

False Labels in Indo-European Reconstruction: Laryngeal Loss in Compounds and Marginal Phonemes

Comparative-Historical Linguistics of the 21st century: Issues and Perspectives.
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1. Two major dangers of labels: a) claim that the phenomenon exists, and b) false assumption that the problem is solved.

2. The notion of IE “kompositionelle Kürzung” was first introduced by Johannes Schmidt (1881); laryngeal loss in compounds was further treated by F.B.J. Kuiper (1961).

Never fully investigated: a sound law? conditions? chronology? Huge amount of counter-examples.

Mayrhofer (1986: 125): “Lautgesetzlich ist */h₁/ vor [- syll] → gr. Ø in endbetonten Komposita”, one example: Gr. ὑγιής ‘healthy’ < *h₁su-g^wih₃-, but rather < *h₂iu-g^wih₃- (Weiss 1994).

Mayrhofer (1986: 140): “In endbetonten Komposita und in Kompositionsendgliedern schwindet */h₂/”; exx.: Gr. στεροπή [f.] ‘lightning’ (Il.) next to ἀστεροπή ‘id.’ (Il.), but cf. also ἀστραπή (Hdt.), στροπά, στορπᾶν (H.); thus, Pre-Greek [Kuiper, Furnée, Beekes]; Skt. *grumuṣṭi-* (see below), *á-bhva-* adj. ‘monstrous’, n. ‘monster, monstrosity’ < *b^huh₂o-, disyllabic.

2.1. Skt. *grumuṣṭi-* f. ‘great handful’ (TS 5.4.5.2,3 vs. KS, MS *gurumuṣṭi-*)

TS 5.4.5.2,3 *grumuṣṭināvokṣati; prājāpatyāḥ vai grumuṣṭiḥ* ‘He anoints with a large handful (of grass); the large handful is connected with Prajāpati” (Keith).

Parallel passages: MS III 3,6:39,11 *darbhagurumuṣṭinā vyāvokṣati; sám hi prājāpatyāḥ;* KS 21.7:46,16-17 *gurumuṣṭināvokṣati; sa hi prājāpatyatamas.*

Later, only BŚS 9,13:2; 16:9; 10.50:5;12;24, ĀpŚS 17.13.6 (*darbhagrumuṣṭi-*), all belonging to the Taittirīya school.

Rather, dissimilation *gurumuṣṭi-* > *grumuṣṭi-*; maybe like in **śruṇumas* 1pl. ‘to hear’ (OAv. *surunuuant-*, OIr. *ro-cluinethar*) > *śṛnumas*?

2.2. An old word is Skt. *agrū-* f. ‘virgin, unmarried woman’ (RV+), YAv. *ayrū-* adj. ‘unmarried (of a girl)’. Often explained by compositional shortening (e.g. EWAia I: 46), but there are other ways to account for it. It might, for instance, be due to dissimilation **ng^wrh₂u-h₂-* > **ng^wru-h₂-*, but, most probably, we are dealing with laryngeal metathesis in this position (**ng^wrh₂u-h₂-* > **ng^wruh₂-h₂-* > **ng^wru-h₂-*), cf. also Skt. *grīṣmá-* m. ‘summer, hot season’ (RV+) < **g^wrih₂-sm(H)-o-* < **g^wrh₂-i-sm(H)-o-*, lit. ‘heavy summer’ (cf. Rasmussen 1989: 95).

2.3. Skt. *sú-ṣuti-* f. ‘easy birth’ or, rather, ‘fertility’ (RV 10.39.7) and possibly *su-ṣu-mánt-* adj. ‘with a good birth (?)’ (RV 10.3.1, about Agni) vs. *a-sú-* adj. ‘barren’ (RV+); *su-śú-* adj. ‘bringing forth, delivering easily’ (RV 5.7.8); *su-śúma-* adj. ‘bringing forth easily’ (RV 2.32.7); *bahu-súvarī-* f. ‘bearing many children’ (RV 2.32.7). EWAia II: 714: “Laryngalkürzungen in der Komposition sind ... heranzuziehen.”

Forms with a short vowel are isolated and fairly late (book X). On the basis of *su-ṣú-* adj. ‘bringing forth, delivering easily’, a denominative verb *suṣvay*^o ‘to be fertile’ has been formed: *suṣváyantī-* ptc.act.f. (RV 10.110.6 about Dawn and Night) and *suṣváyanta* 3pl.inj.med. (RV 7.36.6 about rivers). In this denominative verb, the laryngeal was regularly dropped (in pretonic position, **-uHá-* > *-va-* already in the RV, cf. Lubotsky, FS Beekes, with reff.). From there, the forms with a short root-vowel: *súṣu-ti-* and *suṣu-mánt-*.

2.4. Conclusion: There are hardly any certain examples of laryngeal loss that is due to composition. The whole issue must be reconsidered. See now also Balles 2012.

3. Marginal phonemes: either “loan” phonemes (only in borrowed words), or due to special rare conditions / unique clusters. E.g., saying that PIE had a marginal phoneme **a* does not solve the problem of its rare occurrence, but rather makes it worse: you have to explain why it was so rare.

4. What about PIE **b*? It is exceedingly rare, but not non-existent. If we do not count “European” words, only **pibe-* < **pi-ph₃-e-* and **bel-* (I strongly doubt the currently popular reconstruction PIE **g^hrebH-* for Skt. *grbhñāti* ‘to seize’, Lith. *grėbti*, *gróbtī* ‘to rob’).

Thurneysen, Kortlandt: initial **b-* merged with **p-*, i.e. **bi-bh₃-e-* > **pi-bh₃-e-*, but there are hardly any good examples of PIE non-initial **b* (only **h_{2/3}eb-l-* ‘apple’, but it is only European).

