

Notes on Glide Treatment in Latin: New Phonological Interpretations

Kanehiro Nishimura (Kyoto University)

It is well known that Latin orthography tends to avoid gemination of <i> (see, e.g., Niedermann 1908:61). The most classic case may be *maior* ‘larger’ (phonologically /majjior/). This orthographic feature, i.e., the single <i> for <ii>, has been referred to for some other cases to explain their phonological and metrical peculiarities. Its application, however, should not disregard typological evidence and Latin phonology. The traditional analysis of prefixed verbs in *-iciō* (← *iaciō* ‘throw’), such as *abiciō* and *dēiciō*, may be an example of such a misapplication. The heavy scansion of the prefix is rather normative in the Classical period, and even *abiciō* (← *ab-* + *iaciō*) is scanned as if it were *ābīciō*, more precisely HLLH (H = heavy, L = light). To explain this, a phonological representation like /abj̥iciō/ is often employed (see, e.g., Sommer 1914:486-487 and Weiss 2005:181), supposing a syllable boundary between /b/ and /j̥/. In support of this theory, one may appeal to an orthographic device similar to *maior*, i.e., the way /j̥i/ is spelled as single <i>.

However, as per Hayes (1989:300-302), syllables beginning with /j̥i/ are not found in many languages. Following the above scenario based on such a syllable, we must count Latin as an exceptional language in this regard. Note, however, that there is no Latin word that begins with /j̥i/. This should be construed as an inherent feature of Latin phonology that matches with the typological tendency. The constraint on /\$j̥iC₀\$/ may thus allow us to take exception to /-j̥iciō/. Then, the question arises as to how /\$j̥iC₀\$/ is dealt with in Latin, which perhaps arose as a result of some phonological change or morphological formation. In answering this, it may be helpful to refer to Old Japanese: the verb /kuj̥-u/ ‘regret’ deleted its glide element when the conjugation triggered the sequence /j̥-i/ sequence (e.g., */kuj̥-i-zu/ ‘not regret’ → /ku-i-zu/; cf. /ot-u/ ‘fall’, /ot-i-zu/ ‘not fall’). In fact, Leumann (1977:128-129), though providing no further details, already stated that the *-j̥-* allegedly reconstructed for *abj̥iciō* is “nicht lautlich erhaltenes *j̥-*.” Weiss (2005:181-182) also posits the loss of *-j̥-* before *-i-* as a regular rule, and regards the *abj̥iciō*-type scansion as analogical, though without phonological background. Now we can stress that the glide deletion is motivated by the constraint on /\$j̥iC₀\$/ . The whole process can thus be represented as follows: **ab-j̥iaciō* > **ab-j̥[ə]ciō* > ***ab-j̥iciō* (vowel

reduction; see Rix 1966:161-162, Nishimura 2008:43-62) → *ab-īciō* (elimination of /\$iC₀\$/). When the original morpheme boundary is retained, this prefixed verb may be scanned as HLLH (i.e., /ab.i.ci.ō/). Other tense forms or participles such as *abiēcī* and *abiectus* may have provided leverage to this syllabification, where initial syllables are consistently heavy.

The constraint on /\$iC₀\$/ may also be useful in considering the history of *aiō*. This 1.sg. form is the exact parallel of *maior*, being phonologically /aiō/ (< **ag-iō*) with initial heavy syllable. On the other hand, the 2/3.sg. forms, *ais* and *ait*, show a metrical peculiarity that their first syllable is usually scanned as light. Meiser (1998:120, 195) assumes that the older forms may have been **ag-i-s* / **ag-i-t*, later replaced by *ais* / *ait* based on the *g*-less *aiō*. If this was the case, one would expect that the heavy weight of the initial syllable of the 1.sg. /aiō/ was consistently mirrored in *ais* and *ait*. It seems far-fetched that the glide was re-syllabified at the plausible intermediate stage */ai.is/ (2.sg.) to produce an ill-formed syllable /a.iis/. Weiss (2005:182) provides two other representations of earlier forms, namely **aiis* and **aiiesi* (derived from **ag-īe-*). They are taken to have evolved into ^(*)*ā(i)īs* and **aiisi* > *āīs*, respectively, though he provides no further phonological details.

To solve this conundrum, I will highlight another linguistic factor, that is, the clitic use of this verb with the meaning ‘say’. It is often attached to, e.g., the interrogative pronoun *quid* to produce a close-knit prosodical unit, where the pronoun with semantic focus should have drawn stress. The expected phonological sequence would have been /k^wi.dai.is/ (LH), containing an ideal target for iambic shortening (LH > LL). I will tentatively propose that the light initial syllable of *ais* and *ait* may have arisen in this way.

References

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