

The Etymology of Latin *pirum* ‘pear’ and the development of *i* to *e* before **r* in Latin

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In this paper we derive Lat. *pirum* ‘pear’ from the PIE root **peys-* ‘to crush, crumble’ (attested also in Lat. *pīnsō* ‘crush, pound’ and *pistillum* ‘pestle’). The semantic motivation lies in the delicate, crumbling texture of pears, and it has an exact parallel in Slavic, where, e.g., Croatian *krūška* is derived from the same root as *kršiti* ‘crush’. The development of PIE **pisom* > Lat. *pirum* is regular, since the development of **i* to **e* before **r* was limited to the word-medial position (and the vowel *e* in *serō* ‘sow’ is analogical to the regular reflex found in compound verbs such as *re-serō* ‘to replant’, *con-serō* ‘to strew thickly’, etc.). Moreover, Gr. *ápion* ‘pear’ can then be easily derived from **ha-pihon* < **sm-pisom*, from the same PIE root **peys-*.

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Latin *pirum* ‘pear’ is attested since Plautus, while the first attestations of *pirus* ‘pear tree’ are only slightly later (the word occurs in Cato’s *De Agri Cultura*). The etymology of these words is controversial. Most handbooks maintain that *pirum* is related to Gr. *ápion* ‘pear’, but the exact nature of that relationship is uncertain (WH II: 309f., EM 510). Michiel De Vaan (2008: 467) says that *pirum* is a loanword from some Mediterranean language, and Beekes (2010: 116) thinks the same of Gr. *ápion*, while rejecting the connection with Burushaski *phešo* ‘pear’, which had been suggested in older literature. Although it is in principle possible that both *pirum* and *ápion* were independently borrowed from some unknown substrate¹, it is clearly preferable if a plausible Indo-European etymology for both words can be found. Indeed, Dieter

¹ The initial *a-* in Greek *ápion* is reminiscent of similar initial vowels that were detected in the pre-Indo-European language (or a group of related languages) spoken in Europe, sometimes referred to as “Language of the Bird Names” (Garnier 2014, Matasović 2020), e. g. in the alternation between **ams-Vl-* in OHG *amsala* ‘blackbird’ and **mesVl-* in Lat. *merula* ‘id.’. However, there are no reasons why a word for ‘pear’ should be a loanword in Greek and Latin: pear is not an exotic fruit and it is not limited to the Mediterranean regions. Pears have been cultivated for thousands of years in many regions with temperate climate across Eurasia (Prance and Nesbitt, eds. 2005: 86). The similarity between Lat. *pirum* and Hebrew *p’ri* ‘fruit’ is surely accidental.

Steinbauer (1989: 69) suggested that we reconstruct a PIE noun **h₂pisō-*, from which both *pirum* and *ápion* would be derivable, but this is clearly *ad hoc* in the absence of an otherwise attested PIE root and the semantic motivation for the derivation of the words for ‘pear’ from exactly that root. Therefore, in the rest of this article, we will (1) show that both *pirum* and *ápion* are indeed derivable from a reliably attested PIE root; (2) provide the semantic motivation for this derivation, with parallels of similar semantic development in other IE languages, and (3) show that the new etymology allows us to correct a phonological rule for a special development of **i* in Latin that had not been adequately formulated.

We claim that Lat. *pirum* is derivable from the PIE root **peys-* ‘crush, pound’. The reflexes of that root are attested in Lat. *pīnsō* ‘pound, crush’, *pīla* ‘mortar’ (< **pistla*), *pistillum* ‘pestle’, *pistor* ‘miller’, *pistrinum* ‘a place where corn is pounded’, etc. In other IE languages we find the reflexes of PIE **peys-* in Skt. *pinásti* ‘crush, grind’, Gr. *ptíssō* ‘winnow (grain), bray’,² *pīlos* ‘felt’ (< **pis-lo-*), OCS *pǔšeno* ‘millet’ (< **pis-eno-*), Croat. *pšēnica* ‘wheat’, Lith. *pīsti* ‘to mate’, etc. (cf. IEW 796, LIV s.v. **peys-*).

