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Observations on the development of PIE root ablaut

Most PIE primary verb formations (see the listing in LIV²: 14ff) exhibit intraparadigmatic ablaut, namely between singular (typically e- or o-grade) and plural/dual (zero grade). This alternation is expressed either by the primary suffix (e.g. **h₃r-néu-ti* > Ved. *ṛṇóti* ~ **h₃r-nu-énti* > Ved. *ṛṇvánti*, root **h₃er-*), or, in the absence of a suffix or if the suffix is non-ablauting (such as the desiderative **-s-*), by the root itself (e.g. root aorist **é-g^wem-t* > Ved. *ágan* ~ **é-g^wm-ent* > Ved. *ágman*, root **g^wem-*). In secondary formations the root is fixed in a certain grade – not necessarily the same as in the unmarked formation – and the suffix alternates (e.g. the athematic optative **h₁s-íéh₁-t* > OLat. *siet* ~ **h₁s-ih₁-ént* > OLat. *sient*, root **h₁es-*). Thematic formations exhibit root ablaut only at the interparadigmatic level (i.e. between different formations, such as simple thematic vs. causative). These originally phonologically conditioned alternations had acquired morphological (grammatical) status at the latest by the reconstructable stage of PIE (cf. Weiss 2011: 45–46). Individual IE languages tend to either level root ablaut (e.g. Latin) or preserve (e.g. Sanskrit) and, in rare cases, extend it (the Germanic branch). Divergent treatment is *an sich* language-specific, but is it possible to identify any general tendencies and to convincingly explain them?

In this paper, I examine the *functional weight* of the root in various primary and secondary verb formations in order to determine the conditions for levelling or preservation of root ablaut. Functional weight measures the relative amount of grammatical content that a feature of a linguistic sign contributes towards the overall grammatical content of that sign, taking such features into consideration as the morphological composition of the sign, multiple exponence, and the typological profile of the language. According to the general analogical tendencies of morphological change (in particular, the 1M1F-principle, see Anttila 1989), it is expected that root ablaut is lost first and foremost in such formations in which the root bears little functional weight, whereas it tends to be preserved, when the functional weight of the root is high. I show the feasibility of this approach by examining a number of cases from Latin, a language with a particularly strong levelling tendency. The Latin cases are contrasted with Old Indic and Germanic data, which show contrary developments, that is, towards better preservation of functionally significant root ablaut. The analysis helps us understand the grammatical status of ablaut in PIE as well as the functional significance of the root in grammatical and derivational formations.

References:

- Anttila, Raimo 1989. *Historical and Comparative Linguistics*, 2nd edition (1st edition 1972). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- LIV² = *Lexikon der Indogermanischen Verben*, Helmut Rix (ed.), second edition by Martin Kümmel & Helmut Rix (eds.). Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag.
- Weiss, Michael 2011. *Outline of the Historical and Comparative Grammar of Latin*, second, corrected printing. Ann Arbor/New York: Beech Stave Press.