

The loss of intervocalic laryngeals in Sanskrit and its historical implications

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It is generally assumed that Proto-Indo-European laryngeals are lost in intervocalic positions in extra-Anatolian languages without leaving any traces. The loss of intervocalic laryngeals must have resulted at first in a hiatus, which was later removed by contraction. This development is probably to be seen in Sanskrit, which indirectly shows the former existence of intervocalic laryngeals. Particularly illustrative cases are found in the genitive plural ending $-\bar{a}m$ and the thematic ablative singular ending $-\bar{a}t$, where Vedic meter requires that the long vowel therein must sometimes be read as equivalent to two short vowels. According to Arnold (1905:92f.), about one third of the occurrences of the genitive plural ending $-\bar{a}m$ in the Rig Veda are required to be scanned as two syllables ($-aam$; e.g. *adhvarāṅnām* “of religious services” RV 1.1.8a). Likewise, there are at least seven examples of the ablative singular $-\bar{a}t$ that must be metrically read as two syllables ($-aat$; e.g. *sadhāsthāt* “from the place” RV 8.11.7b). These two sequences are respectively interpreted as going back to $*-aHam$ and $*-aHat$, with an intervocalic laryngeal, by the application of internal reconstruction, and the metrically required $-aam$ and $-aat$ are considered to reflect the stage when contraction of two vowels in hiatus did not yet occur after the loss of an intervocalic laryngeal. It is important to note that the loss of intervocalic laryngeals in Sanskrit did not cause any vowel lengthening before contraction occurred.

There has been a longstanding debate on the development of long vowels in final syllables in Germanic and Lithuanian. To explain the final long vowels in the gen. pl. ending (e.g. OHG *tago* “of days”) and the abl. sg. ending (e.g. Gothic *ga-leiko* “like, similarly” (< abl. sg.), Lith. *vilko* “of a wolf” [gen. sg. < abl. sg.]) that did not undergo the so-called final syllable reduction in Germanic and the effect of Leskien’s Law in Lithuanian, it is suggested that trimoric final long vowels arose in post-Proto-Indo-European from the vowel contraction caused by the loss of an intervocalic laryngeal ($\tilde{V} < *-VHV-$). This analysis seems descriptively adequate. Nonetheless, when the issue is reexamined from typological and theoretical viewpoints, the following two serious problems may emerge: 1) trimoric long vowels are phonologically very rare in the world’s languages and 2) deletion of a segment in onset position does not result in lengthening; cf. Hayes (1989:253ff.). The normal outcome of the loss of an intervocalic laryngeal is seen in Sanskrit, where it simply disappeared without affecting mora length in phonemic terms.

As far as I know, all the previous attempts to explain the final long vowel of gen. pl. and abl. sg. endings in Germanic and Lithuanian by contraction of **-VHV-* implicitly assumed that intervocalic laryngeals disappeared before the final syllable reduction occurred. But there seems to be no affirmative evidence other than the preconception that PIE laryngeals disappeared at a very early stage of Germanic and Lithuanian. If we take a different stance, a surprisingly straightforward account, which dispenses with positing typologically rare trimoric long vowels, is obtained. It will be argued that intervocalic laryngeals still remained when final mora reduction in Germanic and Leskien's Law in Lithuanian operated. The same situation is encountered with in the history of Indo-Iranian. Following this view, the abl. sg. ending is historically derived in the following manner: abl. sg. **-oHat* > **-oHt* > **-ō* in Germanic and abl. sg. **-oHat* > **-aHat* (without acute marking) > **-oHot* > **-oHt* (Leskien's Law) > **-ō* (compensatory lengthening by the loss of *H* in coda position) in Lithuanian. This view is surprisingly simple, and, if correct, would be preferable from typological and theoretical points of view.