The idea that **ph₃* > **b* is at any rate consistent with “special rare conditions”. Can we discover such conditions for **bel-*?

4.1. Skt. *bála-* n. ‘physical strength, vigour’ (RV+); *bálavant-* adj. ‘powerful, strong’ (AV+; the oldest attestation is sup. *bálavattama-* RV); *balin-* adj. ‘powerful, strong’ (RV+); *bálīyas-* comp. ‘stronger’ (AV+); *báliṣṭha-* sup. (ŚB+); *abalá-* adj. ‘weak’ (RV+).

Combination of a neuter *a*-stem + an old comparative in **-ias-* is very rare in Indo-Iranian. The only parallel I can find is Av. *aka-* adj. ‘bad, evil’; OAv. *ašiih-* comp. ‘worse’; *acišta-* sup. ‘worst’, where Skt. attests *áka-* n. ‘pain’ (TS+), but this word has no good etymology.

4.2. Iranian cognates of Skt. *bála-* are very uncertain. In spite of EWAia II: 215, Oss. *bal* ‘group, party, detachment, gang’ can hardly be related. According to Abaev: s.v., this word goes back to PIran. **bārja-* and belongs together with *balc* / *balci* ‘expedition, journey’ < **bārti-* (rather, **brti-*) – although the *-i* in Digoron (instead of *-æ*) is unexpected – and *æmbal* / *æmbal*, *æmbal* ‘comrade, companion’. He further relates these words to the Iranian root **bar-* ‘to carry; to ride horse(back)’, which seems very attractive, indeed.

Cheung (2002: 170) proposes a slightly different account, deriving Oss. *bal* from PIr. nom.sg. **bārah* (> **bāri*) and connecting Mod. Persian *bār* ‘burden, load; assembly, audience’, Skt. *bhārā-* m. ‘burden, load’, later also ‘a large quantity, mass, bulk’. Also in this account, Oss. *bal* is derived from the same root **bar-*.

The Sarmatian names in ^oβαλος (also, ^oαρζβαλακος) can hardly be used, as we do not know what this second part means.

4.3. Other IE cognates are:

Lat. *dēbilis* adj. ‘weak; crippled’;

Gr. (Il.) βέλτερος comp. ‘better’; Gr. (post-Hom.) βελτίων comp. ‘better’; Gr. (Att.) βέλτιστος sup. ‘best’; Gr. ἀβέλτερος adj. ‘naive, silly’;

OCS *boļii* comp. ‘bigger, better’, f. *boļbši*, n. *boļje*

4.4. It can hardly be a coincidence that in two languages – in Greek and Slavic – only a comparative is attested, and in Skt., the comp. looks old, too. It seems very probable to me that this comparative is the only old form.

As is well known, PIE comparatives often have the structure $*C_1C_2eC_3-$ (type Skt. *drághīyas-* to *dīrghá-* ‘long’; *mradīyas-* to *mṛdú-* ‘delicate, weak, soft, mild’, cf. the “normal” full grade Arm. *melk* ‘soft’, OIr. *mell* ‘pleasant, delightful’).

Cowgill (1970: 127) suggests that comparative is responsible for $*e$ in Lat. *gravis* ‘heavy’ < $*g^wreh_2u-i-$; *brevis* ‘short’ < $*breg^h_1ui-$ < $*mreg^h_1u-i-$; *levis* ‘light, weak’ < $*h_1lneg^{(w)h}u-i-$.

Lat. *dēbilis* is often explained (de Vaan 2008: s.v.) as a compound of the denominative type (*in-ermis* ‘unarmed’ to *arma* ‘arms’), but may also be due to the comparative.

4.5. Accordingly, $*bel-ios-$ is likely to go back to $*Cbel-ios-$. What would be the positive and which initial cluster could yield $*b-$?

4.6. PSlav. $*debel_6$: RuCS *debelyj* ‘fat’, Ru. *debélyj* ‘plump, corpulent’; *debělyj* (dial.) ‘healthy, strong, plump, corpulent’; SCr. *děbeo* ‘fat’; Sl. *děbel* ‘fat, big, strong’, f. *deběla*; Bulg. *debél* ‘fat, strong’ ~ Latv. *depsis* ‘small, fat boy’; OPr. *debīkan* Asg. ‘big’; *debica* (Gr.) ‘big’ (Derksen 2008: 97).

Short vowel in the root points to the IE reconstruction $*d^{(h)}eb^h-el-$ (no Winter’s Law), which seems incompatible with Germanic forms like OIc. *dapr* ‘sad’; Nw. *daper* ‘sad, with young’; *dabb(e)* (dial.) m. ‘small, fat fellow’; OHG *tapfar* ‘firm, heavy, thick-set’.

Further, related to PSlav. $*dob_6$ adj. (OCS *dobl’b* ‘strong’; RuCS *doblīi* ‘strong’; Ru. *dóblīj* ‘valiant’; Sl. *dóbālīj* ‘capable, able’) ~ Latv. *dabļš* ‘strong, lush’; *dabls* ‘id.’ (Derksen 2008: 109).

Nominal type $CeC-el-$ is of unusual structure, but cf.

PIE $*seh_2u-el-$ ‘sun’: Gr. ἥλιος [m.] ‘sun’ (Il.) (Epic ἠέλιος, Dor. Aeol. Arc. ἀέλιος, Dor. (trag.) also ἄλιος, Cretan ἀβέλιος < PGr. $*σᾱφέλιος$) or

PIE $*sep-el-$ ‘honour’ (Lat. *sepelio* ‘to bury’, Skt. *saparyāti* ‘to honour, worship’)

4.7. Suggestion: PIE comparative $*db^hel-ios-$ > $*bel-ios-$. In glottalic terms, $*^2db > *^2b$. No counter-examples known to me.

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