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THE FRENCH *-ONS* ENDING

The origins of the French first person plural ending *-ons* have been much debated. Most scholars seem to have accepted, albeit reluctantly, the view that its source is the *-umus* ending of Lat. *sumus*, despite the fact that the main reflex of the latter in O. Fr. is *somes* rather than *sons*. In the most recent study of the question, G. Delisle has sought to explain the change without recourse to the workings of analogy, applying a series of generative rules which account for the passage of *-amus*, *-emus*, *-imus*, etc., to *-ons* [1]. The rules are not purely phonological ones : the « Gravity Switch Rule » which is the lynch-pin of the derivation is made to apply only to vowels « before a morpheme boundary followed by a nasal » [2]. This is to avoid forms such as *fenum*, *manum*, *famem*, etc., being affected also. Delisle's inspiration is another « Gravity Switch Rule », that devised by Sanford A. Schane to account for the presence of *u* in Lat. 3rd person pl. endings such as *perdunt* and *dormiunt*, given that he has postulated the underlying forms of *perdere* and *dormire* to be *perdi* and *dormi* + *i*. Professor Schane's rule was restricted to diffuse vowels in order to avoid the generation of forms like **cantunt* and **tenunt*. Professor Delisle assumes that « speakers of Modern French have generalized the Latin Gravity Switch Rule by removing the condition [+ diffuse] » [3].

It is very difficult for the non-transformationalist to accept the validity of such a derivation. It is not clear, for instance, whether it attempts to relate Latin (or the underlying forms of Latin) to Modern French in what transformationalists see as the most economical way, or whether the derivation is actually meant as an historical account of the way in which these endings evolved from Latin to Modern French, as is suggested by the title of Delisle's paper. In neither case can one be very happy with the analysis. When he assumes that « the speakers of Modern French have generalized the Latin Gravity Switch Rule by removing the condi-

1. « First Persons Plural from Latin to French », *Glossa* 2 (1968), p. 175-84.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

tion [+ diffuse] », does Professor Delisle really believe that the French speaker approaches the *-ons* ending via rules which relate it to endings in Latin ? If so, what is his evidence ? As an historical explanation, the derivation is equally unconvincing to the uninitiated, given that it involves a development that is not paralleled elsewhere in the phonology of surface structures, and above all because it does not account satisfactorily for the known facts of the evolution of verb endings from Latin to French. All that one can say for the rules presented is that they do generate the modern forms from the Latin ones in a reasonably economical way. In short, as an exercise in transformational derivation, the rules may be said to « work », but do not seem to correspond either to the working of the modern language or to the actual history of the forms from Latin to French. Nor can they be said to provide any real explanation why the changes should have taken this form. This falls far short of the kind of claims that are often made for generative grammar. For instance, in the introduction to his revised edition of W. D. Elcock's *The Romance Languages* (London, 1975), Dr J. Green claims that traditional linguistics merely answered the question « what happened ? », structuralists asked « how ? » and wondered « why ? », while transformationalists explicitly ask « why ? ». All that one can say is that this is not the impression one gets from Professor Delisle's study. It is surely not sufficient, for instance, to say that the Gravity Switch Rule postulated by Professor Schane has been generalized, without asking why this generalization should have been largely restricted to Northern Gallo-Romance. To that extent, the change, far from representing a move towards greater generality, involves a restriction, and it is hard to avoid the impression that the rule is a purely *ad hoc* one : it certainly does not constitute an explanation.

Any historical study of the *-ons* suffix needs to start with a more detailed look at the facts than is available in Delisle's paper. One point to be noted is that the Latin first person pl. endings did not always develop to *-ons* in Old French. The early texts contain examples such as *oram* « we pray » (*Cantilène de Ste Eulalie*), *devemps* « we must » (*Vie de St Léger*), *avem* « we have » and *poem* « we can » (*Vie de St Alexis*) [1], the last being in line with the postulated remodelling of *posse* (1st pers. pl. *possŭmus*) as **potere* (1st pers. pl. **potēmus*). Forms without *-s* are common later in Norman

