Barber, P.


The formation of Greek primary comparatives displays an irregularity familiar to all students of the language. In some forms, a cluster of root-final consonant and suffix-initial semivowel *-y- has undergone sound change (as in Ionic μέζων ‘bigger’ and κρέσσων ‘stronger’, from pre-forms *meg-yōn, *kret-yōn), but in other formations, the suffix starts with a vowel -i- (κερδίων ‘more profitable’, ἡδίων ‘sweeter’ from *kerd-iyōn, *swād-iyōn). Why are there two alternating forms of what was originally the same comparative suffix, PIE *-yos-? Barber’s (henceforth B.) book, based on a 2007 Oxford dissertation, investigates the hypothesis that such alternations are due to Sievers’ Law by systematically examining the entire Greek linguistic evidence for formations with post-consonantal *-y-.

According to Sievers’ Law, the alternation between post-consonantal prevo-calic i and *y in Indo-European was automatically conditioned by the weight of the preceding sequence. Following a brief introduction, chapter 2 describes the synchronic functioning of Sievers’ Law in Germanic and Indo-Iranian. In Gothic, the genitive singular harjis ‘army’, outcome of *kor-ye-so (suffix *-ye/o- after a light sequence -VC-), contrasts with hairdeis ‘herdsman’ from *kerd-h-ive-so (where the same suffix appears as *-ive/o- after a heavy sequence -VCC-). A similar phenomenon was also operative in Vedic Sanskrit. For this reason, Sievers’ Law is widely reconstructed as a subphonemic rule of Proto-Indo-European. However, B. rightly emphasizes (building on Sihler) the different details of how the rule functions in Vedic and Gothic (e.g. Vedic shows Sievers’ Law distributions for u/v, Gothic does not). B. therefore admits that Germanic and Indo-Iranian could in principle have undergone independent innovations (p. 67), which leads him to systematically reconsider the supposed Greek evidence. He only investigates *y/i alternations, leaving aside the question of whether similar interchanges occurred with *w/u or with liquids and nasals (p. 68). Throughout the book, the focus remains on determining the value of potential counterevidence.

Chapter 3 reviews the place of Sievers’ Law in the phonological system of prehistoric Greek as it developed over time, and examines the various sequences (*-sy-, *-ry-, etc.) in which *y underwent specific conditioned sound changes. Thus, B. delimits the range of morphological evidence that bears

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on the problem: only examples possibly inherited from PIE can be used. He
excludes from the discussion the motional feminines in *-ya (e.g. γλώσσα < *glōkh-ya) because word-final *-ya derives from PIE *-ih2, which originally did
not contain prevocalic *-y- (further details at pp. 84–90). Moreover, he finds
no clear-cut evidence for syllabicity alternations *Ci-/*Cy- in word-initial
sequences, not even in monosyllables (Lindeman’s Law): Greek normally has
*CyV- (in e.g. Zeûs < PIE *Dîeus), and whenever it has *CiV- (as in χιών ‘snow’),
this may be due to inner-paradigmatic analogy (pp. 129-141). B. equally doubts
that Lindeman’s Law was operative in PIE (pp. 47-65).

The further evidence is discussed in two parts (covering nominal and
verbal formations). Opening part II, chapter 4 discusses comparative forma-
tions. In agreement with previous scholars (e.g. Ruijgh), B. concludes that the
distribution between ήδίων, κῡδίων, κέρδιον, κέρδιον, and μάσσων (where *-iyōn
is preceded by a heavy sequence) and μέζων, βάσσων, βράσσων, πάσσων, βάττων,
έλαττων, κρέατον, and μάσσων (*-yōn following a light sequence) is highly sig-
nificant. He accepts that the long root vowel in Attic forms like θᾶττον does not
reflect something old (pp. 162-164). Other comparative forms, some of which
contradict the above distribution, are dismissed as non-probative for various
reasons: late secondary creations (e.g. κακίων, φιλίων, αἰσχίων, βελτίων), the
reconstruction of the pre-form is uncertain (e.g. μᾶλλον, ἥσσων, καλλίων), or the
etymology is unknown (e.g. λώϊον). B. remarks that the Mycenaean evidence
is difficult to use, because of the possibility that spellings like ka-zo-e ‘worse’
represent the outcome of *kak-iyoh-e (p. 175).

Chapter 5 deals with nominal stems with suffix *-yo- (e.g. μέσως < *medhyo-).
It appears that among the formations in *-yo- with Indo-European pedigree,
the preceding sequence is light in a considerable number of instances (e.g.
μέσως, τόσος, ἀπεινος, κοίρανος, ὀπίσσω), but heavy only once (in λούσσον ‘white
pith’). This “distributional skew” (p. 213) is an important novel discovery.

Part III treats evidence coming from verbal categories, notably the present
suffix *-ye/o- which remarkably never appears in the form *-iye/o-. Chapter 6
treats the Vedic evidence for *-ye/o- formations and removes much irrelevant
Greek material. In chapter 7, B. shows that among the remaining Greek evi-
dence, formations with preceding heavy sequences may simply have been
non-existent at the appropriate time. This is related to the fact that most
inherited examples (e.g. βαίνω ‘go’ < *gʷm-ye/o-) had zero grade roots, in Greek
and Vedic alike. In making this point, B. shows (among other things) that the
only full grade primary *-ye/o-presents securely reconstructible for PIE were of

Process, Lingua 36, 85-100.