

**Zeitschrift:** Vox Romanica  
**Herausgeber:** Collegium Romanicum Helvetiorum  
**Band:** 47 (1988)

**Artikel:** Survival of the suffix -unz(a) in Northern Italian and Romansch  
**Autor:** Hajek, John  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-37118>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 28.03.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Survival of the suffix *-unz(a)* in Northern Italian and Romansch

One of the most unusual nominal suffixes to be found in certain Italian dialects and in Romansch is *-unz(a)* m.(f), e.g. commonly noted *filunz(a)* 'weaver' < *filare* 'to weave'. Sporadic interest has been given to it in the past, and it appears the first published reference to examples of this suffix is given in the work by Ascoli (1880–1883) on Sursilvan in the Grisons. Other great scholars in Romance philology such as Meyer-Lübke (1894: 7,37), Salvioni (1906: 581–582; 1917: 50), Rohlfs (1968: 7) and von Wartburg (1967: 31), also expressed interest, even if somewhat fleeting, in the origins and the geographical distribution of the suffix. These authors seem to accept the theory that the suffix contains an exceptional relic form of nominative *-s* surviving from the Vulgar Latin two-case-system. In this case, the original suffix *-one(m)* in the accusative has been linked to an unetymological nominative *-s*, associated with the animate character of the masculine forms bearing this suffix. Once the case system broke down completely, *-s* lost its declensional value, and the new suffix *-unz/-uns* was therefore no longer analyzable as two separate elements. Feminine derivatives could then be formed on the basis of *-unz*, giving us *-unsa/-unza*, rather than on the expected *-un<sup>f</sup>*. Trovato (1981–82), citing an example of *-unz* in a Gallo-Italic dialect of Sicily, reviews published opinions about the suffix, and provides evidence that indicates wider geographical distribution than previously suspected.

Further investigation on my part indicates that the picture given by Trovato (1981–82: 26) is, in fact, incomplete. Examples of *-unz(a)* cover a much larger area than he describes.

### Northern Italian

There seem to be two geographical areas located on the Northern and Southern peripheries of Lombardy. In both areas the cited forms generally relate to traditional, normally agricultural occupations. The Northern area, which stretches into the Lombard valleys of Ticino and the Grisons, is in fact contiguous to the Romansch valleys of the Grisons where the suffix *-unz(a)* is particularly productive. It consists of the following areas:

(1) Northern edges of Alpine Lombardy. Salvioni (1906: 581) records one form *selvonza* 'woman who gathers chestnuts as her occupation' (< *selva* 'wood') at Campo-

<sup>1</sup> MELCHER (1924: 134) offers an alternative hypothesis: possible fusion of the suffixes *-one* and *-osus*.

dolcino in the Valle di San Giacomo, and in the Valtellina (Salvioni 1906: 581). Monti (1845: 243) notes the same word as occurring in Colico (on Lake Como).

(2) Val Bregaglia (Salvioni 1906: 581): *ražlunsa* 'hayraker' (f.) < RASTELLUS 'rake' (Schaad 1936: 50).

(3) Poschiavo, like (2) a Lombard-speaking area in the Grisons (Salvioni 1906: 581). The suffix seems to be slightly more productive in this valley compared to the rest of the Northern area, e.g. *kusinunz* 'cook', *supreçunza* 'ironing woman' (Salvioni 1906: 581), *badunza* 'woman who takes part in the *badòzz*<sup>2</sup> whilst weaving' < *badà* 'to attend a *badòzz*' (VSI 11-1,31) and *filunza* (Tognina 1967: 388). This greater frequency may be due to Romansch contact.

(4) Upper Valle Blenio in Ticino: *ražlunsa* (Baer 1938: 89).

(5) Val Maggia also in Ticino: *batunz* 'a rather large stick approximately half a metre in length, with which the sheaves, previously beaten on a board, are beaten once more' < *batt* 'to beat' (VSI II-I 290). This is the exception to the rule that in Northern Italian dialects *-unz* is used to indicate an occupation. Nevertheless, its use to represent an archaic agricultural implement may be significant.

Trovato (1981-82: 25, fn 2) indicates that *-unz(a)* is relatively frequent in Ticino.

The Southern area mentioned above centres primarily on the Padanian plain. Conventional wisdom (cf. Trovato 1981-82: 26) has the suffix as occurring in the following areas:

(1) Mantua (South-Eastern extremity of Lombardy). Examples of *-unz(a)* are most prolific here: *crivlonz* (also: *crivlinz*) 'sieve-maker' < *crivlar* 'to sift', *tibionz* 'thresher' < *tibiar* 'to thresh', *filonza*, *spigolonz(a)* 'gleaner/reaper' (Salvioni 1906: 581) < *spigular* 'to glean'.

(2) Cremona (Southern Lombardy): *filonza* and *spigolonza*. (Peri 1847: 217, 583).