The semantic motivation for the development of **pisom* ‘that which is crushed’ > Lat. *pirum* ‘pear’ lies in the delicate, crumbling texture of pears, which (unlike, e.g., apples) are easily crushable. The semantic development we propose here (‘crushable (fruit)’ > ‘pear’) has an exact parallel in Slavic, where, e.g., Croatian *krūška* (Sln. *hrūška* with secondary *h-*) is derived from the same root as *kršiti* ‘crush’, Russ. *krušít* ‘id.’ < PIE **krows-* (Gr. *krouō* ‘stamp, strike’, Lith. *kraušyti* ‘to stamp (off)’, cf. Beekes 2010: 785-6, ERHJ 514, Snoj 2003: 213).³ One may also compare the similar development of Russ. *grúša* ‘pear’, Sln. dial. *grūška*, Cz. *hruška* and Pol. *grusza* from⁴ PSl. **gruxati* ‘beat, pound’ (Croat. *grúhati*, Russ. *grúxat*, Cz. *hrouchati*, ERHJ 306), ultimately from the similar root **grews-*, reflected in Eng. *crush*, Goth. *kriustan* ‘to gnash’, Old Swedish *krýsta* ‘id.’ (IEW 405, ESSJa VII: 156).⁵ It is quite probable that **krews-/krows-* and **grews-/grows-* are variants of the same PIE root, but the alternation between **k-* and **g-* is unexplained.

Gr. *ápion* ‘pear’ can hardly be used as evidence that the PIE root, from which it (and Lat. *pirum*) are derived, should be reconstructed as **h₂peys-*, since there is no word-initial *a-* in Gr. *ptíssō* ‘winnow (grain), bray’ and the other derivatives of PIE **peys-* ‘crush, pound’ in Greek (e. g. *pīléō* ‘to make felt’ < **pis-le-*). Rather, the Greek word for ‘pear’ can easily be derived from **ha-pihon* < **sm-pisom* (by Grassmann’s dissimilation

² The derivation of Gr. *ptíssō* to this PIE root (as suggested by LIV) is somewhat problematic because of the initial cluster *pt-*, which usually points to PIE **tp-*. However, Gr. *ápistos* ‘unground’ and *pīléō* ‘to make felt’ do not have that cluster, and they are also presumably from PIE **peys-* ‘to crush’.

³ Note that there are other parallels to naming a fruit by the texture of its flesh, cf., e.g., Lat. *pōmum grānātum* (lit. ‘seedy fruit’) > Eng. *pomegranate*.

⁴ Pace Vasmer (III: 314) there are hardly any reasons to believe that these Slavic words have any connection with Kurdish *korēshi* ‘pear’.

⁵ Latv. dial. *grauše* ‘pear’ is from the same root. The words for ‘pear’ in the other Baltic languages (Lith. *kr(i)áušė*, OPr. *crausy* ‘pear tree’), on the other hand, are related to Croat. *krūška*.

rule). The prefix **sm-* 'together' (from the zero-grade of PIE **sem-* 'one, together') is well attested in Greek, e.g. in *haplóos* 'single, simple' < **sm-plowo-* (cf. Lat. *simplex* 'simple'), *hápakas* 'once' < **sm-ph₂g-* (from the root of *pégnyimi* 'fix, make firm'), etc. The original meaning of Gr. *ápion* is thus 'that which is crushed together, the crushed (fruit)'. Note that we do not claim that both Gr. *ápion* and Lat. *pirum* come from the PIE word for 'pear' – in PIE there are hardly any reconstructable words for fruits; rather we claim that both words were derived from the same PIE verbal root, and that the semantic motivation of this derivation is similar in both languages.

