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A note on Latin *necessus* and the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*

Introduction

Latin *necessus/necessum*, with its surprising 1st/2nd declension morphology, has resisted definitive analysis. The forms are unanticipated: one expects the familiar and standard 3rd declension neuter *necesse*, which occurs in the classical language in such constructions as *habeo necesse* ‘I have it as necessary, I must’ and *mihi necesse est* ‘it is necessary for me, I must’. The variants *necessus* and *necessum* are mostly found in older literature. *Necessus* occurs in Terence (*Eun.* 5,5,998 and *Heaut.* 2,3,359) and in the archaizing Aulus Gellius (16,8,1); its earliest attestation is from 186 BCE, as NECESUS¹ in the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* (henceforth *SC de Bacch.*) l. 4. As for *necessum*, it occurs several times in Plautus (*Stich.* 1,33,66; *Cas.* 2,5,36), in Terence (*Ph.* 2,1,297), and makes scattered appearances in later literature such as Lucretius (2,468), Livy (34,5) and Martial (6,57,3). There is also a form *necessis* in Lucretius (6,817) in the phrase *vis magna necessis* ‘the great power of necessity’, conjectured to be a nominal genitive by Lachmann (*ad Lucr.*), but possibly not authentic.

The standard form *necesse* is of course the most widespread, though the *necessus/necessum* pair might be older. And despite alternative readings and textual uncertainties, there are enough attestations of the word in *-us*, *-um* (though not *-a*) to at least guarantee the authenticity of the 1st/2nd declension variants, whether they are older or not. This leaves us with several interlocking questions about *necessus/necessum* and *necesse*. First, what is the etymology of the base? Second, which is the older paradigm, the 1st/2nd declension (*necessus/necessum*), or the 3rd declension (*necesse*)? Third, what syntactic processes are at work in the constructions in which it is found?

Etymology and Chronology

For the etymology of *necessus/necessum* and *necesse*, the first task is to verify the proper elements of the base form. Clearly the <S> of NECESUS as it is written in the *SC de Bacch.* does not reflect the true phonological ancestry of this segment, despite the antiquity of the inscription; an original *-s-* would rhotacize in this environment, yielding ***necerus*. So the single <S> in the form NECESUS conceals an underlying *-ss-*, putting it in line with other attestations. Additional forms in the *SC de Bacch.* with single <S> which came to be written later with *-ss-* are ESET, (*esset*), ESENT (*essent*),

¹ Upper case Roman letters are used in the physical representation of Latin inscriptions written in the Roman alphabet.

ADESENT (*adessent*), HABUISE (*habuisse*), and so on. The practice of writing <ss> (actually double consonants generally) is first attested in the decree of Paulus Aemilius (189 BCE) and it was slow to be adopted (Niedermann 1953: 112). From this we see that the target form has an underlying -ss-, and since original -ss- does not rhotacize, the pre-terminal stem of the word is *necess-*,

There are several obvious candidates for the etymology of *necess-*: *nec* ‘not’ + *esse* ‘to be’ is initially appealing as a popular etymology, though the structural and semantic shortcomings of this proposal are obvious, and require no demonstration. Among the other implausible scenarios for the source of *necess-*, one is to derive it from *neco* ‘kill’, a proposal which involves some creative morphological and semantic manipulations. A third possibility, not suggested in the literature, has been proposed by my student Andrew Wigman. Wigman attempted to derive *necesse* from *ne* + *cēnseo* ‘decide, deliberate’, a plausible combination, though one which requires that the -n- in *cēnseo* disappear (as it does elsewhere before -s-, cf. COSOLERETUR in the *SC de Bacch.*). Unfortunately, such a phonetic reduction never takes place in any attested form of *cēnseo*, which is reconstructible to PIE **kens-*. Incidentally, there appears to be no link between *cēnseo* and *consul*.

The final candidate for the base of *necesse* is a form of the verb *cēdo* ‘go’: the possibilities are surveyed by de Vaan (2008, s.v. *cēdo*); see also Walde-Hofmann (1956, s.v. *necesse*); Ernout-Meillet (1969, s.v. *necesse*); Pokorny 1951-1959, s.v. **nek-*, **sed-*; Watkins 2000, s.v. **ked-*). Under this proposal the first part of the compound is clearly *ne*, a negativizing prefix which is a legitimate morphological partner for the second part, a derivative of *cēdo* (like *nescius* ‘not knowing’ from *ne-scio*, for example).

