

Dariusz R. Piwowarczyk 

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

On the Development of the Proto-Indo-European * $\text{u}^h_1\text{-r}^o\text{-}$, ‘Man’, in Latin¹

ABSTRACT: The present article investigates the problem of the etymology and development of the Latin word *vir*, ‘man,’ usually assumed to have descended from the Proto-Indo-European form * $\text{u}^h_1\text{-r}^o\text{-}$, ‘man’, but with somewhat irregular and not commonly accepted pretonic shortening of the vowel in view of the cognates in Indo-Iranian and Baltic. The shortening is usually explained as an effect of Dybo’s Rule, but it is pointed out that there might be a simpler solution to explaining the change, namely, the so-called Osthoff’s law, which occurred in the prehistory and history of Latin at least three times.

KEYWORDS: Latin etymology, Latin language, historical lexicology

1. Introduction

The Latin noun *vir*, ‘man’, presents a problem from an etymological point of view. In comparison to its cognates in Old Indic (*vīráh*) or Lithuanian (*výras*), we would expect a Latin form, **vīr*, with a long vowel going back to the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European form * $\text{u}^h_1\text{-r}^o\text{-}$, ‘man’. Instead, in Latin we find the form *vir* with a short

¹ I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on the earlier version of this paper. Needless to add, all the remaining errors are my own.

vowel, which is also present in the Germanic (cf. Gothic *wair*, ‘man’) and Celtic languages (Old Irish *fer*, ‘man’). The short vowel is present in place of the etymologically expected long vowel, *ī, as reflex of the Proto-Indo-European sequence, *ih₁-C, where the laryngeal disappears after the vowel *i, and before a consonant with a compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel.

In 1961, Vladimir Dybo postulated a hypothesis that the vowel in the word for ‘man’ (i.e., *uīros) was shortened in the pretonic position (i.e., before the original accent) in the development of Italic, Celtic and Germanic languages.² From that time onwards most scholars tended to explain the presence of the short vowel in those words as being the reflex of the sound change, which he postulated and which was in turn named Dybo’s Rule. In this paper I would like to point out that this is not the only possibility of explaining the shortening in this word in the history of Latin. Moreover, the counterexamples to so-called Dybo’s Rule cannot be easily dismissed, and the rule has not become universally accepted.

2. The Proto-Indo-European Origins of the Latin Word *Vir*, ‘Man’

According to the *communis opinio*, the Latin word *vir* is traced back to the Proto-Indo-European *uīh₁-ro-s, originally an adjective with the meaning ‘strong, young’, which developed through ellipsis into a noun ‘(young, strong) man.’³ This form could itself probably be a derivative of the Proto-Indo-European nominal form *ueih₁-, ‘strength’⁴, or it could go back to the verbal root *ueih₁-, ‘to turn one’s attention to, to seek’⁵, though the semantic development in the latter case is somewhat dubious. The basis for such reconstruction is the comparative evidence from the attested Indo-European forms:⁶ Vedic *vīŕá-*, ‘hero, man’,

² Dybo 1961.

³ Cf. NIL: 727.

⁴ Cf. NIL: 727.

⁵ LIV2: 668–669, NIL: 727.

⁶ Cf. NIL: 726.

Old and Young Avestan *vīra-*, ‘man’, Latin *vir*, ‘man’, Old Irish *fer*, and Middle Welsh *gwr*, ‘man’, Gothic *wair*, Old Norse *verr*, Old Frisian, Old Saxon and Old High German *wer*, ‘man’, Lithuanian *výras*, Old Prussian *wirs*, Latvian *vīrs*, ‘man’, and Tocharian A *wir*, ‘young, strong’.

3. The Development of the Proto-Indo-European Form *uih₁-ró-s in Latin

It is usually assumed that the Proto-Indo-European form *uih₁-ró- in its development into Latin has undergone the following changes:⁷

- a. The loss of the antecoronal laryngeal consonant with the subsequent compensatory lengthening of the previous vowel: *uih₁-ró- > *uī-ró-
- b. The shortening of the long vowel due to Dybo’s Rule, i.e., the shortening of long vowels in pretonic syllables in Italic, Celtic and Germanic: *uī-ró- > *ui-ró-
- c. The stabilisation of the accent on the initial syllable in Italic (alongside Celtic and Germanic): *ui-ró- > *uí-ro-
- d. The syncope of the unaccented short vowel */o/ in the nominative singular *uí-ro-s > *uí-r-s
- e. The loss of the word final *-s either directly or through the assimilation stage *-r-s > *-r-r > *-r

The final form was attested in Latin ever since the oldest texts appeared as *vir* without the long vowel.⁸

4. Dybo’s Rule

The rule according to which the long vowel is shortened in a pretonic syllable was first proposed for Latin and the other Italic languages,

⁷ Cf. Schrijver 1991: 340; Weiss 2020: 108, 237–238.