1. Cf. P. Fouché, *Le verbe français*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1967, p. 190, n. 2.

and Anglo-Norman as well as in Occitan, in which the vowels of the endings also closely parallel those of the examples cited. Admittedly, these are early, rare and highly untypical cases. There are, however, plenty of other, more numerous examples of developments other than to *-ons*. *Dicĭmus* and *facĭmus* > O. Fr. *dimes* and *faimes*, which were replaced in the course of the 12th century by analogical *disons* and *faisons*. Much more numerous were the cases in the present subjunctive where palatal + *amus* > *-iens*. In the imperfect, *-abamus* and *-ebamus* regularly developed to *-iiens*. I mention these cases because according to the Gravity Switch Rule postulated by Professor Delisle, they also should have undergone rounding and backing of the vowel. Delisle himself deals with the endings of the perfect such as *-avimus*, and although his explanation of their development seems implausible to the non-believer [1], we may concur with him in omitting the perfect forms from discussion. In an historical account, however, one can hardly ignore the *-iens* and *-iiens* forms, which are normal in O. Fr. in the cases mentioned.

It would probably not be beyond the ingenuity of Professor Delisle to modify his derivation so that the Gravity Switch Rule did not operate when vowels were preceded by palatal or potentially palatal elements — indeed, it makes some sense in phonetic terms that the rounding and backing of a vowel should be inhibited by the presence of a preceding palatal or palatalized sound. Unfortunately, the addition of such a rule would not suffice to account for the O. Fr. forms, since the development

1. Professor Delisle believes (*art. cit.*, p. 180) that the perfect was formed from Stem + vis + person by certain rules, notably an s-Deletion rule : s- Ø /--- {m, r (t)}. This would account for the fact that an underlying **cantavismus* becomes Latin *cantavimus* : it does *not* produce the form **cantasmus* to which Delisle applies a still-operative s-Deletion rule, following a Reduction rule which led to the retention as schwa of the final vowel as a support to the consonant group. It is surely more plausible, in view of the fact that the O. Fr. form in the 1st person is *-ames*, to explain the retention of the final vowel in support not of a group **sm* but of a group **v(i)m* : *amavimus* > **amavmos* > **amavməs* > **amaməs*. It is incidentally incorrect to say that « Nyrop states that possibly the reason why we have *chantâmes* and not *chantons* is because the *s* of *cantavistis* appeared by analogy in *cantamus* yielding *cantasmus* » (*art. cit.*, p. 180). Operating within the limitations of traditional phonology, Nyrop would not have dreamt of making *cantamus* become *chantons* by regular phonetic development. What he says (*Grammaire historique de la langue française*, Vol. 2, Copenhagen, 1903, p. 128) is « *Cantam(m)us* aurait dû donner *chantans* ou *chantains* : la forme *chantames* doit provenir de quelque analogie externe ».

to *-iens* is not determined solely by the presence of a preceding palatal : the reflexes of *collocamus* and *manducamus* in O. Fr. are not **colchiens* and **mangiens* but *colchons* and *mangeons*, because these are indicatives, not subjunctives.

It would therefore be difficult, if not impossible, to make Delisle's derivation fit the facts as far as O. Fr. is concerned, and the « traditionalist » can hardly be blamed for feeling that if it is not an historical explanation, it is pointless, since the usefulness of analysing Mod. French through roundabout derivations from the underlying forms of Latin is dubious, to put it no more strongly. Delisle's difficulties arose mainly out of his desire to discard traditional explanations of Fr. *-ons*, which ascribe it to the workings of analogy, in favour of a rule that has greater generality. In itself, the desire is laudable, and all scholars share it : what they would object to in the case of Delisle's derivation is that it achieves greater generality, if in fact it does achieve it at all, at the expense both of the facts and of general plausibility. One of the points that is not clear is whether Delisle or other generative phonologists are prepared to accept that certain changes cannot usefully be explained in phonological or morphophonemic terms. It may (for instance) be possible to devise phonological rules that « account for » the change from *dimes* > *disons*, but it is difficult to see how they would have greater scientific validity than Ménage's famous derivation of Fr. *haricot* from Lat. *faba*. But having accepted that the substitution of *-ons* in the case of *dimes* and *faimes* is best ascribed to the influence of analogy, does one accept it also for the change from *-iens* and *-iiens* in O. Fr. to *-ions* in Middle Fr. and Mod. French ? And if so, why not for the *-amus*, *-ēmus*, etc. > *-ons* change ? In other words, where does one draw the line between « phonological » and « analogical » changes, and on the basis of which criteria ? If it is a matter of convenience and economy in stating the changes from Lat. to Mod. Fr., there may be some sort of case for Professor Delisle's derivation : as an analysis of what actually seems to have happened, or why it happened, it suffers from many weaknesses.

