

INDO–EUROPEAN PHONOLOGY
WITH A HUMAN FACE

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INDO–EUROPEAN PHONOLOGY WITH A HUMAN FACE

PETER DUNPHY–HETHERINGTON
XAVERIO BALLESTER



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«Es kann somit festgestaltet werden, daß das Indogermanische in einer frühen Epoche seiner Entwicklung über die drei Vokale **i*, **a*, **u*, verfügte» (R. SCHMITT–BRANDT)



to Professor Robert SCHMITT–BRANDT (12/02/1927 – 27/03/2025), who showed us the way, *in memoriam*

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FOR A REALISTIC APPROACH

In this volume we collect a series of papers already published in various journals. The papers have been ordered here not according to the chronology of their publication, but in such a way that their reading would be more consistent and comfortable for the reader, starting, then, from the most basic and general questions to the most specific and concrete ones. If a theory is correct, it is usually predictive and productive, thus sometimes we could still add new arguments and more information in this new version. Misprints were corrected, some formal aspects have been modified and all the cited bibliography has been unified in a single final section. Since all the studies were carried out independently, the reader will forgive some inevitable coincidences of arguments, examples and references all along the different sections of this volume, given the imbrication of all the topics covered and the convenience of each work maintaining its reading autonomy. The noun *Phonology* in the title of this book may be somewhat inaccurate. Certainly, most of its parts focus on phonology, but logically a certain overlap with morphology is inevitable as well (Phono[morpho]logy). The morphological content is more obvious in the last chapters. Still, throughout the book phonology remains the starting point of all morphological imbrications.

Albeit all the studies we present here were thought, projected and discussed jointly by both authors, if this work were a concert, by means of metaphor one could say that essentially Peter DUNPHY–HETHERINGTON has played the role of performer and Xaverio BALLESTER that of composer.

For SZEMERÉNYI (1996: 32), «From the outset realism, a realistic approach, plays a decisive part in reconstruction, since the reconstruction of phonetically impossible sounds and sound sequences (= words) can be considered nothing but an idle game». The same famous Indo–Europeanist wrote about «the innate resistance of many linguists to facing the lead given by the facts. In the eyes of some scholars, almost any explanation, however ill–founded or contrived, seems preferable to a conclusion which classes with long–held theoretical views» (SZEMERÉNYI, 1964: 29). In contrast with the distant, hieratic and algebraic face of the dominant Indo–European Linguistics, one of our aims has been to provide this discipline with a human face. If this way we can at least generate greater interest in this field of studies and gain some readers or researchers, we will be satisfied.

P. D.–H. & X.B.

ON INDO-EUROPEAN /a/

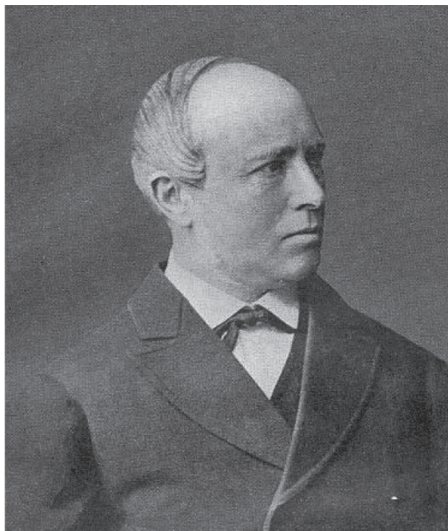
THE ARYAN LAW THAT CHANGED ALL, THE FRENCH *LAW* THAT CHANGED NOTHING

One of the very first descriptions of the Indo-European vowel pattern, very worthy of mention, is the proposal of a phonemic inventory with *only* three vowel sounds: /a i u/. It was a proposal, however, that was perhaps too soon abandoned. Indeed, for official Indo-European Linguistics the absence of /a/ became in practice an axiom, so that, in almost any later proposal on Indo-European vocalism, most scholars accepted the idea that the vowel /a/ would never have existed. Consequently, all the obvious cases of presence of /a/ in Indo-European material were explained by means of varied and bizarre arguments of a kind of derogatory, childish or popular vocalism and finally rejected as quantitatively not significant. One cannot hide that the presence of /a/ in Proto-Indo-European would be barely compatible with the then emerging academically dominant laryngeal theory. BEEKES proclaimed (1991: 238): «I consider as one of the most important insights provided by the laryngeal theory that PIE had no phoneme *a». On the contrary, for us, as we shall try to demonstrate, precisely the absence of /a/ in Proto-Indo-European would be one of the best indications of the fallacies and fallibility of the laryngeal theory. Anyway, the slogan «Against a Proto-Indo-European phoneme *a» (so *litteratim* LUBOTSKY, 1989) has become one of the most frequent proclamations of the laryngealist *dogma*. So, everyone against *a!

However, if considered today without prejudice, the argument that motivated the rejection of the primitive Indo-European /a/ presents, at least from a current phono-typological perspective, no validity at all. In order to demonstrate this assertion and to briefly go over the matter, we will invoke here an objective testimony on this subject. SZEME-RÉNYI (1996: 134) wrote: «Influenced by the antiquity of Sanskrit, the founders of the IE linguistics and the immediate successors assumed that the Old Indic triangular system *i-a-u* represented the original situation. In 1864 G. Curtius¹ drew attention to the fact that in many cases European languages opposed *e* to the Sanskrit *a*; cf. Gr. δέκα, Lat. *decem*,

¹ In reference to Georg CURTIUS (1864).