However, a formal issue must be addressed before our etymology can be accepted. De Vaan (2008: 467) claims that Lat. *pirum* cannot be from **pisom*, since we would expect **i* to be lowered to **e* before **s* which underwent rhotacism in open syllables, as in Lat. *serō* 'sow' (attested since Plautus, like most of its derivatives) from the reduplicated present **sisō* < PIE **sish₁oh₂* (from the root of *sēmen* 'seed').⁶ Now, the problem with this rule is that the evidence for its operation in the *initial* syllable is virtually limited to this example.⁷ Moreover, the rule is contradicted by a number of Latin forms: firstly, the development of *vir* 'man' < **wiros* (< PIE **wiHros*, cf. Lit. *výras*, Skt. *vīrás*), which was not changed to **ver*; and secondly, the development of the prefix *dis-* in positions where *-s-* underwent rhotacism contradicts the rule, e.g. in *dirimō* 'pull apart' < **dis-emō* (we would have expected **derimō*). Now Michael Weiss (2010: 142), who holds that there was a general rule of lowering of **i* > *e* / *_**r in open syllables both word-initially and word-medially, claims that it operated after the loss of the final vowel in **wiros* > **wirs* > *vir*, so that **i* was not in the open syllable at the time when the rule operated. However, *i* was indeed in the open syllable in all case forms of *vir* except in the Nominative singular, so all of those forms would have to be analogical. Likewise, Weiss (*ibid.*) is aware that *dir-imō* 'pull apart' is unexpected, so he has to claim that its vocalism is secondary, analogical after the prefix *dis-* (e.g. in *dissimilis* 'dissimilar'). However, all of these complicated analogies do not have to be assumed if one simply accepts, as we do, that the change of **i* to *e* before **r* occurred only in medial open syllables. Moreover, Latin *vireō* 'to be green' and several of its derivatives (e.g. *viridāre* 'to be green', *viridulus* 'young and tender', etc.), which are not discussed by Weiss, clearly contradict his formulation of the rule (we would expect **vereō*, **veridāre* and **veridulus*). Although the etymology of Lat. *vireō* is disputed (De Vaan 2008: 682), it is quite likely that *-r-* in this verb also developed by rhotacism, since an etymological connection with OIc. *visir* 'sprout', OHG *wīsa* 'meadow' (Germ. *Wiese*), Lith. *veīsti* 'to breed, rear' seems probable (all of these words would be derivable from PIE **weys-*). This also shows that the operation of "lowering rule" in the first syllable cannot be limited just to the position before *r* < **s* (by rhotacism; this would account

⁶ The same objection is raised by Sihler (1995: 37). It is clear that the change of **i* to **e* before **r* did not occur in closed initial syllables because of Lat. *virga* 'sprout, twig' < **wizga* (cf. ON *wisk* 'wisp, cluster').

⁷ In medial syllables, the change of **i* to *e* in open syllables before **r* (which is due to rhotacism) is not problematic, cf. Lat. *cinis* 'ashes', Gen. sg. *cineris* < **kinises* (Leumann 1977: 162).

for *vir* ‘man’, where *r* is original), as suggested by Sihler (1995: 37), since there is no lowering of *i* to *e* in the root of *vireō* (and its derivatives).

There are three more words which need to be discussed in this context: namely, we also find the sequence *CirV-* (rather than **CerV-*) in *hirundō* ‘swallow’, *hirūdō* ‘leech’, and *quirīs* ‘name for Rome’s citizens in their peacetime functions’ (usually only in the pl. *quirītes*),⁸ but all of these words are etymologically obscure (de Vaan 2008: 286, 509f.). However, if *hirūdō* ‘leech’ is related to Mir. *giritán* ‘periwinkle, sea snail’,⁹ as suggested by David Stifter (to appear and p.c.), this could perhaps be used as an argument against the change of **i* to **e* before **r* in open initial syllables in Latin. Note that this word could have been borrowed from some unknown substratum, and then the date of borrowing into Latin is crucial: if it occurred early enough (say, in the Italo-Celtic period), then it is a counter-example to it and shows that *i* is the regular reflex of **i* before **r* in the initial open syllable. Lat. *hirundō* ‘swallow’, on the other hand, is too similar to Gr. *khelidōn* ‘id.’ for this to be accidental (Beekes 2010: 1622-3). Just like many other bird names (Matasović 2020) both words could have been borrowed from some substratum, but the vocalism of the initial syllable and the nature of the consonant following it cannot be ascertained. Again, if the borrowing was early, this shows that **i* did not change to *e* before **r* in initial open syllables in Latin. The same can be said of *quirīs* (and its derivatives), which is suspect of being a loanword from Sabellic (EM 559). It is, we believe, hardly credible that all three words (*hirūdō*, *hirundō* and *quirīs*) were borrowed after the operation of the putative “lowering rule” in the initial open syllables.

