

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

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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, **^hkei-* meant ‘lie’ (atelic, durative-stative) and hence formed a root present (e.g., Gk. *keĩtai*), while **leg^h-* 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. **^hel(h₁)-/ *^hel(h₁)-* (e.g., Lat. *vult* ‘wants’, opt. *velit*) vs. aor. **^hel(h₁)-/ *^hel(h₁)-* (e.g., Ved. *avṛta* ‘chose’). Another Narten : non-Narten pair, interesting because the root aorist is limited to a “passive” (< *h₂e*-conjugation) aorist in Indo-Iranian, is pres. **stēu-/ *steu-* (e.g., Ved. *stāuti* ‘praises’) vs. aor. **stou-/ *st(e)u-* (Ved. *ástāvi* ‘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^{wh}en-* ‘strike, slay’, best known from the non-Narten root present **g^{wh}en-/ *g^{wh}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. *jaynaṭ* = Gk. *épephnon*). But a *h₂e*-conjugation aorist **g^{wh}on-/ *g^{wh}(e)n-* must once have existed to serve as the derivational base of the perfect **g^{wh}eg^{wh}(ó)n-* (cf. Ved. *jaghāna*, YAv. ptcp. *jaynuuāh-*, Gk. *péphatai*, OIr. *geguin*) and the zero-grade “stative-intransitive” present **g^{wh}n-* (cf. YAv. *ni-γne* ‘is slain’, pl. *-γnāire*). Perfects and zero-grade stative-intransitive presents are associated with *h₂e*-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 *h₂e*-conjugation aorist **g^{wh}on-/ *g^{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 *jaiṅti* ‘slays’, as a casual creation on the basis of the present. But given the generally overlooked stative-intransitive “persona” of the root **g^{wh}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^hāni* (< **g^{wh}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^{wh}en-/ *g^{wh}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 presential and aoristic readings from the beginning.

Further progress must await further discoveries.

References

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