The lack of generality of Delisle's explanation comes out more strongly when one seeks to situate the problem in a wider comparative and historical perspective. The corresponding present indicative ending in Modern Italian is *-iamo*, regardless of whether the etymological source in Latin was *-amus*, *-ēmus*, *-ĭmus*, *-īmus* or *-ŭmus* : cf. Ital. *cantiamo*, *teniamo*, *perdiamo*, *dormiamo* and *siamo*. In O. Ital. texts, on the other hand, endings

such as *-amo*, *-emo* and *-imo* were still found. In Italian, therefore, as in French (except for *sommes*), one ending — curiously enough in this case that deriving from *-eamus* and *-iamus* in the present subjunctive — has been generalized throughout the whole verb-system. Clearly, it would be possible, as with the generalization of *-ons*, to devise morphophonemic rules which would convert all the endings into *-iamo*. These would again be *ad hoc* rules, and would carry little conviction for the non-transformationalist. Such a procedure would not bring out one significant point that the French and Italian phenomena have in common — i. e. the generalization of a single ending in the 1st person pl., where Spanish and Portuguese have retained three different endings, and Rumanian, four. It is not easy to say why this should have happened, but one can at least note that it is in what were the peripheral areas of the Roman Empire that greater variety has been maintained, while simplification has occurred in the more central areas. This would of course be more impressive if it were not for the fact that the simplification occurred so late in Italian. It would seem, however, that the simplification of the 1st person pl. forms can be related to earlier trends affecting other endings, such as that of the 3rd person pl., so that one can meaningfully refer to the oft-mentioned conservatism of « aires latérales » [1] and the corresponding greater tendency towards innovation in the centre. Question-begging as such speculations may be, they are surely more concerned with « generality » than are Delisle's rules, however « tightly ordered » the latter may be.

If one considers the generalization of the *-ons* ending in the wider framework of the evolution of verb-paradigms in Northern Gallo-Romance, one finds several other examples of the generalization of single endings throughout the conjugations : to take only two examples, the 2nd person plural ending *-ez* (to which the only exceptions are *êtes*, *dites* and *faites*) is the reflex of Lat. *-atis*, while the flexions of the imperfect tense derive from the endings of the Lat. second conjugation. These cases differ from that of *-ons* in so far as their generalization took place largely in Old French, whereas the extension of *-ons* (or its variants *-on* and *-omes*) took place considerably earlier, in the case of the indicative forms at least. Since endings cognate with *-ons* are also found in the dialects of North-West

1. Generalizations of this kind are always dangerous because each of the Romance languages is conservative in some respects : Gallo-Romance in respect of the declensional system, Italo-Romance in respect of phonology, and so forth.

Italy and in some forms of Rhaeto-Romance [1], it would appear that the substitution of a rounded back vowel + nasal for *a*, *e*, *i* + nasal took place in the Late Empire in a number of contiguous areas which probably had many developments in common up to the time when the Germanic invasions reduced their contacts. This view that the change was at least begun during the V. Latin period is one that would not be accepted by all Romance scholars. The late Pierre Fouché, for instance, believed that the existence of forms like *oram*, *avem* and *poem* in the earliest texts disproved the possibility of V. Latin (or indeed of Gallo-Roman) remodelling of the type *cantamus* > **cantumus* [2]. This seems to me to go beyond the evidence. The *Vie de St Léger* poem is tainted by Occitan, and even it contains *-ons*-type forms (1.3, *cantomps*, 1.6, *cantumps*, etc.); the one example of a 1st person pl. ending in the *Cantilène de Ste Eulalie* is one in *-am* — but it is suspect because of the strong liturgical overtones of a line such as *Tuit oram que por nos dɐgnet preier*. It is therefore difficult to accept the quoted examples either as typical of Early O. Fr., or as proof of the fact that changes to **-omos* did not take place anywhere in the Gallo-Romance area before the downfall of the Empire : such a view is based on a conception of a V. Latin much more uniform than it is likely to have been. Something else suggesting that the substitution of back vowel + nasal took place early is the degree of divergence between *somes* < *sŭmus* and the verb ending that allegedly derives from *sŭmus*. Seen in the context of an emergent Old French, it is puzzling that there should be so little parallelism between the development of *-ons* and that of its source — although *sons* < *sumus* is found. In the wider context of a tendency to generalize an ending of the **-omos* type in V. Latin, the later differentiation of *somes* and *-ons* is interesting, but hardly crucial.