⁸ Cf. De Vaan 2008: 681.

along with Celtic and Germanic, by Vladimir Dybo in 1961.⁹ Although the postulated rule did not initially find much support, in time it has been gaining popularity due to the fact that in some of the words the development lacked a plausible explanation. It was taken up mainly by representatives of the so-called “Leiden School” of Indo-European linguistics, i.e., Frederik Kortlandt¹⁰ and Peter Schrijver,¹¹ who tried to show that the rule can explain several examples which so far lacked a clear-cut explanation. Due to this it also sparked some interest outside of the Leiden School¹² and was also mentioned by Michael Weiss in his historical grammar of Latin (as “Dybo’s Phenomenon.”¹³) According to Weiss,¹⁴ the rule can explain the irregular development of *uih₁-r_ó- in Latin to *vīr*, but there are two counterexamples to Dybo’s Rule which are difficult to explain: Latin *vīvus*, ‘alive’, and *fūmus*, ‘smoke’. Both of those forms attest the long vowel in the initial syllable and both have exact etymological cognates in the other Indo-European languages, clearly pointing to a non-initial accent in the proto-language Vedic *jīvá-* and *dhūmá-*,¹⁵ and in ancient Greek *thūmós*.¹⁶ Weiss tried to explain this difficulty by assuming that the rule operated only in a restricted context.¹⁷ He hypothesized that it might have operated before only as a coronal sonorant, which would exclude the two forms mentioned above but, as he correctly observed, such a restriction would in turn be typologically implausible. Another reformulation would be a shortening of a pretonic high vowel before any sonorant consonant, but this formulation would leave the Latin *vīvus* largely unexplained. Weiss¹⁸ postulated that the length could have been reintroduced analogically on the basis of the verb, but this seems like a less economical solution,

⁹ Dybo 1961.

¹⁰ Kortlandt 1975.

¹¹ Schrijver 1991: 334–357.

¹² Garnier 2016.

¹³ Weiss 2020: 108.

¹⁴ Weiss 2020: 108.

¹⁵ Mayrhofer 1992: 594–595, 795.

¹⁶ Beekes 2010: 564.

¹⁷ Weiss 2020: 108.

¹⁸ Weiss 2020: 108.

since such reintroduction of the vowel length in the noun from the verb does not seem to appear very often.

In a recent B.A. thesis, Jan German¹⁹ analyzed all of the Latin examples and counterexamples of Dybo's Rule and came to the conclusion that the rule does not apply in Latin because of three counterexamples (*fāgus*, 'beech'; *fūmus*, 'smoke'; and *suāvis*, 'sweet'), which are difficult to explain with the assumption of Dybo's Rule and require complicated analogical solutions rather than straightforward phonological development. *Fāgus* could be explained if we assumed a restricted version of Dybo's Rule operating only before resonants (/r/, /l/, /m/, /n/), and for *suāvis* we do not know the exact original placement of the accent,²⁰ so those two words do not have to be strict counterexamples, but the word for 'smoke' (*fūmus*) does not have a generally plausible solution for the lack of shortening. It has been claimed by Schrijver that it was shortened and then the length was analogically reintroduced (Schrijver 1991: 342), but this verb seems secondary, and such a hypothesis is certainly less economical.

The most apparent examples which would speak in favor of the rule are *labō*, 'tottle'; *puter*, 'rotten'; and *vir*, 'man'. However, as pointed out by German,²¹ these three could also be explained otherwise (*labō* could go back to *sleh₁b-; *puter* should be derived from *puh_x- instead of *ph_xu- and *vir* is generally irregular), and the other examples, i.e., *cognitus*, 'known'; *ferus*, 'wild'; *fretum*, 'strait'; *molestus*, 'annoying'; *musculus*, 'muscle'; *nota*, 'sign'; *rupex*, 'a rough'; *rutus*, 'dug-up'; *sagāx*, 'acute'; *serēscō*, 'to become dry'; *sucula*, 'pig'; *tumeō*, 'to be swollen'; *ulna*, 'elbow'; and *vadō*, 'to wade through' are clearly easier explained without invoking Dybo's Rule: *fretum*, *musculus*, *nota*, *rutus* and *tumeō* do not have to come back to proto-forms with long vowels; *sucula*, *ferus*, *rupex*, *sagāx*, *serēscō* and *vadō* could have been shortened through other phonological or morphological processes (including the ablaut within the paradigms). In *cognitus* the short vowel might be due to analogy; *ulna* has cognates in the other Indo-European

¹⁹ German 2017.