Of the various possibilities for the root and its suffix, one which posits the base form **ced-* and the nominalizing suffix -*tis* is the most cogent. The form *ced-tis* develops seamlessly into the variant *necesse* (along with the possible form *necessis*), which strongly indicates that *necesse* is the older variant, and *necessus*, *necessum* are later analogical formations. The proposal to treat *necessus/necessum* as secondary and *necesse* / *necessis* original, from **cēd-tis*, is supported by the pattern of attestation of the two variants. The *necesse* variant is attested from the time of Naevius (*Incertarum Palliatarum Fragmenta*, 1), and predates the *SC de Bacch.*, where *necessus* is first found, by at least 20 years. Furthermore, and critically, only *necesse* is found with the archaic possessive *mihi est* construction, an apparent relic expression which identifies *necesse* as the older form.

We should mention that there are some arguments for *necessus* / *necessum* as the older variants. Pariente (1975) assumes a nominal form *cessus* from *cēd + tu*, which creates a meaning for the compound of “there is no going away from X” (= “X is inescapable”). The form *cessus*, though not an original *o*-stem, is drawn analogically into the *o*-stem declension, which is taken as primary. Pariente then derives what for him are the later forms *necessis* and *necesse* from the contraction of *necessum est* to *necessest*. This proposal rests on several plausible, though complicated analogies, but its real problem is

a chronological one: namely, the attested Latin form *cessus* on which it rests does not occur until the late Imperial period (de Vaan 2008), far too late to be of any value in the identification of a word-formation process involving *nesesse*.

In our opinion an etymology based on *ne* plus a form of *cēdo* + *-tis* is perfectly defensible, and the position which places the *nesesse* variant as the oldest one is superior to other possibilities. From a methodological point of view the steps to the *necessus/necessum* variants are shorter and more plausible than the steps in the other direction. So from this point we will assume the correctness of this position.

Explaining necessus and necessum

Quite apart from the etymology of the base *necess-* is the question of the inflected variants *necessus* and *necessum*. What is the motivation for these forms? The neuter form *necessum* seems rather easy to explain as an analogical replacement of a less productive form (*nesesse*) by a more productive one. When it is used impersonally, as in *mihi nessesse est*, *nesesse* is functioning simply as a neuter adjective in a predicate adjective construction, parallel to countless expressions such as *bonum est*, *malum est* and so on, formed with the more common 1st/2nd declension morphology. So it is by no means surprising that the less-marked *o*-stem neuter *necessum* occasionally intrudes, replacing *nesesse*.

More troubling is the variant *necessus*. What exactly is this form morphologically? Most commentators are silent on the issue, simply treating it as though it were a neuter like *necessum*, a mere substitute for *nesesse*. One explanation of this unusual form is that *nesesse est* changes to *necessus est* under analogical pressure from *opus est* ‘there is a need’ and/or *usus est* ‘id.’. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the only example of such an attraction. Furthermore, such an analogy is only practical with the fixed expressions like *usus est*, where the differences in gender between *opus* (neut.) and *usus* (masc.) are neutralized in the nominative. If *necessus* is a neuter, why a neuter in *-us*, which is above all a form associated with a masculine paradigm? Analogy is very good at making forms less opaque and more regular; it typically does not make them more opaque.

There are many different constructions in which the *necessus est* construction appears, and a unified syntactic account is precluded by this variation. What we will do in the remainder of this paper is to try to sort out the *necessus* form in one particular piece of Early Latin, the *SC de Bacch.*). We begin with the archaic text, followed by a standard rendition into Classical Latin, and a loose translation.