Professor Delisle derives *sommes* from a form **sommus* which as a Latin word would certainly develop to O. Fr. *somes* — but this is presented as a stage in a derivation which takes the « underlying form for the verb *sum* » as *sm* and rather ingeniously accounts for the variants *sons*, *esmes* and *somes* on the basis of different ordering of TG rules for Degemination, u-Insertion and Reduction [3]. Once again, however, one has the impression of an academic exercice in the arrangement of rules, conducted with scant

1. Cf. E. Bourciez, *Éléments de linguistique romane*, 4th ed., Paris, 1946, § 204 (b), p. 215.
2. *Le verbe français*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1967, p. 190, note 2.
3. *Loc. cit.*, p. 182 f.

regard for chronology. The rules presented duly produce the 1st person plural form *sumus* from an underlying *sm*. Delisle suggests that **essmus* and **summus* were generated from the same base through the loss of environmental restrictions. a different ordering of rules, etc., but if such had been the case, these variants would surely have been produced simultaneously with *sumus*. The form **essmus*, for instance, is attributed to an unexplained failure to apply the postulated *u*-insertion rule, and therefore cannot be subsequent to the generation of *sumus* : once *u* is inserted, there is no need for an initial *e*. The facts are, however, that while *sumus* is attested in Latin, **summus* and **essmus* are not : all that we have, very many hundreds of years later, are O. Fr. *somes* and *esmes* [1]. Less imaginatively, traditionalists have tended to explain the development of *somes* in terms of an analogical influence of the synonymous variant *esmes*, although the origins of the latter are themselves obscure [2]. Fouché has suggested that *somes* arises out of the development of an epenthetic vowel between *m* and final *s* when the form occurred before a word beginning with a consonant. The difficulty about explaining the development in terms of syntactical phonetics would seem to be that the same factor would be expected to operate not only in the case of *sumus*, but in that of every 1st person pl. form. One point that has not been made is that *sons* — although it did occur — was unique among 1st person pl. forms in that it was monosyllabic, fusing or appearing to fuse stem and ending. This suggests that one reason why a phonetically rather irregular form *somes* and an equally irregular 2nd person p. *estes* (cf. *hostis* > O. Fr. *oz*) were generalized in use, was that they fitted into the pattern of plural forms having at least two syllables. Against this, it may be argued that the reduction to monosyllables of certain 3rd person pl. forms. was not inhibited (cf. *sont, ont, vont* and *font*) — but *sunt* at least was already monosyllabic in Latin.

As we have seen, the traditional hypothesis is that the *-ons* of French is due to the analogical extension of the *-umus* ending from a single influential verb-form, *sumus*, to all other verbs. This is due largely to the fact that — at least according to traditional views of historical phonology — *sumus* is the only form from which an *-ons* ending can regularly be deri-

1. The latter is relatively rare in O. Fr., as is a further variant mentioned by Fouché (*op. cit.*, p. 418), *suimes*, presumably formed on the analogy of *sui*.
2. Cf. Fouché, *op. cit.*, p. 417 ff.