²⁰ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for turning my attention to those facts.

²¹ German 2017: 26–27.

languages with a short vowel, and for *molestus* no hard evidence is found for the original position of the accent.²²

Additionally, it has been suggested by German²³ that the word *vir*, being quite frequently used in the language,²⁴ could have undergone irregular phonetic development due to its frequency of occurrence as per Mańczak.²⁵ This might be a viable solution, but it is very difficult to verify. I will come back to this possibility later.

Moreover, Dybo's Rule has encountered criticism also within the proposed changes in Germanic and Celtic languages, where it, according to its author, should also operate (cf. the shortened vowel in Gothic *wair*, 'man', and Old Irish *fer*, 'man'). Ringe has shown that the Germanic data also does not permit one to assume such a regular sound change and that the Germanic forms which were used by Dybo as examples of the rule might have been the result of various restructurings.²⁶ As for the Celtic data, Zair has shown that the rule does not really work for Celtic.²⁷

5. Osthoff's Law

In the history of Latin the process which caused a long vowel to shorten before a sonorant consonant in front of another consonant was named after its founder, Hermann Osthoff.²⁸ This process took place in the history of Latin at least once.²⁹ The exact position of Osthoff's Law in the relative chronology of changes in Latin is currently under discussion,³⁰ but it is generally agreed that it operated in Latin and

²² German 2017: 26–27.

²³ German 2017: 23–24.

²⁴ Cf. Delatte et al. 1981: 113.

²⁵ Mańczak 2012.

²⁶ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for turning my attention to this fact. Ringe 2006: 79, but see also Neri 2017: 221–240 for arguments in favor of the rule in Germanic.

²⁷ Zair 2012: 145–149.

²⁸ Weiss 2020: 136.

²⁹ Weiss 2020: 136.

³⁰ Cf. Sayeed 2017; Weiss 2020.

probably in three rounds.³¹ The prime example of the change is the shortening of the vowel in the third person plural of the present tense in the verb, e.g. Latin *amānt > *amānt*, or the word for ‘wind’, *uēntus > *uēntus*. According to Weiss,³² the rule operated in three rounds – the first round occurred before vowel weakening, the second round after syncope and before raising the vowel before nasals and the third round occurred after monophthongization (e.g. *oĵno(m)-dekem, ‘eleven’ > *ūndecim > *ūndecim*.³³) If the chronology is correct, then perhaps the third round of Osthoff’s Law could be invoked to explain the short vowel of the Latin form *vir* after the syncope of /o/.

6. A Possible Competing Scenario of Development

There is a possible scenario of development which would explain the development of the Latin word *vir* without having to invoke Dybo’s Rule (or phenomenon). Starting with the same proto-form nominative singular *uih₁-ro-s, we can assume the following development:

- a. The loss of the antecorsonantal laryngeal consonant with the subsequent compensatory lengthening of the previous vowel: *uih₁-ró-s > *ūī-ró-s
- b. The stabilisation of the accent on the initial syllable in Italic (alongside Celtic and Germanic): *uī-ró-s > *uī-ro-s
- c. The syncope of the unaccented short vowel */o/: *ūī-ro-s > *ūī-r-s
Syncope in Latin was a generally irregular process.³⁴ However, it did not occur in words built similarly to *ūīros, such as, for example, *virus*, ‘poison’, which developed from the proto-Latin *uīśos through *uīzos and rhotacism, but without the syncope of */o/,³⁵ alternatively, the word could go back to the root with a diphthong, *ueis-os.³⁶ Thus there must have been an additional factor. In my view, this development must have been conditioned by the frequency of use

³¹ Cf. Weiss 2020: 136.

³² Weiss 2020: 136–137.

³³ Weiss 2020: 137.

³⁴ Weiss 2020: 132–135.

³⁵ De Vaan 2008: 682–683.

