Old French declension in a "Word and Paradigm" approach and default syncretism

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Old French (OF) nominal lexemes (nouns and adjectives) inflect for two values of the Number feature, singular and plural, and two values of the Case feature, Nominative (traditionally *cas sujet*) and Oblique (traditionally *cas régime*). Nominative is for subjects, whatever agrees with the subject, and vocatives; Oblique is for all the rest (DO, IO, genitives, adjuncts) (Horning 1882 ; Raynaud de Lage 1964 ; Nyrop 1965 ; Rheinfelder 1967 ; Moignet 1973 ; La Chaussée 1977 ; Picoche 1979 ; Buridan 2000). I will use the traditional term "declension" for such a double Number-Case inflection. Modern French (MF), in which nominals inflect for Number only – if at all ! – has no declension according to that definition.

In "classical" OF (end of the 10th century – beginning of the 14th century) all nominals decline, to the massive exception of feminines ending in *-e* (probably sounded as [ə]) which only inflect for Number: cf. *la porte* /la_ˈpɔrtə/ vs. *les portes* /les_ˈpɔrtəs/ 'the door(s)', all functions; and various sorts of indeclinable nominals (e.g. masculines whose stem ends in *-s*). With declinable nominals, the combinatorics of two numbers and two cases yields four-cells paradigms, illustrated below with a masculine lexeme, MUR 'wall' and a feminine one, FLOR 'flower':

	SG	PL
NOM	*li murs*	*li mur*
OBL	*le mur*	*les murs*

Table 1 : Paradigm of OF MUR (masculine)

	SG	PL
NOM	*la flors*	*les flors*
OBL	*la flor*	*les flors*

Table 2 : Paradigm of OF FLOR (feminine)

As is usual in OF grammars, nominal paradigms include the definite article, showing three distinct forms in the masculine, but only two in the feminine. However, bare noun phrases – i.e. NP's without a determiner – being much more frequent in OF than in MF and word-order freer, case marking is often the only clue to grammatical function, as illustrated in (1) (Régnier 1967:45):

(1) *Bertran   apele...*
   Bertran.OC call.PRES.INDIC.3SG
   He calls Bertran…

OBL on *Bertran* (contrasting with NOM *Bertranz*) unambiguously signals that the sentence must be understood as translated in (1) – OF being pro-drop (compare MF *Il appelle Bertrand*) – not as "Bertran calls" (MF *Bertrand appelle*).

Given this, the two paradigms make apparent the phenomenon that motivates the present study : discounting the article as we may, we see that the four cells are occupied by only two distinct forms, one identical to the root-stem (*mur*, *flor*), the other ending in *-s* (always pronounced in OF). Hence a syncretism in Table 1 of NOM.SG and OBL.PL, as well as of OBL.SG and NOM.PL ; and in Table 2 of NOM.SG, NOM.PL and OBL.PL.

Owing to these syncretisms, the *-s* ending expresses distinct, nay reverse feature values: subject and singular OR object and plural in Table 1 ; singular OR plural subject OR plural object in Table 2. Likewise for the bare form in Table 1, object and singular OR subject and plural. Providing the latter with a *-∅* suffix, counterpart of *-s*, neither removes the difficulty of having opposite values attached to the same element, nor makes the paradigms more canonical (Corbett 2007a). I will therefore consider the bare form to be morphologically nonmarked, so that Table 1 and Table 2 only show one ending in their four cells.

Having one phonological form express different feature values is not a problem in itself: e.g. *-um* in Latin is an Accusative singular ending in Declension 2 (*dominum odio* 'I hate the master'), and a Genitive plural ending in Declension 3 (*odium prīncipum* 'the hate of the princes'). What may be an issue worth thinking about is having one phonological form – and its absence – express REVERSE values of the same feature, as shown above, insofar as singular and plural are reverse values of the feature Number, and Nominative and Oblique may be viewed as reverse values of the Case feature in a two-case system.

The diachronic causes that led to this state of affair in the course of the evolution from Late Latin to OF are well-known. They are not relevant to my purpose, however, which is to think about the issue from a synchronic perspective, that is with the aim of setting up a fragment of grammar which may count as a plausible model of OF native speakers' competence.

"Morphous", incremental approaches that take *-s* and the "zero" morpheme they countenance as lexical signifiers allow for two solutions only: homophony or a peculiar type of morpheme endowed with a "toggle" property (Weigel 1993). As I will show, the former solution, although quite reasonable in the case of Latin *-um*, fails to take into account the intriguing fact of the contradictoriness, not just difference, of the values expressed by OF *-s* and its absence. The latter solution, first applied to the issue of "inverse" number marking in some Amerindian languages (Weigel 1993; Mithun, 1999:81), assumes the existence of a rather exotic linguistic entity, without any necessity outside the theoretical framework that forces the assumption.

The "Word and Paradigm" approach (Robins 1959 ; Blevins 2006), in contrast, allows for a simpler and more revealing solution, as it does not assign autonomous reality to *-s*, but it considers it to be ABSTRACTED from the comparison of the word-forms inside the paradigm. From this perspective, the identical forms in Tables 1 and 2 are indeed the result of syncretism, a quite common phenomenon within paradigms (Corbett 2007b). The syncretism itself is particular, as it is neither stipulated (arbitrary) nor unstipulated (semantically motivated) (Stump 2001:215), but it is based on the DEFAULT values of the morphosyntactic features expressed by the forms.

The default notion has a semantic and a morphosyntactic facet. From a semantic viewpoint, "[…] default interpretation of the speaker's utterance is normally understood to mean salient meaning intended by the speaker, or presumed by the addressee to have been intended, and recovered (a) without the help of inference from the speaker's intentions or (b) without conscious inferential process altogether." (Jaszczolt 2010). In morphosyntax, "[…] a default rule […] applies by default if no other rule applies" (Finkel & Stump 2002)

For instance, with OBL the Case default in OF (which I will try to demonstrate) and singular the Number default perhaps universally, we see that OBL.SG and NOM.PL are respectively all default and all nondefault, whereas NOM.SG and OBL.PL are inharmonious, respectively nondefault / default and default / nondefault. The pattern in Table 1 is therefore accounted for by syncretism of default-conflicting forms, identically marked by the lone exponent, and by consequent syncretism of default-consistent forms, identically nonmarked. In Table 2, only the all default form OBL.SG is nonmarked ; all other forms include at least a nondefault value (two in NOM.PL) and are marked. (An interesting comparison is with the

Romanian feminine declension, where the all-default nonmarked form is the singular nominative-accusative or direct case.) Syncretism in OF (and Old Occitan, Old Franco-Provençal, and Romanian) is DEFAULT SYNCRETISM, a third kind besides stipulated and unstipulated syncretisms, deserving acknowledgement, I believe.

To conclude, I will try and show that the OF declension system, also for other word-classes than those illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, is a consequence of the necessity imposed by language change to express four contrasts with one surviving exponent. In this way, the OF Old Occitan, and Old Franco-Provençal declensions represent inherently unstable and now long extinct stages in the evolution from a rich nominal inflection towards a nominal inflection reduced to the Number contrast (Modern Occitan) or virtually nonexistent as in spoken MF. In colloquial Romanian, case inflection is very much on the wane.

Such DEPLETED inflectional systems, highly syncretic of necessity and based on default (in a way the minimal amount of contrast) are probably rare (empirical research needed!), but of indisputable theoretical significance.

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