
Romance compounding and language contact: the origin and spread of the pattern *vert bouteille* ‘bottle-green’

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1. Introduction

While a great deal of continuity exists between Latin and Romance in the realm of suffixation, compounding is generally believed to have been created anew in Romance through reanalysis of syntagmatic patterns. There can be no doubt that this view is correct, at least to a large extent. Bold claims for Latin-Romance continuity have been put forward in the 1990s for three patterns of compounding – VN (Bork 1990), NN (de Dardel 1999), and N-i-A (the *pettirosso* type, de Dardel & Zamboni 1999) – but they have not met with general approval. In the light of the fact that Romance patterns of compounding have arisen anew through reanalysis, a process that necessarily takes place in one speech community only, it must come as a surprise that the compounding patterns of present-day Romance languages are so highly similar. It suffices to read the various contributions to the special issue of *Probus* “On Romance compounds” (Scalise & Masini 2012) to get a picture of the high degree of uniformity.

2. Research Gap & State of the Art

The abundant literature on Romance compounds has largely failed to inquire why this is so. A priori, two possibilities come to mind. One could argue that the similarities among Romance patterns of compounding are due to similarities concerning the syntagmatic patterns that gave rise to the compounds, the mechanisms of reanalysis, as well as the conceptual needs of the different speech communities. Alternatively, it could be argued that the similarities are the result of language contact, of a continuous exchange of compounds among the Romance languages. Since these two explanations are not mutually exclusive, a combination is also a possible option. What is less relevant in this case, in contrast to prefixation and suffixation, is re-Latinization, since the compounding patterns of present-day Romance languages did not exist in Classical Latin.¹

3. The pattern *vert bouteille*

In our poster, we will concentrate on one specific pattern, viz. colour compounds of the type *vert bouteille*. The grammatical status of these expressions has given rise to controversial claims in the literature (cf. García-Page 2009). While most Romance scholars have always treated these formations as combinations of two nouns, Masini & Scalise (2012) treat them as AN compounds. One problematic fact in particular speaks against this interpretation: if the first member of the pattern were an adjectival head, we should expect it to agree with the head of

¹ Note, however, that the uniformity of A-A patterns (e.g. the *physico-mathématique* type) is indeed the result of re-Latinization, albeit on the basis of a Neo-Latin pattern of compounding that did not yet exist in Classical Latin (cf. Grossmann & Rainer 2009).

the noun phrase, which is not the case (e.g. *chemise vert bouteille* / **verte bouteille*).² More controversial is the question whether we are dealing with compounds or phrases. Both options have been defended by numerous scholars in the literature. García-Page (2009: 61-62) shows that in fact they have traits in common with both compounds and phrases, but eventually seems to prefer a phrasal account. He surmises that *chemise vert bouteille* is a kind of elliptical shortening *chemise couleur vert bouteille*, just like *chaise rococo* is short for *chaise style rococo*. Whatever the merits of this account in synchronic terms, we will show that this is not the way in which the *vert bouteille* pattern has arisen in diachrony. The issue of the delimitation of syntax and compounding in Romance NN constructions is, of course, an important one that has ramifications far beyond colour terms. In addition, it is a highly theory-dependent question that it does not make sense discussing outside specific frameworks of syntax and morphology. Construction morphologists might even argue that it is a pseudo-issue, since its constructions all the way down... A poster is not the place to take up these questions in all their complexity. Therefore, we will simply assume that we are dealing with compounds here.

4. Preliminary results

The main goal of our poster is to show that massive borrowing was indeed the decisive factor for uniformity among Romance languages with respect to the *vert bouteille* pattern. We will try to identify the oldest of such examples for the major Romance languages, from Romanian to Portuguese (the pattern, tellingly, seems to be absent from the dialects). At the present stage of our investigation, the oldest example is French *jaune paille* in Oudin's dictionary from 1607. French examples, however, only became more abundant in the course of the 18th century. The other Romance languages seem to have borrowed the pattern from French: Italian early on, the Ibero-Romance languages somewhat later, and Romanian only quite recently (after World War II). The picture is not without complications, however. Italian dictionaries, for example, feature some examples of *verdeterra* 'verditer' from around 1400 until the 16th century, which on closer inspection, however, turns out to have been an adaptation of Middle French *verd de terre* (just like English *verditer*, by the way).³ It is not the leader word of this pattern.

5. Outlook

The *vert bouteille* pattern is not an isolated case. Other patterns are certainly amenable to a similar explanation via inter-Romance borrowing, but this remains to be determined by detailed analyses. Most Romance works on compounding, unfortunately, tend to concentrate on one language only, a notable exception being Ciobanu and Hasan's monograph on Romanian, which acknowledges the deep influence that foreign languages have played in the development of compounding in this language. Much work remains to be done to pin down for each pattern and sub-pattern of compounding the exact part that the common starting point, cross-Romance contact and re-Latinization have had in creating the degree of uniformity that can be found.

² In substandard varieties, one can occasionally find such combinations (e.g. Sp. *chicas rubias platino* 'platinum blonde girls'). They seem to be a relatively recent phenomenon.

³ The term that thrived in Italian was *terra verde*. Note that earth is not a prototypical substance for green colour or some shade of green, as straw or a lemon are for the colour yellow, or blood or a cherry for the colour red.

6. References

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