ved, but there is some supporting evidence from other Romance areas. Nyrop claims [1] that in Frioulan and in Northern and Central Italian dialects the forms of the 1st pers. pl. parallel those of the 1st pers. pl. of the verb *essere* : where the latter derives from *simus*, the ending is *-emo* (or a variant thereof) in all verbs, while it is *-umo* (or a variant thereof) where a reflex of *sumus* is used. G. Rohlfs in his *Historische Grammatik der italienischen Sprache* [2] suggests that the situation is rather more complex, with (for instance) *-amo* replacing *-emo* in some areas, as well as *-emo* replacing *-amo* (whether by analogy with the reflex of *simus* or for some other reason). Although the influence of the form *sŭmus* is clearly a likely factor in the generalization of *-ons* in French, it seems advisable to consider what other factors could have contributed to the phenomenon. The point has already been made that the tendency to extend one ending at the expense of others is not something that is restricted to the case of the 1st pers. plural. One significant example that has not yet been mentioned is that of the 3rd pers. pl. ending, where there have been widespread extensions of the reflex of *-unt* into paradigms other than those in which it is etymological. Old Provençal had (for instance) *canton* (< Lat. *cantant*) and *vezon* (< Lat. *vident*) [3] ; Italian has *tengono* and *vengono* (cf. Lat. *tenent* and *veniunt*), and forms like *cantono* are found in Italian dialects ; from the point of view of the French forms, the most notable feature of Italo-Romance development is the parallelism in Piedmontese between *-umo* (presumably the reflex of *-umus*) and *-u* (< *-unt*) [4]. The precise history of the 3rd person pl. in Northern Gallo-Romance is obscured by the fact that all unstressed endings [5] in V + *nt* end up orthographically as *-ent* in O. Fr., presumably pronounced as [ənt]. The fact that we have forms such as *sont*, *vont*, and *font* in French would appear to prove that etymological *-unt* was maintained, while the history of Lat. *habent* and *stant* in Gallo-Romance would appear to indicate at least some extension of *-unt* into conjugations where it was not etymological. Fouché ascribes the evolution of *habent* > *ont*

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 41.
2. Vol. 2, Berne, 1949, p. 291 ff.
3. Admittedly in competition with forms such as *cantan*, which is etymological, and *canten*, in which the analogical influence is that of the 2nd conjugation ending. Cf. J. Anglade, *Grammaire de l'ancien provençal*, Paris, 1921, p. 269.
4. Cf. Rohlfs, *op. cit.*, p. 293, 299.
5. *Sont, ont, font, vont* and O. Fr. *estont* derive from forms in which the vowel of the ending was stressed in Latin (*sunt*) or merged with the vowel of the stem to form a diphthong (**aunt*, **faunt*, etc.).

to the analogical influence of *sunt* [1], and believes that by and large, the etymological endings were retained in Northern Gallo-Romance [2]. Because of the general impossibility of distinguishing the development of *-ant*, *-ent* and *-unt*, it is difficult to prove or to disprove this statement. The main evidence adduced by Fouché is that *plaisent* and *taisent* would appear to derive from etymological *placent* and *tacent* rather than from **placunt* and **tacunt*, which would be expected to produce **plont* and **tont*. However, given the importance of formal solidarity within paradigms, the forms *plaisent* and *taisent* may represent analogical rather than etymological developments. There is certainly little to prevent one from postulating a widespread extension of *-unt* from the Latin third and fourth conjugations into others. This would not merely account for the development of the forms *ont* and Old Fr. *estont* (cf. Lat. *stant*) — it would help to explain the success of the *-umus/-ons* ending in the first person pl., which would then be seen as resulting from a move towards uniform endings in the pl. of the present indicative, based on a pattern in the 1st and 3rd persons of back vowel + nasal. The areas outside N. France in which the reflex of *-ŭmus* has been extended to other verbs (Northern Italy and some forms of Rhaeto-Romance) [3] are areas in which the reflexes of *-unt* have also been extended analogically. The presence of analogical forms from *-unt* does not inevitably entail the analogical extension of *-umus* forms, as can be seen from the general development of Italo-Romance and of Occitan. The question is whether one can reasonably maintain the opposite, i. e. that without the extension of *-unt* forms there was no extension of the reflexes of *-umus*. In the second edition of *Le verbe français*, Fouché also stressed the importance of 3rd person forms, but on the rather narrow basis of special later developments such as those of *sont*, *vont*, and *font* : « ... sur le modèle de *sons* : *sont*, les formes verbales en *-ont* ont déterminé *-ons* dans les formes de la 1re pers. plur. qui leur correspondaient... » [4]. This is a very piece-meal approach, and while one cannot reject such an explanation out of hand, it ignores the wider context of other Romance developments involving *-umus*, and treats the spread of *-ons* as a late, purely Gallo-Romance feature. It seems more appropriate