³⁶ Szemerényi 1989: 91.

of the proto-form of the word *vir*, and according to the lexicon of the frequency of occurrence of Latin words it is used 1,030 times,³⁷ whereas the word for ‘poison’ only 17 times.³⁸

d. The third round of Osthoff’s Law: *uǐ-r-s > *uǐ-r-s³⁹

e. The loss of the word final, *-s, either directly or through the assimilation stage: *-r-s > *-r-r > *-r

In this scenario, at stage d the form *uǐ-r-s would have undergone Osthoff’s Law, which changed it into *uǐ-r-s, and then at stage e the form would be simplified into *vir*, thus giving the exact form as found in the oldest Latin texts. The forms in cases other than nominative singular would have been consequently levelled to the nominative.

A similar hypothesis has been put forward by Graham Isaac,⁴⁰ but he uses a different explanation than the one presented here, namely, he claims that the words for ‘man’ (*vir*) and ‘poison’ (*vīrus*) would have developed the same as *virus*, and this homonymy could have caused the syncope in the word for ‘man’. Afterwards, the form would have undergone Osthoff’s Law, as in the current hypothesis. Isaac’s hypothesis with the syncope caused by homonymy is not impossible, but various other words which sound the same but relate to different concepts exist in Latin and other languages and do not usually cause changes. Thus, his hypothesis is in my opinion less economical.

7. Conclusion

It has been shown that Dybo’s Rule is a phenomenon which still has many important counterexamples, and thus invoking it should rather be avoided while explaining the phonological development of Latin. The development in Celtic and Germanic should be further investigated, but there are tendencies to avoid using the rule in explaining the phonological development of those languages as well.

³⁷ Delatte et al. 1981: 113.

³⁸ Delatte et al. 1981: 113.

³⁹ Cf. Weiss 2020: 137.

⁴⁰ I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewer for turning my attention to that publication. Isaac 2007: 56–59.

The prime example of the explanatory power of Dybo's Rule in Latin, i.e., the word *vir*, 'man', can be explained as a regular development according to Osthoff's Law, if we assume that the law occurred at least three times in Latin as per Weiss.⁴¹ Additionally, as a statistically frequently used word it might have been affected by an irregular syncope per Mańczak.⁴² This seems to be a more economic and easier solution to explain the irregular short vowel in this word.

References

- Beekes R.S.P., 2010, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Leiden – Boston.
- Delatte L. et al., 1981, *Dictionnaire fréquentiel et Index inverse de la langue latine*, Liège.
- De Vaan M., 2008, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*, Leiden.
- Dybo V., 1961, 'Sokraščenie dolgot v kel'to-italijskix jazykax i ego značenie dlja balto-slavjanskoj i indoevropskoj akcentologii', *Voprosy slavjanskogo jazykoznanija* 5, pp. 9–34.
- Garnier R., 2016, 'Dérive postnéogrammaire des analyses laryngalistes: sur la loi de Dybo en italique et en celtique', *Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 23, pp. 159–182.
- German J., 2017, *Reguła Dybo w języku łacińskim [Dybo's Rule in Latin]*, unpublished B.A. thesis, Kraków.
- Isaac G.R., 2007, *Studies in Celtic Sound Changes and Their Chronology*, Innsbruck.
- Kortlandt F., 1975, *Slavic Accentuation: A Study in Relative Chronology*, Lisse.
- LIV2 = *Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben*, H. Rix et al. (eds), 2001, Wiesbaden.
- Mańczak W., 2012, 'Aktualna sytuacja teorii nieregularnego rozwoju fonetycznego spowodowanego frekwencją', *Linguistica Copernicana* 7/1, pp. 15–30, <https://doi.org/10.12775/LinCop.2012.017>.
- Mayrhofer M., 1992, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen. Band I*, Heidelberg.
- Neri S., 2017, *Wetter. Etymologie und Lautgesetz*, Perugia.
- NIL = *Nomina im Indogermanischen Lexikon*, D.S. Wodtko, B. Irslinger, C. Schneider (eds), 2008, Heidelberg.

⁴¹ Weiss 2020: 136.

⁴² Mańczak 2012.

- Ringe D., 2006, *A Linguistic History of English: From Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic*, Oxford.
- Sayeed O., 2017, 'Osthoff's Law in Latin', *Indo-European Linguistics* 5/1, pp. 147–177, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22125892-00501005>.
- Schrijver P., 1991, *The Reflexes of the Proto-Indo-European Laryngeals in Latin*, Amsterdam – Atlanta.
- Szemerényi O., 1989, *An den Quellen des lateinischen Wortschatzes*, Innsbruck.
- Weiss M., 2020, *Outline of the Historical and Comparative Grammar of Latin*, Ann Arbor – New York.
- Zair N., 2012, *The Reflexes of the Proto-Indo-European Laryngeals in Celtic*, Leiden – Boston, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004233096>.