

Ablaut renewal and neo-roots in Baltic and Balto-Slavic

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The concept of the Indo-European root is intimately linked to that of ablaut and to the existence of a primary verb. It is needless to say not a static entity. Roots are formally renewed, split into two or more neo-roots, etc. through a variety of processes. The Baltic and Slavic languages are of particular interest for research in this area because the typological properties of the PIE root have been preserved until very recently. A relatively frequent phenomenon in this branch of the family is the creation of neo-primary verbs (and hence neo-roots) via paradigm split of an originally unitary paradigm (e.g. Lith. *giñti*, *gẽna* “chase, drive”, *ginti*, *gina* “defend” from PIE **g^{wh}én-ti/*g^{wh}n-énti* “beat”, OCS *gъnati*, *ženq* “chase, persecute”).

In this paper I will argue that paradigm split in Baltic (Balto-Slavic) was motivated, in part, by a series of dramatic restructurings of the morphology of (active-transitive) primary verbs that affected both the productivity of the present and aorist stems and ablaut structure:

1) Early Balto-Slavic: PIE presents from “present roots” acquired a zero grade aorist-infinitive stem, almost certainly with a “*ā*-aorist” of still uncertain origin (e.g. PIE **b^hér-e-ti* → OCS *bъrati*, *berq* “gather, take”). “Aoristic roots”, on the other hand, usually surface with a full grade aorist-infinitive stem (e.g. PIE **(s)k^(w)eit-* → OCS *čisti*, *čbtq* “count, read”).

2) Early Proto-Baltic: the ablaut pattern *čisti*, *čbtq* was systematically eliminated, leaving just a couple of relics (e.g. Lith. *iñti*, *ima*, *ẽmẽ* “take”). The ablaut pattern *bъrati*, *berq*, on the other hand, was considerably extended and became the productive ablaut pattern of primary verbs (e.g. PIE **g^werh₃-* → Sl. **žerti*, **žbrq* “swallow, devour”, but Bl. **gir-ti*, **ger-(i)a* “drink”, cf. Lith. *girtas* “drunk”, *girdyti*, *-o* “give to drink” ~ pres. *gẽria*).

3) Late Proto-Baltic: creation of the *ē*-preterit (< **-ijā*); elimination of *e* : zero ablaut among *ia*-presents; expansion of *ia*-presents (e.g. Lith. *gerti*, *gẽria*, *gẽrẽ*); tendency to eliminate *e* : zero ablaut among *a*-presents of most root-structures (well-preserved only among °ERT-roots, e.g. Lith. *pirkti*, *peřka* “buy”).

This framework, I submit, allows us to explain surprising root remodelings in Balto-Slavic (e.g. **lep-* [Gk. *λέπω*] → **leup-* [Lith. *lũpti*, *-a* “peel”]), formal mismatches between both branches (e.g. OCS *dъxati*, *dušq* “breathe, blow” vs. Lith. *dvẽsti*, *dvẽsia* “starve”), ablaut renewals (Lith. pres. *peřša*, for instance, has secondary State I after pret. *piršo*, inf. *piršti* “propose as a match”, but how does inf.-aor. *pirš-* relate to the PIE paradigm pres. **př(k)-ské/ó-*, aor. **prẽk-s-?*), and, finally, the relative abundance of paradigm split, especially in Baltic (e.g. Lith. *řisti*, *-a* “roll” ~ *riẽsti*, *-čia* “bend”; *siaũpti*, *-ia* “wrap” ~ *sũpti*, *-a* “surround”; *skẽlti*, *skẽlia* “split” ~ *skilti*, *-ia* “strike fire”; *čiaũpti*, *-ia* “press together” ~ *tũpti*, *tũpia* “perch”; *kãlti*, *kãla* “forge” ~ *kũlti*, *-ia* “thresh”, etc.).