(3) Brescia (Eastern Lombardy): *filonza* and *spigolonza* (Rosa 1877: 36, 144).

(4) Parma (Western Emilia): *filonz(a)* (Malaspina 1873: 182).

However, extensive research allows one to extend the spread of *-unz* along the Padanian plain much further than previously suspected, to the east of Mantova along the Po river into Eastern Emilia:

(5) Ferrara: *tibbionz* and *tubbionz* (Nannini 1805: 258, 263).

(6) Mirandola: *tibbionz* (also: *tibbion*) (Meschieri 1932: 807).

To the South of Parma a lexical relic has been recorded in an isolated Eastern Ligurian valley:

(7) Val Graveglia: *fiyunsa* 'weaver, referring in particular to the common carnival mask of the old lady with the spindle' (Plomteux 1975: 346).

Quite apart from these examples we appear to have relic forms in two quite distant and isolated dialects:

<sup>2</sup> *badòzz*: 'gathering during winter evenings allowing one to talk and weave; place where the gathering is held' < *badà* 'to look after' < \*BATARE (VSI, II-I, 31).

(8) Aidone in Sicily. Trovato (1981–82: 25) cites *ss.lunz(a)* «cobbler», cf. AIS II 207 Cp.: [u səlúnts]. The dialect spoken here is a Gallo-Italic one, although its exact source is uncertain. One theory traces it back to the area covering the South-East Piedmont, Eastern Ligurian and Western Emilian dialects, cf. Trovato (1981–82: 27). This fits in very well with evidence of *-unz(a)* in the dialects of Parma and Val Graviglia.

(9) Valsugana in Trento: *sfilonzon* ‘runabout’ (<*sfilar*). Plomteux (1975: 346) cites this form as containing the *-unz* suffix. Semantically, however, it is not comparable with other forms in Northern Italy. In this case we may be dealing with a different suffix or suffixes, unless a link be established with use of *-unz* with pejorative effect in Romantsch.

Meyer-Lübke (1894: 2, 496) suggested that the forms recorded in Northern Italy are Ladin borrowings. Salvioni (1906: 581–582, 1917: 50) on the other hand suggests that the forms in Bresciano spread north from Cremona and Mantua. Salvioni may be right, given the mutual geographical proximity of these areas, and if we accept the implication that the survival of *-unz* in the Grisons/Northern area and that of *-unz* in the Southern area are historically unrelated in origin. However, both Meyer-Lübke and Salvioni may be mistaken. One can argue that the sporadic occurrence of *-unz* in and around Lombardy is indicative of a more general distribution of the suffix at some earlier time, with a continuum stretching along the Padanian valley and north through Lombardy as far as the Grisons. Conceivably, the influence of the innovating dialects of Milan and to a lesser degree of Bergamo could have resulted in the disappearance of the suffix from Central Lombardy. There appears to be no evidence in this case to indicate specifically Ladin (or Romantsch) influence in what I have called the Southern area, whilst the relatively small number of lexical items with *-unz* in the so-called Northern area suggest meagre Romantsch influence, with the possible exception of Poschiavo.

Certainly in the Southern area, *-unz* is unproductive and has become purely lexicalized and liable to disappear. Ferrarese *tibbionz* and *tubbionz* cited in 1805 are not to be found in subsequent works on Ferrarese lexicon, whilst alongside *filonza* we find *filera* in Brescia and *filadora* in Parma. Given the paucity of examples of the suffix recorded in Alpine Lombardy, the situation is probably the same in the Northern area, with the possible exception of the Swiss Lombard valleys. This differs markedly from the continuing productivity of the suffix in Romantsch.

Von Wartburg (1967: 30–31) links the survival of the suffix to that of etymological *-s* in a small number of essential lexical items: «six», «Monday» and «Tuesday», as evidenced by AIS II 286, 329, 330 respectively. Closer examination show a relatively large discrepancy between the geographical spread of these three items and that of *-unz*. In the case of the former, a much larger area is affected, including Piedmont, most of Central Lombardy, and Friuli. In none of these are there examples of the suffix *-unz(a)*. In Mantua and Western Emilia where traces of *-unz* have been noted, no

other examples of *-s* occur. It appears, however, that a correlation exists in the Grisons, where distribution of *-s* in both categories is consistent<sup>3</sup>.

