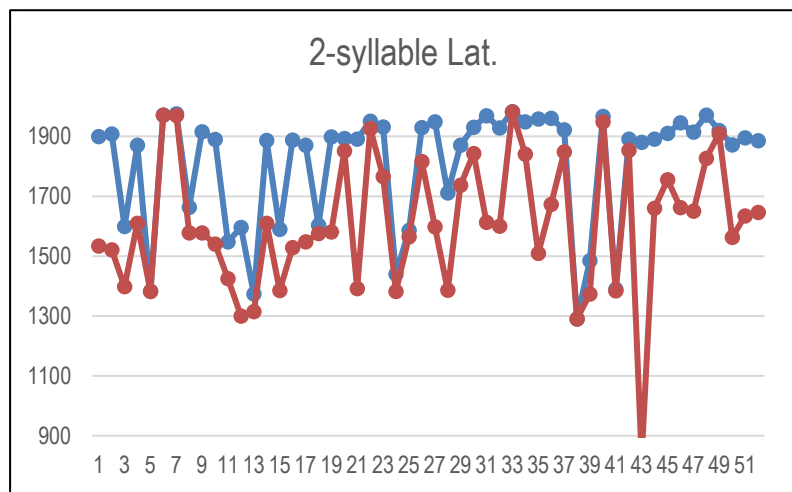
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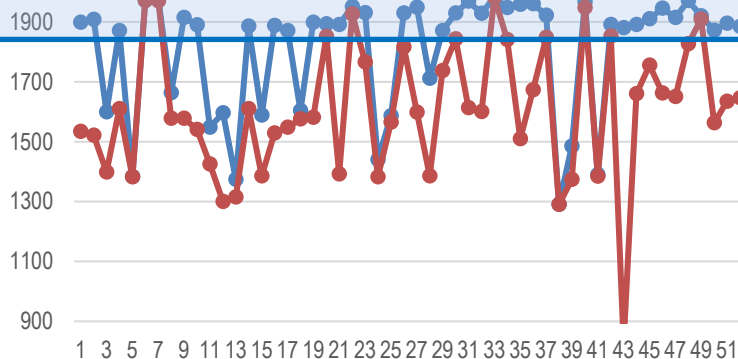
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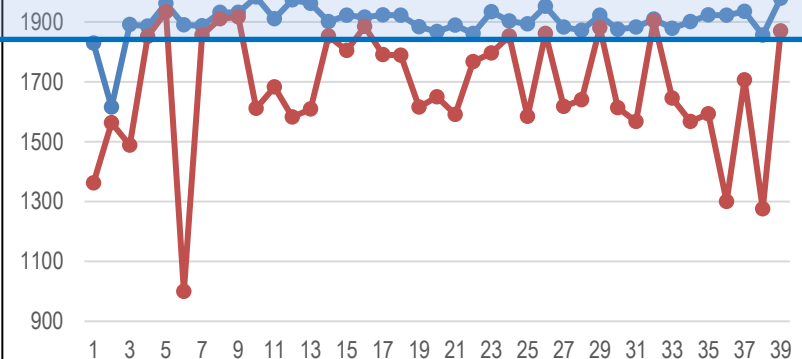
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2-syllable Lat.



2-syllable Germ.