Let us now return to *serō* ‘sow’, which seems to show the operation of the “lowering rule” in the first open syllable. We believe that its vocalism can be explained as secondary: it is based on the analogy with prefixed verbs in which it is regular, e.g. *re-serō* ‘to replant’, *con-serō* ‘to strew thickly’, *in-sero* ‘to graft on’, *ob-serō* ‘to sow, plant’, etc. The analogical leveling was made easier by the fact that *-er-* never changes to *-ir-* in open medial syllables, unlike *-e-* before other consonants, hence we have *ferō* ‘carry’ vs. *re-ferō* ‘relate’, unlike, e.g. *emō* ‘buy’ vs. *red-imō* ‘buy back’; for that reason the regular reflexes **sirō*: **re-serō* were leveled to the attested *serō*: *re-serō*.¹⁰

Therefore, our two findings actually support each other: Lat. *pirum* can be regularly derived from PIE **pisom* ‘crushed/crushable (fruit)’ and it is not contradicted by the development **i* > *e* / *r* since that development was limited to medial (open) syllables.

⁸ Cf. also the theonym *Quirīnus* and the place-name *Quirīnālis* (one of the hills of Rome), which are certainly from the same root.

⁹ Lat. *hirūdō* and Mir. *giritán* might both be derivable from a pre-form **ghiruzdV-* ‘a sleezy, sticky, small water animal’, which does not appear Indo-European.

¹⁰ Meiser (1998: 43) dismisses the problem of the change of **i* to *e* in the initial syllable of *serō* by positing the *e*-vocalism in the originally reduplicated syllable (i.e. he reconstructs **se-sh₁-oh₂* > Lat. *serō*). This is a possibility to be reckoned with, but it is not very likely, in our opinion, since reduplicated presents normally had the vowel **i* (rather than **e*) in the initial syllable of reduplicated present stems, both in PIE and in Latin, cf. Lat. *sistō* ‘put’ < **s(t)i-sth₂-*, *gignō* ‘beget’ < **g’i-g’nh₁-*, *bibō* ‘drink’ < **pi-ph₃-* (Skt. *pībati*), etc.

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Etimologija latinske riječi *pirum* 'kruška' i prijelaz *i* u *e* ispred **r* u latinskom

Sažetak

U ovom se radu lat. *pirum* 'kruška' izvodi iz ie. korijena **peys-* 'gnječiti' (iz istoga su korijena i lat. *pīnsō* 'tući' i *pistillum* 'tučak'); značenjske usporednice postoje u slavenskom, gdje je imenica koja znači 'kruška' (npr. hrv. *krùška*) izvedena iz korijena glagola *kršiti* odnosno *grùhati* (usp. rus. *grúša* 'kruška'). Lat. *pirum* tako je pravilno postalo od ie. **pisom* 'gnjecavo, krhko (voće)'; u grčkom je srodno *ápion* 'kruška' < ie. **sm-pisom*, što je izvedno prefiksom **sm-* 'zajedno, s-'. U članku se također pokazuje da je pravilo kojim ie. **i* prelazi u **e* ispred **r* u otvorenu slogu (kao u gen. jd. *cineris* 'pepela' < **kinis-es*) ograničeno na sredinu riječi, dok se u prvom slogu ne provodi (inače bismo od ie. **pisom* imali lat. **perum* umjesto *pirum*).

Ključne riječi: latinska etimologija, kruška, latinski glasovni zakoni, indoeuropski prajezik