### Romantsch

Romantsch data on the suffix *-unz(a)* are in marked contrast to the situation in Northern Italy. Incomplete perusal of the lexical sources available has revealed a corpus of approximately 125 separate lexical items (and numerous dialectal variants). There is a general geographical distribution throughout the Grisons (cf. *AIS* VIII 1500 Cp «filatrice», 1515 «il tessitore, la tessitrice»). Nevertheless, the suffix seems to be more productive in the Engadine dialect group than in the other Romantsch dialects:

- (1) Engadine (upper and lower): 90 forms (Peer 1962)
- (2) Surmeir: 19 forms (Sonder and Grisch 1970)
- (3) Sursilvan: 27 forms (Vieli and Decurtins 1962)<sup>4</sup>

Survival of lexicalised *-s*, irrespective of its origin, is in any case much more frequent in Romantsch than in Northern Italian dialects (cf. Ascoli [1880–83: 426–435] on Sursilvan). Vieli and Decurtins (1962) provide some examples in modern Sursilvan, e.g. *afuns* ‘deep’ < A+ FUNDUS, *aunz*<sup>5</sup> ‘hook’ < HAMUS, *parenz* ‘relative’ < PARENTIS, *purtonza* ‘pregnant/-cy’ < \*PORTANT+ S+ A (?).

In Romantsch too the suffix *-unz(a)* has a much broader semantic range than elsewhere. Certainly quite remarkable is its continued use with pejorative effect, as was frequently the case for the suffix *-o*, *-onis* in Classical Latin (Ascoli 1880–83: 434), e.g. *baderlunz(a)* ‘chatterbox’ < *baderlar* ‘to chatter’, *bagliaffunz(a)* ‘chatterbox’ < *bagliaffar* ‘to chatter’, *critichunz* ‘fault-finder’ < *critichar* ‘to criticize’, *schgniclunz* [ʃniklunz] ‘whining child’ < *schgniclar* ‘to whine’, *schlufunz* ‘liar’ < *schlufar* ‘to lie’, cf. Peer (1962). This pejorative use of *-unz(a)* is especially common in the Engadine.

We also find a very wide range of terms relating to traditional agricultural (often archaic) activities, e.g. *scudunz* ‘thresher’ < *scuder* ‘to thresh’, *cavunza* ‘potato-picker’ < *cavar* ‘to pick’ (Vieli and Decurtins), *s-chartatschunz* ‘wool-comber’ < *s-chartatschar* ‘to comb wool’, *spatlunza* ‘flax/hempscutcher’(f.) < *spatlar* ‘to scutch’, *raschlunz(a)* ‘raker’ and *dozunza* ‘sheafbinder’ < *dozar* ‘to bind sheaves’ (Peer). Other occupations include: *cunagiunza* ‘cleaningwoman’ < *cunagir* ‘to clean’, *cuschinunz(a)* ‘cook’ < *cuschinar* ‘to cook’, *cusunza* ‘seamstress’ < *cusir* ‘to sew’ (Peer)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> ASCOLI (1880–83: 426) for numerous examples in Sursilvan.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that all forms are always recorded in Engadine, cf. *cuntschunz(a)* ‘hoe’ < *cuntschar* ‘to hoe’ in Sursilvan only. (DRG, vol. 3: 610).

<sup>5</sup> The etymology of *-z* in this case is unclear. It is unlikely, however, to be fossilized *-s* of HAMUS, cf. DRG I: 547.

<sup>6</sup> *-unz* shows a remarkable flexibility. It can also sometimes be used in some common nouns, e.g. *vischdunzas* pl. ‘banquet in return for the gifts given to a woman who has recently given birth.’ Otherwise, *vižduntsas*: ‘visitors’ (f.), cf. HUONDER (1901: 506). Further affixation is also possible: *cusunzaria* ‘tailor’s shop’.

In some cases where *-unz(a)* competes with other agent suffixes, especially *-eder*, it may have particular semantic values, even outside of the Romansch speaking areas. Referring to the Swiss Lombard dialect of Bregaglia, Stampa (1934: 90) claims that *-unz* is rare and generally does not indicate a truly occupational activity, e.g. *kužinúntsa* 'a girl who plays at cooking'.

The suffix *-unz(a)* appears to have a particular role in the creation of neologisms in modern Romansch, and is extremely productive. Its strength appears to lie in its perceived «Romantschness» that other agent suffixes do not have. Duval-Valentin (1984: 489–490) cites the case of 'skier' where neologisms e.g. *skiatur* have been ultimately superseded by *skiunz* after its introduction in 1938. Similarly, *cusunz* 'tailor' and *chürunza/tgirunza* 'nurse' < *chürar* 'to care for' have replaced loan-words.

### Conclusion

It appears that the survival and development of *-unz(a)* in Northern Italian and in Romansch have diverged significantly in recent times despite their apparent common origin. In the case of the former, geographical distribution of the suffix is now known to have been much wider than previously suspected. The distribution of *-unz(a)* is now extremely limited and apparently shrinking in Northern Italian. In some dialects, e.g. Ferrarese, where it was once recorded, it has disappeared from later published sources. The suffix in Northern Italian appears to lack much particular significance and is found only in a few terms representing traditional agricultural occupations, resulting in its progressive disappearance, and the lexicalized survival of only a small corpus of archaic forms in an increasingly urban society<sup>7</sup>. Circumstances are radically different in Romansch, where we have a much larger corpus of words covering different fields, and a relatively wide semantic range and use. The suffix here is very much alive, evidenced by its use in the derivation of neologisms this century: its strength must lie in its ability to be perceived as more Romansch, and therefore to be used to mark the uniqueness of Romansch language and culture.