Goth. *taihun*, Lith. *dešimt* but Skt. *daśa*. He supposed, however, that in this respect all the European languages had innovated as a closed group, i.e. they had split the original *a* into *e* and *a*. It was not until 1871 that Arthur Amelung² came to realize that the European *e* as opposed to Sanskrit *a* represented the original situation, though this view did not win general acceptance until later, with Brugmann's famous article of 1876³. The originality of the (European) *e* was then proved within Old Indic also by the discovery of the Aryan law of palatalization». A somewhat different historiographical version of this episode, by the way, was offered by SZEMERÉNYI (1967: 68) in an earlier paper.



Georg CURTIUS [public domain]

This *decisive* “law” of Aryan palatalization would consist, again in the words of SZEMERÉNYI (1996: 63), in that «In Aryan *k g gh* were palatalized to *č j ĵh* before *e* (which later became *a*), *i* and *y*». It is the so-called “law of palatals” or “law of Collitz–Saussure” (CAVAZZA, 2004: 148), conjecturing the existence of an **e/* in the prehistoric phase of Sanskrit. Thus, for example, from the enclitic ‘and’ [tʃa] in Sanskrit (–*ca*) or Avestan (–*ča*) as opposed to Celtiberian –*QVE* or –*cue*, Greek *τε* or Latin –*que*, a previous form **-kue* was deduced and not **-kua*, since —so it was said— otherwise the consonant could not have been palatalized. It was assumed, therefore, that after the regular loss of [w] ([kwa] > [ka]) the dorsal consonant /k/ should have remained unchanged in the Indo–Iranian languages, but the existence of a palatalization in [tʃa] could only mean, according to those neogrammarians, an original **-k^we* sequence. Similarly, the existence of Avestan and Sanskrit *ĵani-* with a palatalized consonant in contrast to Greek *γυνή* or Gothic *qinō* would invite one, under the effects of this Aryan law, to reconstruct a root **g^wen-* ‘woman’ etc. etc.

² In reference to AMELUNG (1871).

³ The reference is to BRUGMANN (1876).

It seems to us, however, that exchanging a stable vowel model for such Aryan minutiae has really been a methodological abuse, the consequences of which for Indo-European phonology have been, in our opinion, catastrophic. Thus, according to such flamboyant argument, the antiquity of */e/ and not of /a/ should also be seen in, for example, the Italian, Portuguese or Spanish *campo* ‘field’, since French also presents the palatalized velar in *champ* [ʃã]... and in *charbon* ‘coal’ but Latin *carbo*, *chante* ‘s/he sings’ but Latin *cantat*, etc. etc. So, according to some law of *Frankian* palatalization that original Latin root should be reconstructed as [†]*cemp-* and not as it surely was: *camp-*. Fortunately, today we have enough documentation to admit that a consonant followed by /a/ —and, naturally, by /ε æ/ and similar vowels— may very well be palatalized. This is, for instance, the *reoffending* case of the modern Persian, where «velars tend to be fronted before front vowels, including a» (WINDFUHR, 1997: 681).

The fact is that, at least before [a] or before [æ], palatalizations also occur in many languages, among which, as we see, there are some that are very close and well known. Thus, in French we have *char* ‘car’ (Latin *carrus*) or *chose* ‘thing’ (Latin *causa*), words that stemmed always from a root with /a/, and where a *palatalizing* /e/ very probably never existed. Alternations as for ‘leg’ Italian *gamba* – French *jambe* or for ‘shank’ Italian *garetto* – French *jarette* would show the same palatalization before /a/. Also in Romansh, possibly influenced by a Celtic superstratum (see ALINEI, 2000: 742), we have palatalization of velars followed by /a/: *cian* ‘dog’ (Latin *canis*), *ciastel* ‘castle’ (Latin *castellum*), or *gialina* ‘hen’ (Latin *gallina*). Likewise, to quote now a non-Indo-European example, in the Turkish of the Oghuz group «k and g are palatalized in front of anterior vowels and an â of Arabic-Persian origin»⁴ (MANZELLI, 1993b: 558). All this is not surprising, if compared to what happens in some Lak dialects: «Curiously, Turči and Shuni *govory* palatalize /k/, etc. to [č] only preceding [a] and not [i]» (ANDERSON, 1997: 991).

OUT OF THE VOCALIC EDEN

Thus, a rough and rigid topic of traditionalist Indo-European Linguistics is the denial of the presence of the proto-phoneme /a/. This active opposition to /a/ should not surprise us, since the recognition of this phoneme would automatically give rise to enormous problems both for the defense of the existence of the so-called *laryngeals* and for the existence of /e/ and /o/ —or, in the most extravagant versions, of /e|o/! (*sic*)— in the primitive phonemic pattern.

The ugly truth is that the vowel /a/ is the *champion* of the vowels, because statistically it is present in almost all the languages of the world and its absence from a vowel phonemic pattern is *coincidentally* highly improbable from a statistical point of view. Therefore, before denying the existence of salt in the reconstructed Indo-European ocean and conjecturing an otherwise unknown chemical component, it is necessary to try to reconstruct that impressive mass of oceanic water as salty as well, because almost all

⁴ «k e g sono palatalizzati davanti a vocali anteriori ed a â di origine arabo-persiana».