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Interpreting Second Declension Singular Forms in -*u*

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With the fall of final -*m* in spoken, i.e., so-called Vulgar Latin, and the merger of /ō/ and /ŭ/ in the unstressed final syllable, the accusative is said to have been assimilated to the ablative, thus giving rise to what was to become, in the second declension singular, the general oblique case in -*o*.[1] Thus, an originally phonological phenomenon eventually turned into a morphological one.[2] However, the orthographic change from -*u* to -*o* in the final syllable, reflecting the emergence of this new case form (a change that is clearly reflected in studies of Late Latin documents like those of Pei, Sas, B. Löfstedt, Politzer, Cooper, Jennings, my own on Christian Inscriptions, and, more recently, Charles Carlton's study on documents from Ravenna)[3] is far from characteristic of the earlier Vulgar Latin period (say, up to the fourth–fifth centuries). Indeed, the phenomenon is *extremely* rare in Diehl's seminal study on final -*m* in epigraphic material,[4] where instances of an -*u* ending in what appears to be the classical accusa-

[1] Cf. Mario Pei, *The Language of the Eighth-Century Texts in Northern France* (New York, 1932), 106 ff. and 141 ff., with additional bibliographical references.

[2] Henri F. Muller and Pauline Taylor, *A Chrestomathy of Vulgar Latin* (New York, 1932), 54.

[3] Pei, *op. cit.*, 141 ff.; Louis Furman Sas, *The Noun Declension System in Merovingian Latin* (Paris, 1937), 124 ff.; Bengt Löfstedt, *Studien über die Sprache der langobardischen Gesetze* (Stockholm, 1961), 226 ff.; Robert L. Politzer, *A Study of the Language of Eighth-Century Lombardic Documents* (New York, 1949), 73; Paul J. Cooper, *The Language of the Forum Judicum*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 1952), 51 ff.; Augustus Campbell Jennings, *A Linguistic Study of the Cartulario de San Vicente de Oviedo* (New York, 1940), 95 ff.; Paul A. Gaeng, *An Inquiry Into Local Variations in Vulgar Latin As Reflected in the Vocalism of Christian Inscriptions* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 221 ff.; Charles Merritt Carlton, *A Linguistic Analysis of a Collection of Late Latin Documents Composed in Ravenna Between A.D. 445–700* (The Hague, 1973), 81 ff.

[4] Ernst Diehl, *De m finali epigraphica* (Leipzig, 1899), 268 ff.

tive case abound, e.g., *deus magnu oclu habet, filias titulu posuerunt, Petrus cum suis votu solvet, vixit annu et dies L, post ovitu meu,* and passim.

It must be pointed out, however, that the apparent omission of final *-m* in the classical accusative, even on inscriptions of a later date, such as Christian inscriptions of the fifth and sixth centuries, is far from overwhelming, let alone universal. While there are many examples of the omission of this final consonant in the accusative, in both dated and undated inscriptions, there are also a great number of correct occurrences. To illustrate this phenomenon and to get some idea of a possible ratio of omission versus retention of final *-m*, I have selected a sampling taken from Chapter XXVI of Diehl's collection of *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres* (ILCV) (Vol. II, 279 ff.),[5] which includes 55 epitaphs from the area of *Rome* concerned with the purchase of burial places and sarcophagi for two or more persons, so-called *loci bisomi, trisomi,* and even *quadrisomi.* Out of a total of 74 occurrences of the direct object—the usual formula being *emit* or *fecit* (*fecerunt*) *sibi locum bisomum* (*trisomum, quadrisomum*), or simply *locum* or *bisomum,* etc.—I found 36 occurrences spelled with *-u* and 38 with *-um.* On six inscriptions, furthermore, I noted the concurrent use of classical accusatives in *-um* and forms in *-u* in the same function, as in *emit sibi et Maxentiae locum bisomu* (3810A).[6] It is also interesting to observe that in five out of seven cases where the expected accusative appears with an *-u* ending, the ablative preceded by the preposition *a(b)* is also spelled with *-u,* as in *locu bisomu emptu ab Ursu fossore* (3811A, a. 403). (This group of inscriptions, incidentally, seems to come from the first half of the fifth century, seeing that some of them are precisely dated.)