Oxford

*John Hajek*

<sup>7</sup> Although there is no clear evidence either way, this conclusion may not be valid for the Lombard dialects of Ticino and Grisons.

## Bibliography

- AIS = JABERG, KARL and JAKOB JUD 1928-1940: *Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz*, Zofingen (Ringier).
- ASCOLI, GRAZIADIO I. 1880-1883: *Saggio di morfologia e lessicologia soprasilvana*, AGI 7: 406-602.
- BAER, MARCO 1938: *Contributo alla conoscenza della terminologia rurale dell'Alta Valle Blenio*, Pisa (S.T.I.D.).
- DRG = *Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun*, vols. 1-6, 1939-, Chur/Winterthur.
- DUVAL-VALENTIN, MARIANNE 1983: «La situation linguistique en Suisse», in: FODOR, ISTVAN and CLAUDE HAGÈGE (eds.), *Language Reform, History and Future*, vol. 1, Hamburg (Buske) p. 463-544.
- MALASPINA, CARLO 1873: *Vocabolario Tecnico Parmigiano per Uso delle Scuole degli Artisti e de' Campagnuoli*, Parma (Adorni).
- MELCHER, FLORIAN 1924: «Furmaziun Nominala nel Idiom d'Engiadin'Ota», part 1, *Annalas della Società Reto-Romantscha* 38, 119-179.
- MELCHIORI, GIOVAN-BATTISTA 1817: *Vocabolario Bresciano - Italiano*, 2 vols., Brescia (Tip. Franzoni).
- MESCHIERI, EUSEBIO 1932: *Vocabolario Mirandolese - Italiano*, Imola (Paolo Galeati).
- MEYER-LÜBKE, WILHELM 1894: *Grammatik der Romanischen Sprachen*, vol. 2: *Romanische Formlehre*, Leipzig (O. R. Reisland).
- MONTI, PIETRO 1845: *Vocabolario dei Dialecti di Como*, Milan (Soc. Tip. de' Classici Italiani).
- NANNINI, FRANCESCO 1805: *Vocabolario Ferrarese Portatile*, Ferrara.
- PALLIOPPI, ZACCARIA and EMIL 1895: *Dizionari dels Idioms Romauntschas d'Engiadin'Ota e Bassa, della Val Müstair, da Bravuogn e Filisur*, Samedan (Simon Tanner).
- PEER, OSCAR 1962: *Dicziunari Rumantsch ladin-tudais-ch*, Samedan (Lia Rumantscha).
- PERI, ANGELO 1847: *Vocabolario Cremonese - Italiano*, Cremona (Giuseppe Feraboli).
- PLOMTEUX, HUGO 1975: *I Dialecti della Liguria orientale odierna*, vol. 1, Bologna (Patron).
- ROHLFS, GERHARD 1968: *Grammatica Storica dei Dialecti italiani*, vol. 2: *Morfologia*, Turin, Einaudi.
- ROSA, G. 1877: *Vocabolario Bresciano - Italiano*, Brescia (Stefano Malaguzzi).
- SALVIONI, CARLO 1906: *Il Dialecto di Poschiavo*, RIL II 39: 477-494, 505-522, 569-586, 603-622.
- SCHAAD, GIACOMO 1936: *La Terminologia Rurale di Val Bregaglia*, Bellinzona (Arti Grafiche Arturo Salvioni).
- SONDER, AMBROS and MENA GRISCH 1970: *Vocabulari da Surmeir*, Chur (Leia Rumantscha).
- STAMPA, GIAN ANDREA 1934: *Der Dialekt des Bergell*, Aarau (H. R. Sauerländer).
- TOGNINA, RICCARDO 1967: *Lingua e Cultura della Valle di Poschiavo*, Basel (Soc. Svizzera per le Tradizioni Popolari).
- TROVATO, SALVATORE, C. 1981-82: «Tracce di -s del Nominativo in un Relitto Lessicale del Dialecto di Aidone /EN/», in: *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti* 140: 25-29.
- VIELI, RAMUN and ALEXI DECURTINS 1962: *Vocabulari Romontsch (Sursilvan-Tudestg)*, Chur (Ligia Romontscha).
- VSI = *Vocabolario dei Dialecti della Svizzera Italiana*, vol. 2: *bab-bluzcar* 1965-1970, Lugano (Natale Mazzuconi).
- WARTBURG, WALTHER VON 1967: *La Fragmentation Linguistique de la Romania*, Paris (Klincksieck).