

Theme vowels in Ukrainian inchoative deadjectival verbs

1. Outline Theme vowels (TVs) are traditionally believed to have no semantic contribution, existing purely for morphological reasons (Aronoff 1994, Oltra-Massuet 1999). Recent literature on Slavic (Taraldsen Medová & Wiland 2019, Caha et al. 2023, Matushansky 2024, Vyshnevskaya 2025) that (at least) some TVs are syntactically and semantically active. The most clear cases are TVs that derive deadjectival verbs. In this talk, I focus on such TVs in Ukrainian: *-a*, *-i* and *-nu*. On the surface, they all perform the same function, namely derive deadjectival inchoative verbs, suggesting that they are structurally equivalent. I will suggest, however, that their lexical entries differ. Using the framework of Nanosyntax (Caha 2009, Starke 2009), I will propose that each of the three TVs lexicalises different amount of features.

2. Data Deadjectival verbs in Ukrainian can be derived with three different TVs: *-a*, *-i*, and *-nu*, as shown in Table 1. They differ morphologically: TV *-a* attaches to the comparative form of an adjective (a,b) following the comparative suffix *-š* (or its allomorph *-iš*), while TVs *-i* and *-nu* attach to the positive form of an adjective (c,d,e).

adjective					deadjectival verb					
root	aug	cmpr	agr	translation	root	aug	cmpr	TV	inf	translation
a. star		š	yj	‘older’	star		š	a	ty	‘to get older’
b. tup		iš	yj	‘dumber’	tup		iš	a	ty	‘to get dumber’
c. tverd			yj	‘solid’	tverd			i	ty	‘to get more solid’
d. mits	n		yj	‘mighty’	mits	n		i	ty	‘to get mightier’
e. mjak			yj	‘soft’	mjak			nu	ty	‘to get softer’

Table 1: Deadjectival verbs taking different TVs

Vyshnevskaya (2025) shows that *-i* verbs are compatible with perfectivising prefixes which show that the action happened to its maximum (e.g. *za-tverd-i-ty* ‘to get completely solid’). At the same time, comparative-based *-a* forms are incompatible with such prefixes. As I will show in this talk, *-nu* verbs follow *-i* verbs in this respect (e.g. *roz-mjak-nu-ty* ‘to get completely soft’). When it comes to the differences between the *-nu* and *-i*, Jurčuk (1979:189) observes that their distribution differs: while *-nu* always attaches to roots (e), *-i* can attach to complex adjectives (d). In the latter case, an adjective is augmented with a suffix *-n*, which follows the root and precedes the TV.

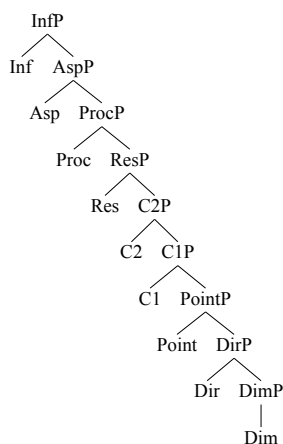
3. Analysis In this talk, I follow a decompositional approach developed in Vanden Wyngaerd et al. (2020), where AP is internally complex, consisting of three different projections: (1) Dimension (Dim), such as velocity, size, or color, (2) Direction (Dir), which introduces a scale, and (3) Point (Point), which introduces the contextual standard. There are two comparative heads merging with the adjectival structure: C1 and C2 (Caha et al. 2019).

Bobaljik (2012) proposes the Containment Hypothesis, where the comparative is derived from the positive, and the verb is derived from the comparative. Following this hypothesis, Vyshnevskaya (2025) shows that Ukrainian deadjectival verbs, both overtly comparative like (a,b) in Table 1 and the ones with the TV *-i* but without the overt comparative morphology (c,d) contain the comparative degree adjective. Thus, both types of verbs contain comparative heads C1 and C2; I propose here that the same reasoning should be extended to *-nu* verbs.

When it comes to the verbal structure, I adopt the decomposition of VP into three different projections developed in Ramchand (2008): Initiator (Init), Process (Proc), and Result (Res). Since I am concerned only with inchoative verbs in this talk, I will not make use of the Init projection.

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(1)



Considering the above-mentioned feature decomposition, the functional sequence looks like (1) with the adjectival features at the bottom, followed by comparative and then verbal features. Two other heads that merge up with the verbal features are Aspect (Asp) and, since I consider here only infinitives, infinitival head (Inf). In Nanosyntax, lexicalisation targets phrases, not terminal nodes. The idea is that different morphemes will lexicalise different parts of the fseq in (1). This division of labour is shown in lexicalisation Table 2.

In comparative-based forms, roots lexicalise the adjectival structure, while comparative morphemes *-i* and *-š* lexicalise comparative heads. Asp and Inf heads are lexicalised by the TV *-a*. Vyshnevskya (2025) claims that the incompatibility of the comparative-based forms with the maximal prefixes has a syntactic explanation: such forms lack the Res head (marked in black).

Dim	Dir	Point	C1	C2	Res	Proc	Asp	Inf	translation	
star				š		a		ty	‘to get older’	
tup		i		š		a		ty	‘to get dumber’	
tverd					i				ty	‘to get more solid’
mits		n		i					ty	‘to get mightier’
mjak		nu							ty	‘to get softer’

Table 2: The structure of deadjectival verbs with different TVs

At the same time, since *-i* verbs are compatible with such prefixes, Res head is present in their structure. I claim here that the same applies to *-nu* verbs. Crucially, in *-i* verbs it is the TV that lexicalise the whole structure from Point to Asp; as a result, the comparative morphemes never surface. In case of complex adjectives, the suffix *-n* lexicalises a portion of the adjectival structure, making the root smaller. I propose here that since *-nu* attaches to roots only, it has a lower foot than *-i*. Since *-nu* lexicalises the structure from Dir to Asp, comparative morphemes never surface. As a result, the three TVs lexicalise different amount of structure.

4. Conclusions I discussed three Ukrainian theme vowels that derive deadjectival inchoative verbs, namely *-a*, *-i*, and *-nu*. I showed that the Nanosyntactic mechanism of phrasal lexicalisation accounts for the morphological differences among these verbal forms, where each TV lexicalises a distinct portion of the functional sequence. It also allows to maintain the hypothesis that deadjectival verbs are uniformly derived from the comparative degree adjectives.

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