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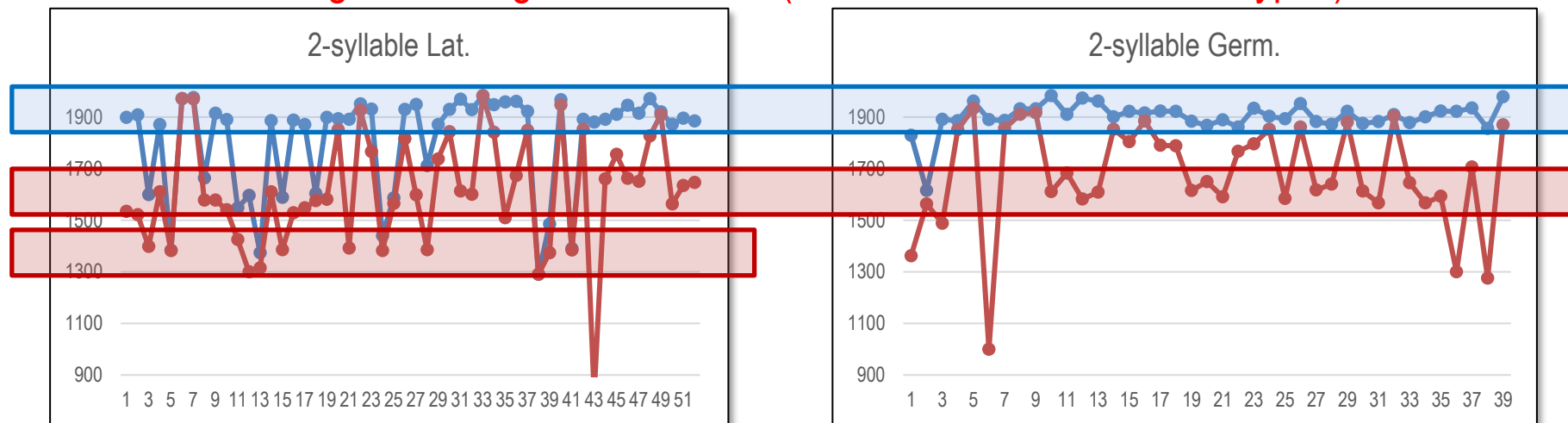
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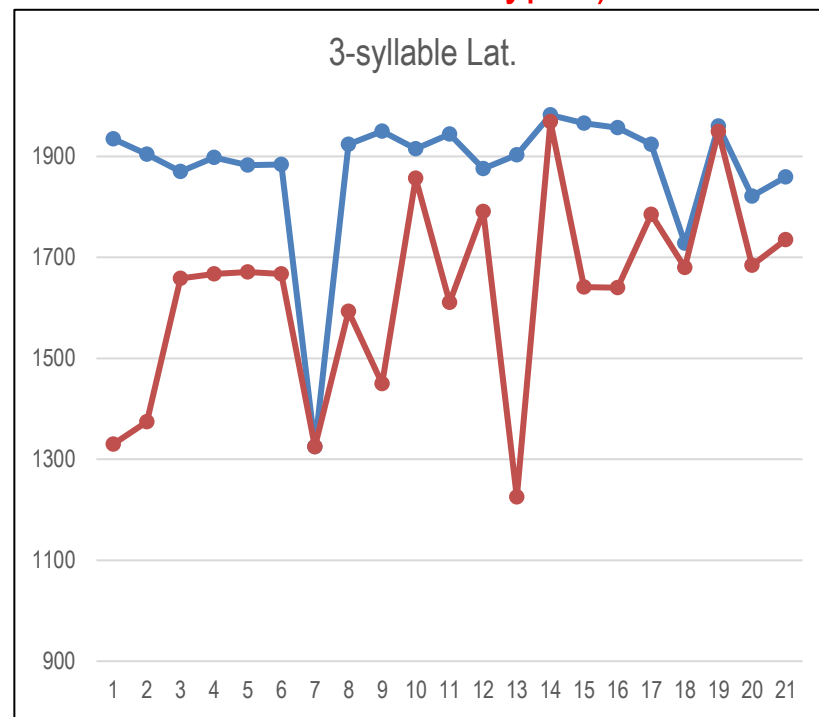
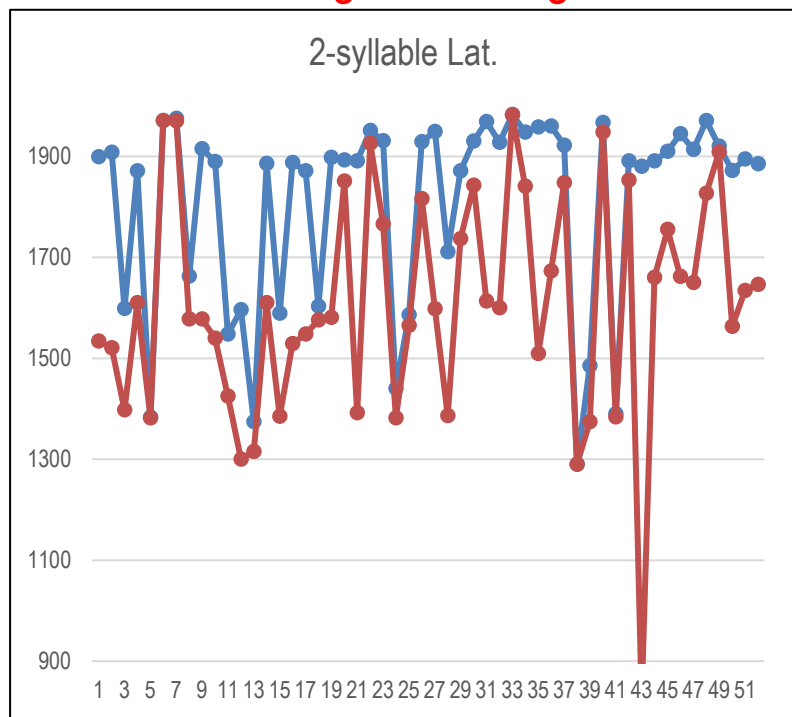
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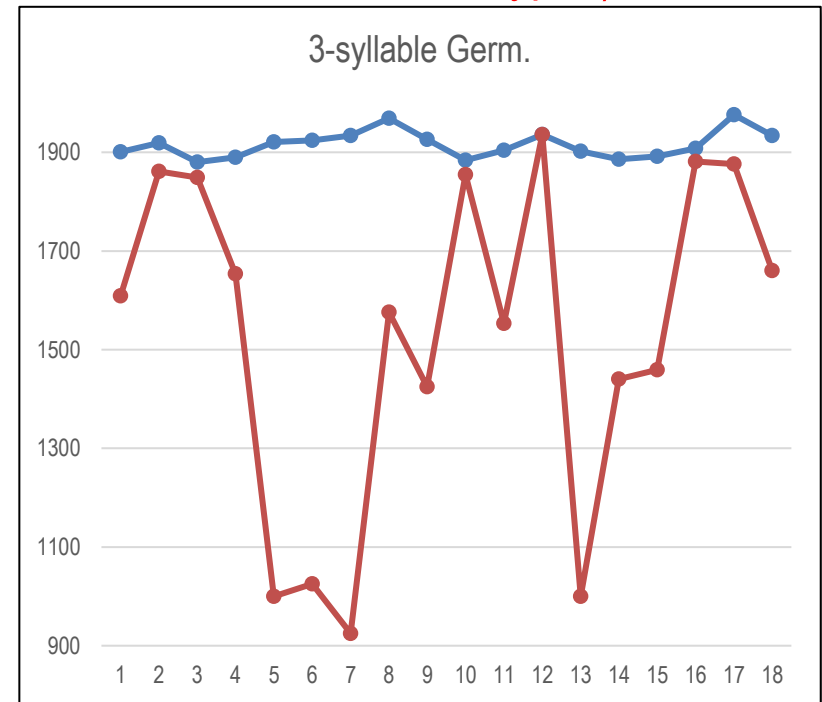
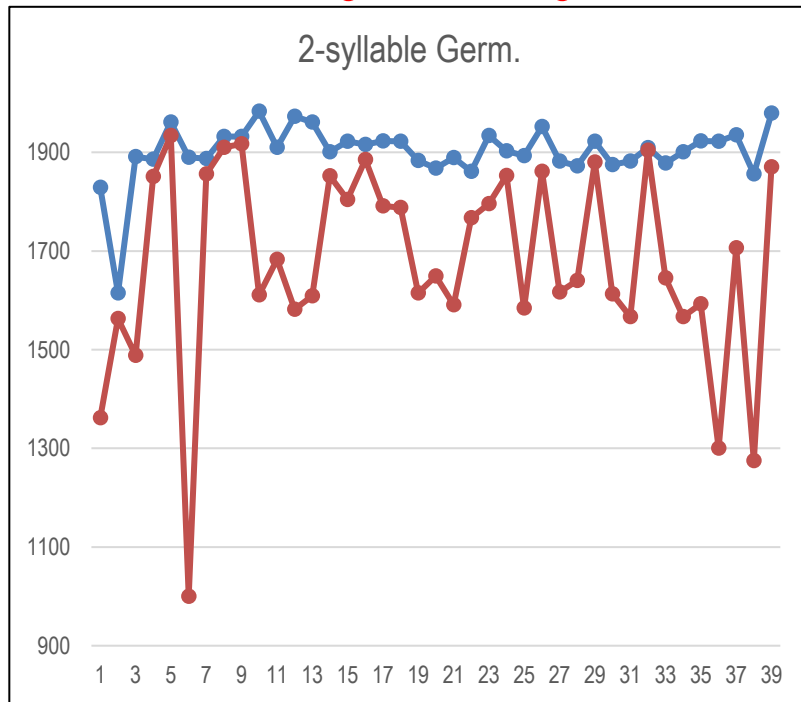
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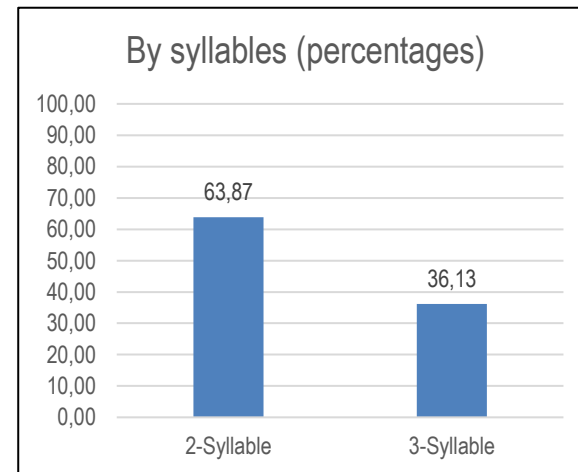
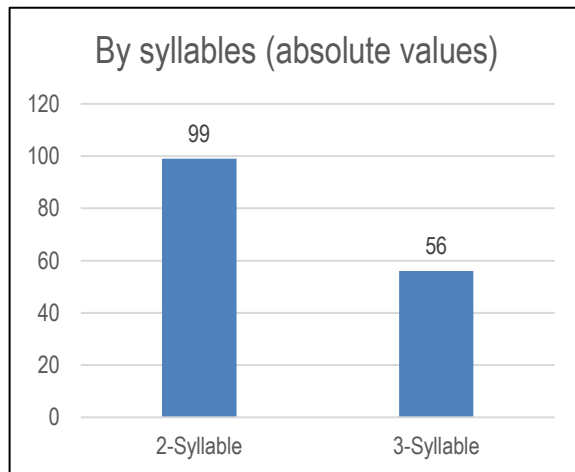
5. Questions

III. Stress shift

Stress shift outside the *detain*-type (Biese 1941: 247):

‘[...] substantives of a heavy multi-syllable type show considerable resistance to being converted into verbs [...] many having become obsolete [for their phonetic structure, at least in some cases]

How widespread is stress shift?’



5. Questions

IV. Semantic change

Plank (2010) to be applied in II (competition) and IV (semantic change).

6. Profile

Stress shift not abundant (but not residual?): 12.90% (i.e. open to interpretation).

Stress shift not guided by etymon, or by the number of syllables.

Stress shift shows a similar chronological profile regardless of etymon or syllable number.

Stress shift is productive (e.g. *overkill*)

Tight methodological constraints on relevant questions.

7. Further research

- N > V conversion
- polysyllables in conversion
- stress shifting in conversion and rise of semantic asymmetry
- role of structural analogy (native patterns: the *mislike/dislike* etc.) and lexico-semantic analogy

References

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