A sampling such as this nevertheless seems to suggest a considerable hesitation between forms in *-um* and *-u* to signal direct object function, even in formulaic expressions involving high frequency words, in which the retention of final *-m* as a written device may not reflect the true state of the spoken language at all.[7] In fact, such a hesitation on the written level must surely reflect new spoken language habits. Without wishing to embark upon a discussion of the chronology of the loss of final *-m* in Latin speech—scholars do not seem to be in agreement on this point anyway[8]—

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[5] Second edition, revised. Berlin, 1961.

[6] The number in brackets refers to the reference number in Diehl's collection, from which these and all subsequent examples are taken.

[7] Cf. in this connection Emil Seelmann, *Die Aussprache des Lateins nach physiologisch-historischen Grundsätzen* (Heilbronn, 1885), wherein the author states: "Die Vulgärsprache hat . . . jedwedes M dem Schwunde preisgegeben" (p. 357 f.).

[8] On this subject cf. Robert K. Higgins, "Research Into the Phenomenon Involving Latin Final M." Unpublished Master's Essay, Columbia University, 1951.

I hope to show in my subsequent line of argument that written *-m* at this point in time (late fourth–early fifth centuries) no longer reflects a spoken /m/ accusative marker, but merely represents an orthographic tradition which some stonecutters continue to observe, in accordance with their training in Latin grammar.

But what about a form like *annu* in such expressions as *qui vixit annu et meses IIII* (3299)? Could this form, which we might assume to be an accusative without final *-m*, not also stand for a classical ablative? Singular ablative forms spelled with *-u* for the expected *-o* are attested in inscriptions from all over the Roman Empire. And although the form *annu* has generally been interpreted as an equivalent of *annum* whenever it is followed in these time expressions by the accusative plural forms *menses* and *dies*,[9] the interchangeability and practical identity of accusative and ablative in expressions of time duration—as further evidenced by the frequently concurrent use of both cases in the same inscription—would lend support to the ablative interpretation of *annu* also.[10] After all, *vixit anno* (also found on inscriptions) is perfectly acceptable to Latin grammarians,[11] even though *vixit annum* is the more usual formula in expressions indicating length of time a deceased person had lived. Thus, we are really left in the dark as to whether *annu* is to be interpreted as a classical accusative without final *-m* or an ablative in *-u* for the expected *-o*.[12]

The difficulty of deciding whether forms in *-u* represent accusatives or

[9] Otto Prinz, *De O et U vocalibus inter se mutatis in lingua latina* (Halle, 1932), 122.

[10] On the interchangeability of accusative and ablative "ad spatium temporis designandum," cf. Guilelmus Konjetzny, "De idiotismis syntacticis in titulis latinis urbanis conspicuis," *Archiv für lateinische Lexikographie und Grammatik*, 15 (1908), 297–351. Cf. also Jules Pirson, *La langue des inscriptions latines de la Gaule* (Brussels, 1901), where he states: "Dans les inscriptions de la Gaule, à quelque époque qu'elles appartiennent, l'ablatif a été complètement assimilé à l'accusatif pour exprimer la durée" (p. 183). In a similar vein, and with specific reference to inscriptions from Spain, Henry Martin makes the statement that "it is not at all rare to find the Accusative and Ablative side by side in the same expression of time, thus confirming their practical identity to express duration of time." *Notes on the Syntax of the Latin Inscriptions Found in Spain* (Baltimore, 1909), 23.

[11] Allen & Greenough's *New Latin Grammar*. Revised edition (New York, 1903), 266.

