

Iranian *mā* ‘to become, to be’ and its Indo-European cognates

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Cheung (2007: 257) posits the existence of Ir. **maH²* ‘to be, become’ based on the comparison between Khotanese *hämä-* ‘to be, become’, Sogdian suppletive preterit stems *m’t* ‘to be and *wm’t* ‘to be, become’, and a number of modern East Iranian forms, such as Yazghulami *mi-/mad* ‘to be’, Wakhi *ымы(y)-* ‘to be’ (subjunctive stem), and Yidgha *fərmē-* ‘it may be’. With regard to the etymology of this root, he remarks: “It is uncertain whether **maH²* can be traced back to IE, despite the fact that it is remarkably similar to Tock *māsk-* ‘to be’, which is thought to derive from IE *m̥ske/o-* ‘to remain’”. The main formal obstacle to this comparison is the vocalism of Sogd, *(w)m’t*, phonologically */(wi)māt/*, which is tough to reconcile with the *aniṭ* character of Indo-European **men* ‘to remain’.

A attempt to overcome this obstacle was undertaken in Szemerényi 1971: 515-516. Szemerényi conjectured that the Iranian preterit participle **mata-* underwent proportional analogy *zan- / zāta-* ‘born’ = *man- / X* → *X = māta-*, which was partly triggered by undesirable homonymy between **mata-* ‘remained’ and **mata-* ‘thought’. The cognates of Sogd. *(w)m’t* ‘be, become’ listed above would suggest that this change would have been at least common East Iranian, but the reflexes of the root **man* are also profusely attested in East Iranian with the expected meaning ‘remain’ (Cheung 2007: 73-75). The inexplicable lack of paradigmatic association between **man* ‘to remain’ at its would-be participle **māta-* undermines the validity of Szemerényi’s etymology and makes one look for an alternative solution.

I suggest that Ir. **mā* ‘to become, to be’ is to be compared with Hitt. *mai-/miya^{hi}* ‘to grow’ and Lat. *māturus* ‘ripe, full-grown’. The reconstructed semantic development ‘to grow > to be come > to be’ finds a close parallel in Gk. *φύειν* ‘to grow’ vs. Ved. *bhū* ‘to become, to be’. Hitt. *mai-/miya^{hi}* can be analyzed as a secondary *i*-present from the root *ma* (cf. Jasanoff 2003: 93-97). With regard to the Indo-Hittite reconstruction of the root under discussion, I suggest IH. **mā* ‘to grow’, plain and simple, but those who might insist on the “laryngealist” reconstruction **meh₂* for structural reasons, would be able to invoke the disappearance of **h₂* before *y* in Hittite.

The proposed solution establishes regular correspondence between forms belonging to three separate Indo-European groups, all of which were previously regarded as etymologically uncertain. If acceptable, it leads to the identification of a new Indo-European verbal root. In my presentation I intend to discuss the additional possible reflexes of this root in Slavic and Indic.

REFERENCES

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