

The fates of Latin *ille*: a tale of syntax and phonology

In historical syntax ‘phonetic erosion’ is often said to cause change (e.g., Roberts and Roussou, 2003) and phonology burdened with actuation, previously I have argued that ‘phonetic erosion’ is phonologically meaningless (2025). Here I expand on this and address direction of the alleged causal links between ‘erosion’ and grammaticalisation exemplified through the development of the Latin demonstrative *ille* > Romance definite articles (RDA), which I argue is a series of unremarkable phonological changes (not ‘erosion’) where syntactic change ‘caused’ (= created the environment for) phonological change.

By the late Classical (CL) period *ille* had two distinct functions (demonstrative and 3rd person pronoun). The demonstrative is grammaticalised into the RDAs which are phonologically reduced compared to [ˈil.lə]. Despite all being monosyllabic the RDAs are not all descended from the same syllable of *ille* e.g., most of the Spanish DAs ([la], [los], [las]) descend from *ille*’s second syllable (σ₂) apart from the masculine singular, [el], from the first (σ₁). How can the phonology account for this? Moreover, comparing the structure of the RDAs to the pronominal descendants of *ille* which did not undergo syntactic change between CL and Romance and have largely retained their phonological form suggests that it was in fact grammaticalisation that created the environment for ‘erosion’.

Unlike previous accounts of the grammaticalisation of the RDAs (e.g., R&R, 2003) I propose that each RDA evolved through its own series of cross-linguistically common phonological processes rather than undergoing some phonologically special process of ‘erosion’. Examples (1) – (4) below show proposed development pathways for the four definite articles in Modern Spanish. Each step of each pathway shows an unremarkable phonological processes (the order of which is not yet meant to precisely reflect every phonological change chronologically).

(1) 'il.lum	>	'il.lu	>	'il.u	>	il	>	el
	nasal syncope		degemination		vowel syncope		lowering	
(2) 'il.lam	>	'il.la	>	'i.la	>	la		
	nasal syncope		degemination		vowel syncope			
(3) 'il.lo:s	>	'i.lo:s	>	'lo:s	>	los		
	degemination		vowel syncope		shortening			
(4) 'il.la:s	>	'i.la:s	>	'la:s	>	las		
	degemination		vowel syncope		shortening			

In (1) the seemingly surprising loss of stressed syllables can be accounted for with the nuances of Latin prominence marking. RDAs developed from the corresponding accusative forms of *ille* all of which are formed of two heavy syllables. Given that Latin assigns stress to weight (Lahiri et al, 1999), I propose that weight is significant enough to prosodic prominence to be on par with stress. In (3) and (4) degemination removes σ₁ coda minimising the difference in prominence between σ₁ and σ₂: σ₁ is light and stressed while σ₂ is heavy and unstressed, making loss of either syllable unremarkable. Loss of the stressed syllable in (2) requires more detailed analysis but may be attributed to function words having lower prosodic prominence making them more susceptible to lenition, an established idea in both Latin philology (Radford, 1906) and prosodic theory (Selkirk, 2004). I argue that the observed variability in syllable retention is unsurprising given that there is no straightforwardly ‘strong’ syllable in grammaticalised *ille* (cf. pronominal *ille*).

Thus, I show that the development of the RDAs can be accounted for by a series of normal phonological changes. Since, some of the later phonological developments are dependent on conditions created by grammaticalisation of *ille*, it seems syntactic change is creating the environment for phonological change in this case.