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 432.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
3. Cf. W. D. Elcook, *The Romance Languages*, 2nd ed., 1975, p. 134.
4. *Op. cit.*, p. 190.

to believe, with Elcock[1], that the extension of *-ŭmus* must go back to V. Latin. The fact that the most important single verb in the language had back vowel + nasal in the 1st and 3rd person pl. forms *sumus* and *sunt* may have been one of the factors that favoured the extension of these particular endings, but it seems implausible to attribute the entire extension of *-ons* in French solely to the influence of *sumus* and *sunt*, or even to that of *sumus* alone. If one relates the extension of *-umus* and its reflexes to the extension of *-unt*, the change becomes a little less mysterious. Clearly, there was nothing inevitable about the extension of the latter, let alone of the former : Ibero-Romance saw the elimination of *-unt* (except in exceptional cases such as that of *son* < *sunt*) in favour of *-en* < *-ent* — but this may be seen as the expression of a similar tendency to that which led to the extension of *-unt* and *-umus*, i. e. the trend towards simplification in the flexional patterns of the verb. It is by no means obvious why *-unt* and its reflexes should have replaced *-ent* forms, as in Italian, or vice versa, as in Ibero-Romance. In favour of the former solution was the fact that the presence of the *-unt* ending in a number of very high frequency verbs (though curiously, *fanno* and *vanno* are among the few cases in Italian where etymological *-unt* was replaced) : also, *-unt* was unequivocally an indicative ending, where *-ant* and *-ent* are not.

Given the widespread presence of *-unt* forms in the third person pl., it is much easier to understand the extension of *-umus* forms in the first person, although again this is a far from inevitable step, as can be seen from the history of Occitan and of Italo-Romance. What all the languages — including the Ibero-Romance ones — have in common is a degree of simplification of the flexions of the present tense, carried through with the greatest thoroughness in French, where in the present indicative (apart from a few odd forms like *faites*, *somes*, etc.), the plural forms of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd persons had reduced by the end of the 12th century or so to a single flexion in each case : *-ons*, *-ez*, *-ent*. If one looks at the history of the first person pl., Northern Gallo-Romance links up not with Occitan, but with Franco-Provençal, Rhaeto-Romance, and those dialects of North-West Italy which like it have adopted the reflexes of *-umus*. This is of course not the only case in which the *langue d'oïl* and the *langue d'oc* have diverged in a significant way : in the matter of diphthongiza-

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 134.

tion, for instance, a similar grouping of the languages would be appropriate. In other words, the break is between Gallia Narbonensis on the one hand, and the rest of Gaul, including Gallia Cisalpina, on the other.

Seen in the wider context of the early history of Romance, the generalization of *-ons* may be seen as one facet of a trend towards simpler paradigms — the same trend towards greater simplicity and uniformity which may be observed today in the evolution of a system such as that of « le français populaire », which is relatively free from normative constraints. In that wider perspective, it would seem that the form taken by simplification in a large part of the central Empire was the extension of *-unt* in the 3rd person pl., followed in part but not all of the same area, by the extension of back vowel + nasal into the 1st person as well. Obviously, if one follows Fouché in arguing that forms such as *chantent* and *voient* (for instance) continue etymological *cantant* and *vident*, the force of this argument is weakened, since the *-unt* and *-umus* areas would then overlap in a much less significant way. A link between 3rd and 1st person forms has the merit of providing at least some idea as to how and why the reflexes of *-umus* came to be extended throughout the system in French. Nothing very new has been suggested here, but it appeared useful to look at the problem of *-ons* again in the light of some very different approaches. The methodological gap between the transformationalists and non-transformationalists is such that, to use a cliché, they seem to be speaking different languages. Is a *dialogue de sourds* inevitable ? The purpose of this paper has been at least in part to indicate the kind of difficulties experienced by a structuralist-cum-traditionalist in approaching a transformationalist analysis. Some of the general problems raised, such as the role of analogy in transformational explanations, would seem to merit closer attention

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