[12] Albert Carnoy suggested in his *Le latin d'Espagne d'après les inscriptions* (Louvain, 1906) that these apparent ablatives in *-u* may be due to hypercorrections of a semiliterate stonecutter who is vaguely conscious of the difference in the ablative endings of second and fourth declension nouns but no longer remembers which noun belongs to which class. Cf. also the studies by Pirson (*op. cit.*, 20) and B. Löfstedt (*op. cit.*, 116) for similar views. Since, however, more often than not fourth declension ablatives are spelled with *-o* rather than *-u*, as in the frequent occurrence of *spirito* for *spiritu* (cf. Diehl, *ILCV*, Vol. III, p. 409), one wonders whether fourth declension ablatives in *-u* were either frequent enough or exerted enough of a pressure on second declension ablatives to create such a confusion in the stonecutter's mind.

ablatives is further compounded by the fact that in some instances, as in *contra votu et dolo suo* (4181, a. 400) (for the expected *dolum suum*), forms in *-u* and *-o* occur concurrently in the same syntactic function. Are such cases to be taken as *prima facie* evidence that the form in *-u* reflects an accusative? This is, in essence, what Prinz[13] suggests when he claims that the frequent forms spelled with *-u* occurring side by side with classical ablatives in *-o* are to be interpreted as final *m*-less accusative forms. On the strength of forms like *tertiu idus, se vivu, vixit annu*, and many others, the German scholar sets out to show that in inscriptions from *Gaul* and *Italy* the *-u* spelling reflects a classical accusative case, the final *-m* having been omitted by the stonecutter for reasons of contraction, haplology (when the following word begins with *m-*), and lack of space (*margine urgente*), while in the *Iberian Peninsula* and in *Africa* the *-u* seems to stand for the classical ablative. His line of reasoning runs something like this: whenever the *-o* spelling occurs in the ablative almost to the exclusion of forms in *-u* and *-um* (the latter being an inverse spelling, also attested here and there, particularly after prepositions, as in *fecit cum maritum annos III* [4219B, a. 392]), the occasional orthographic *-u* is to be interpreted as representing the ablative case. Conversely, where frequent *-u* and *-um* spellings occur in an ablative function beside the normal ablative form in *-o* (particularly when found in the same inscription side by side), the orthographic *-u* would rather reflect a classical accusative form with the final *-m* omitted, i.e., a syntactic confusion. It is perfectly true that in many instances forms in *-u* and *-o* (and also forms in *-um*) occur on one and the same inscription in what appears to be the ablative case; by the same token, there are just as many instances, and in some cases even more (e.g., in *Rome*), where the ablative is represented by a form in *-u* exclusively. The fact that Prinz himself seems to throw up his hands in desperation when he admits "diffi-cillimum est iudicare, utrum in U terminatione accusativus an ablativus subsit"[14] would suggest that there is hardly any point in trying to decide when the *-u* spelling stands for final Lat. /ō/ in the classical ablative, and when for a final *m*-less accusative form. Under the circumstances, Bengt Löfstedt is quite right when he states, in connection with later inscriptions (and surely he must have Christian inscriptions in mind), that it is in principle wrong to try to decide in every instance which form in *-u* stands for an accusative, and which one for an ablative; the stonecutters often did not know it themselves.[15]

The problem of the *-u* spelling for an expected accusative in *-um* or an ablative in *-o* must be considered in the light of an overall comparison of

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[13] *Op. cit.*, 121 ff.   [14] *Ibid.*, 130.   [15] *Op. cit.*, 116.

these two cases, that is, an analysis of the way accusative and ablative are orthographically represented in our documentary material. Thus, in addition to the replacement of the expected accusative in *-um* by a form in *-u* (i.e., the apparent omission of final *-m*), this case also appears spelled with *-o*, as in the already mentioned phrase *contra dolo suo*. Similar examples occur in *deo temens* (1340, a. 486), *pater titolo posuit* (3584D, AD), *tumulavit marito* (362), and passim. This spelling occurs both in direct object function and after prepositions that traditionally take the accusative case, and the phenomenon is by no means limited to a particular area. The earliest example of a direct object in *-o* is found on a Roman epitaph, which is believed to have been composed no later than the early third century: *ne quis titulo molestet* (3972). It is significant, I believe, that forms in *-o* for the expected *-um* also occur in highly formulaic expressions, such as *titulo posuit* for *titulum*, which a stonecutter would be least likely to misspell. Also, both the classical accusative in *-um* and its substitute form in *-o* occasionally appear on the same epitaph, as in *contra votum suo* (756) or *gesisti sacrum officio* (1075, a. 630), suggesting a purely formal rather than grammatical opposition between the accusative in *-um* and the ablative in *-o*.

