The aspectual profile of PIE $g^{\text{wh}}\text{en}$- ‘strike, slay’

Jay H. Jasanoff
Harvard University

Abstract

It is widely assumed that PIE roots had an inherent Aktionsart that determined whether they would have root presents or root aorists. According to this conception, *kei- meant ‘lie’ (atelic, durative-stative) and hence formed a root present (e.g., Gk. keîtai), while *legh- meant ‘lie down’ (telic, punctual) and hence formed a root aorist (e.g., Gk. lékto).

In the few well-described cases where both a root present and a root aorist are built to the same root, the present is usually of the “Narten” type and can be seen as a derivative of the more basic underlying aorist (Kümmel 1998). Such a pair is pres. *yél(hi)-/*yel(hi)- (e.g., Lat. vult ‘wants’, opt. velit) vs. aor. *yel(hi)-/*yl(hi)- (e.g., Ved. avrta ‘chose’).

Another Narten: non-Narten pair, interesting because the root aorist is limited to a “passive” (< h.e-conjugation) aorist in Indo-Iranian, is pres. *stēu-/*steu- (e.g., Ved. stāuti ‘praises’) vs. aor. *stou-/*st(e)u- (Ved. āstāvi ‘has been praised’).

It would be surprising to come across a root that formed both a root aorist and a “normal” (i.e., non-Narten) root present. Yet this is precisely what we find in the case of $g^{\text{wh}}\text{en}$- ‘strike, slay’, best known from the non-Narten root present $g^{\text{wh}}\text{en}$/*$g^{\text{wh}}\text{n}$- (cf. Ved. 3 sg. hánti, pl. ghnánti = Hitt. 3 sg. kuenzi, pl. kunanzi). No root aorist is canonically assumed for this root, which is commonly set up with a reduplicated aorist instead (cf. YAv. jaynāt = Gk. épéphon). But a h.e-conjugation aorist $g^{\text{wh}}\text{n}on-/*g^{\text{wh}}(e)n$- must once have existed to serve as the derivational base of the perfect $g^{\text{wh}}\text{eg}g^{\text{wh}}(\dot{o})n$- (cf. Ved. jaghāna, YAv. ptcp. jaymuāh-, Gk. péphatai, OIr. geguin) and the zero-grade “stative-intransitive” present $g^{\text{wh}}n$- (cf. YAv. ni-γme ‘is slain’, pl. -γnaire). Perfects and zero-grade stative-intransitive presents are associated with h.e-conjugation aorists in the derivational complexes known as “stative-intransitive systems” (Jasanoff 2003: 154 ff.). Recent work has shown that the reduplicated aorist was part of the same derivational family.

The expected h.e-conjugation aorist $g^{\text{wh}}\text{n}on-/*g^{\text{wh}}(e)n$- is actually attested in YAv. jaini ‘was slain’. It is usual to write off this form, which supplies a passive preterite to jainti ‘slays’, as a casual creation on the basis of the present. But given the generally overlooked stative-intransitive “persona” of the root $g^{\text{wh}}\text{en}$- and the limited productivity of the passive aorist in Avestan, it is better to take jaini as the representative of a real Indo-Iranian $g^{\text{hā}}\text{nī}$ (< $g^{\text{wh}}\text{on}$-), analogically altered to agree in root shape with the present.

The interpretation of these facts is unclear. Among the possibilities may be mentioned:

1) the present stem $g^{\text{wh}}\text{en-}$/*$g^{\text{wh}}\text{n}$- was originally an aorist (pace García Ramón 1998), displaced to the present by the encroachment of the reduplicated aorist;

2) the semantics of the pre-PIE protomiddle led the protomiddle-based forms, but only these, to take on perfective value;

3) the root was aspectually neutral, i.e., had both presentential and aoristic readings from the beginning.

Further progress must await further discoveries.
References

In Jay Jasanoff, H. Craig Melchert, and Lisi Oliver, eds., Mir Curad: Studies presented to

Press.

Kümmel, Martin J. 1998. Wurzelpräsens neben Wurzelaorist im Indogermanischen. HS
111. 191-208.