

Vocalic epenthesis in early Latin: syllable structure and frequency effects

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Vocalic epenthesis occurred within word-internal stop + /l/ sequences in early Latin with near-regularity where the stop was /b/ or /k/, and in some words where the stop was /p/. Consider *stabulum* ‘stable’ < **stablom*, *pōculum* ‘cup’ < *pōclom*, and *populus* ‘people’ < *poplos*. Traditional grammars of the language (e.g. Leumann (1977: 102-103)) state little further regarding the phenomenon, save that the sequences /kl/ and /pl/ survived intact in numerous instances in early Latin inscriptions and verse, even after the first attestations with epenthesis from the first half of the third century BC (the *pōcula deorum*; see Wachter (1987: 465-68)). The remaining Indo-European stops underwent changes internally before /l/: */tʰl/ > /kl/; */dʰl/ > /ll/; */bʰl/ and */dʰl/ both > /bl/, and the labiovelars delabialised before consonants. /gl/ remained intact, but did not show epenthesis with any regularity.

But more can be gleaned from the Latin evidence, taking particular note of the Indo-European heritage of the morphological constituency of the words in question, notably the ‘mediative’ (Serbat (1975)) suffixes **-dʰlom/-dʰlā* > *-bulum/-bula* and **-tlom/-tlā* > *-culum/-cula*. As a syllable boundary fell before transparently tautomorphic stop + liquid sequences in early Latin (Sen (2006)), vocalic epenthesis appears to have been a phenomenon separating syllable onset sequences (cf. onsets in early *Her.c̄lēs* and *Ais.c̄lā.pi.us*); contrast situations where a morpheme boundary intervened and thus introduced a syllable boundary, e.g. *ab.lēgō* ‘I send off’. Furthermore, the environment for insertion spread from the sequence /bl/, unattested intact in this position, to the other stop + /l/ sequence found in mediative suffixes, namely /kl/, where the most frequent forms appear to have put up resistance through regular repetition. Epenthesis in /pl/ occurred later still, when the regular word-internal syllabification of stop + liquid came to be tautosyllabic regardless of word-internal morphology, as in early Latin verse. However, we also have evidence for the slightly earlier heterosyllabic development of the sequence /pl/ to /bl/, as in *pūblicus* ‘public’ < *poplicos*, following a trend in Latin for codas to be assimilated to their ensuing onsets, as seen in *arripīō* ‘I seize’ < **ad-rapiō*, where the assimilation was total, and **nec + legō* > *neglegō/negligō* ‘I neglect’, with assimilation in voice alone.

Finally, typological evidence and psycholinguistic investigations explain why the change did not occur word-initially, despite being a tautosyllabic onset in this position: word-initial groups are considerably more stable than those word-internally, permitting a larger inventory of permissible onsets.

References

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