Although the ablative is generally speaking signalled by the *-o* ending in our inscriptional material, an occasional replacement by *-u* and even *-um* is attested here and there, again without any particular restriction as to region. (*Baetica* and *Lusitania*, however, seem to show greater orthographic conservatism than any other regions of Western Romania.) The replacement of the *-o* by what would appear to be a morpho-syntactic substitution of the classical accusative for the ablative occurs particularly after prepositions, as in *de donum dei* (121), *in hoc tumulum* (3550, a. 511), *positi sunt in cimiterium* (2000, 7th cent.), *cum virginium suum* (1263a), and passim. This latter example is of some interest. The inscription on which it is found commemorates a deceased wife. On the same stone we also find another epitaph (1263b) which is dedicated to the woman's deceased daughter. Each epitaph appears to have been written by the respective husband; one of them writes: *vixit cum virginium suum*, while the other uses the correct ablative *cum virginio suo*. Does it seem likely that the hypercorrect form in *-um* should have sounded any different from that in *-o*? Sittl[16] claimed, more than half a century ago, that the form *oblatum* on an

[16] Karl Sittl, "Zur Beurteilung des sog. Mittellatein," *Archiv für lateinische Lexikographie und Grammatik*, 2 (1885), 550–580. This [o] pronunciation also seems to be reflected in the *so* spelling of the verb form *sum* in *Iulia vocata so* (Diehl, 1537), found on a Roman epitaph. Cf. also W. D. Elcock, *The Romance Languages* (London, 1960), p. 28, who cites *hic so et non so* from a pagan inscription found at Naples.

inscription from *Neretum* (*Calabria*) (CIL IX 10) dated A.D. 341 was pro-
nounced /oblato/. I am most inclined to agree with him.

Within the framework of such an analysis of these two cases—an analysis
for which I used about 5,000 inscriptions, from all areas of the Western
Roman Empire, to the exclusion of Africa and the eastern territories, for
which a comparable study still remains to be done—and in view of the
likely collapse of their opposition on the level of content, it is indeed futile
to attempt to determine whether orthographic -*u* represents a classical
accusative form with final -*m* omitted, or an ablative. With the fall of
final -*m*, forms like *titulu* (acc.) and *titulo* (abl.) fell together in pronuncia-
tion as /titulo/, bringing about a collapse of accusative/ablative distinction,
although, in terms of flexional elements, still being observed in traditional
orthography, in accordance with the writer's level of instruction. It may
well be, as Hugo Schuchardt[17] once suggested, that the final spoken /o/,
represented in writing now by -*u* (or -*um*) now by -*o*, at first sounded like
an [u]-colored [o] or an [o]-colored [u]—a "Mittellaut," to use his term;
most Western Romance languages in which the final vowel survived have
eventually developed an /o/, except for those dialects in which a stronger
[u] coloring finally resulted in /u/, as in the general area south of Rome.[18]
Thus, we see emerging a single *oblique* case form on the level of content in
which semantic relationship is no longer bound to morphological distinc-
tion, the same form—innovative -*o* and residual -*u* (-*um*)—serving to
express both classical accusative and ablative functions.

In this context, then, it seems reasonable to conclude that forms in -*u*
are neither accusatives nor ablatives, but rather represent a "transitional"
spelling in the overall process of restructuring the system of *casus obliqui* in
the singular, as a result of eliminating the formal category of the accusa-
tive in -*um* from the language.

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[17] *Der Vokalismus des Vulgärlateins* (Paris, 1866–1888), II, 94 f.
[18] Schuchardt, *loc. cit.*