

Sound Change in Proto-Celtic: Laryngeals Before *w

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Proto-Indo-European laryngeals are a set of phonemes reconstructed on the basis of the comparative method. Their phonetic status has not been fixed (e.g. Beekes 1989), but they are generally accepted as PIE phonemes¹. It is agreed that laryngeals were lost in Proto-Celtic before the glide *y, at least after a sonorant (McCone 1996: 53, De Bernardo Stempel 1987: 47, Ringe 1988: 424-5), e.g. Old Irish *-gainethar* “is born” < **ganyetor* < **gnyetor* < **ǵnH₁-ye-tor* cf. Sanskrit *jāyate*).

It is not so clear whether this applies also to laryngeals before the other Proto-Indo-European glide, *w. Ringe suggests that laryngeals were lost between sonorants and semivowels. De Bernardo Stempel (1999: 214, 454 fn. 54) assumes their loss after vowel or sonorant and before *w, but in the same work (220 fn. 148) argues that PIE *(C)RHwV- > *(C)RǎwV-. Some examples of apparent laryngeal loss before *w may be due to other sound changes, such as dissimilatory loss when two laryngeals are in close proximity (Joseph 1982: 55).

This paper collects the Celtic evidence for laryngeals before *w, and assesses their reflexes in that position, as a means of arbitrating between the competing claims. While there is some evidence for the loss of laryngeals before *w, the firmest evidence is for a loss only after consonantal sonorants. This suggests that we should be careful in expecting the same results of laryngeals before *w as for *y.

If the difference between laryngeal reflexes before *y and *w reflects a real distinction, rather than the paucity of our evidence, a possible explanation is that an original Proto-Celtic law *H → Ø/R_y which operated whether the sonorant was vocalic or consonantal, was extended to *H → Ø/R_w, which operated only when the sonorant was consonantal.

References

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¹ In this abstract, C stands for any consonant, R for any sonorant, V for any vowel and H for any laryngeal