SC de Bacch. 1. 4: *sei ques esent quei sibi deicerent necesus ese bacanal habere*

CLat.: *si qui essent qui sibi dicerent nessesse esse Baccanal habere*

“If there are any who say that they must maintain a place of Bacchic worship”

Morphological parsing

<i>sei</i>	<i>ques</i>	<i>esent</i>	<i>quei</i>	<i>sibei</i>	<i>deicerent</i>	<i>necesus</i>	<i>ese</i>
conj.	rel. pro.	3 rd pl.	rel.	refl.	3 rd pl.	acc. sg.	pres.
	nom. pl.	impf. subj.	pro.	pro.	imp. subj.	neut.	inf.
if	any	are	who	for	say	necessary	to be
				them-			
				selves			
	<i>bacanal</i>	<i>habere</i>					
	acc. sg.	pres. inf.					
	neut.						
	Bacchic	to hold					
	worship						

Syntactic analysis

This brings us now to *necesus*, an odd form to say the least. Looking at it strictly from the viewpoint of morphology, it could be:

- a. a nom. sg. masc., like *usus*;
- b. a nom. sg. neut., like *opus*;
- c. an acc. sg. neut., like *opus*;
- d. a gen. sg. masc. or fem., like *senātūs* or *manūs*.

Options a., b. and c, the *opus* or *usus* connection, are the most obvious given the possible modelling of *necesus* on the fixed phrases *opus est* and/or *usus est*. However, if we treat *necesus ese* as an AcI construction, which is the only analysis possible, *necesus* can only be neuter:

<i>sei ques esent quei sibei</i>	[<i>deicerent</i> [[<i>necesus ese</i>] [<i>bacanal habere</i>]]]
	verbum acc. inf. acc. inf.
<i>dicendi</i>	sg. in obj. subj. of
	neut. AcI <i>necesus</i>

Treating *necesus* as the accusative member of an AcI is possible because it is the same as the *-us* termination in neuter nouns like *opus*, *genus*, or the rare neuter adjectival forms like *plūs* and *vetus*. The advantage of finding *necesus* in an AcI construction is that it forces the subject of the following infinitive *ese* into the accusative, thereby revealing its gender. This is because, as is well-known, neuter nouns in Latin are always identical in their nominative and accusative morphology. Case (re-)solved: *necesus* is a neuter based on some less than obvious morphological analogy.

But wait.

We could end here by adopting the traditional view, accepting *necesus* as a neuter accusative, and ignoring the awkward morphology while delighting in the regular syntax. But before we do that, let us be mindful of the linguist we are commemorating here, Ivan Sag. If ever there was a person who was willing to take a step out on a limb of intellectual uncertainty, it is Ivan. And in that spirit I would like to speculate that in fact *necesus* may be a nominative masculine after all, and that the morphology is not awkward, just the syntax. To justify this position we suggest that *necesus* is a semi-personalized form of the usually impersonal construction *necesse/necessum est*. The “subject” on which *necesus* depends is unspecified and therefore indefinite, making *necesus* masculine and singular. On this analysis the impersonal accusative is “raised” to semi-personal status, shifting from a dative of interest to a nominative of agency, in much the same way that the impersonals *mihi taedet* ‘it disgusts me’ or *mihi pudet* ‘it shames me’ are transformed into the personal expressions *taedeo* ‘I am disgusted’ and *pudeo* ‘I am ashamed’; or English *me thinks* becomes *I think*. This “subjectivization” is consistent with the general replacement of impersonal constructions from PIE with personal constructions in Latin and other IE languages. The rise of transitivity and the strong expression of agency can account for many phenomena in the history of Latin and other IE languages, such as the replacement of the *mihi est* dative of possession by the transitive verb *habeo*. The syntax of the *necesus esse* construction reflects the traditional *Nominativus cum Infinitivo* (*Marcus dicitur esse bonus* ‘It is said that **Marcus** is good, **Marcus** is said to be good’), in which the underlying accusative subject of the infinitive (*X dicit Marcum esse bonum* ‘X says that **Marcus** is good’) is promoted to the nominative. Roughly, then: *mihi necessum/necesse est ire* ‘it is necessary for me to go’ is transformed into *necessus est ire* ‘I must go’.

In order to test this hypothesis, I will have to verify and analyze the more than twenty-five examples of *necessus/necessum* which occur in the literature, and put the construction to a more serious formal analysis. My prediction is that it will work for some and not for others, providing another illustration of why the Neogrammarian regularity hypothesis does not apply to syntax.

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