

The change of *e > i in initial syllables in Latin

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A remarkable number of Latin words show *e > i in initial syllables, where such a change would not otherwise be expected. In the handbooks these are treated as the result of at least three independent changes (for examples see table below):

1. raising due to lack of stress
2. raising in hiatus before *ē
3. sporadic *e > i when the following syllable contains ĭ or ī

However, this latter rule has many exceptions, e.g. *enim* ‘for’, *geminus* ‘twin’, *here* ‘yesterday’ < **heri*, *medius* ‘middle’, and there are suspicious similarities among the rules: all the examples involve *e > i when the following syllable contains ĭ, ī or *ey > ē. Fries (2019) has attempted to combine these rules into just two exceptionless ones:

1. e > i when the following syllable contains ē
2. a syllabic nasal becomes iN in the sequence *sNV-

Unfortunately, Fries’s rules rest on unacceptable assumptions (*similis* is from **semali*- not **smVlo*-; *nimius* is from **nimīos*, not **nemēos*; *cinis* ‘ash’ < **kenis* explained implausibly as a loanword).

Closer attention to phonetic/phonological context can help to make the original rules less arbitrary; it then becomes clear that some forms which have been assigned to rule 3 can belong to rules 1 or 2, allowing rule 3 to be exceptionless. Questions remain about rule 3: *cinis* ‘ash’ < **kenis* is the only instance of raising after a velar, and it must have taken place before weakening of unstressed vowels to i produced forms like *geminus* ‘twin’, *genitor* ‘parent’. Conversely, raising in *similis* < **semalis* can only have taken place after vowel weakening; but it could be explained by analogy with compound forms like *dissimilis*, in which i is regular by weakening.

1) Unstressed raising in function words (after a coronal or before *ē in the following syllable?)	2) Raising in hiatus before *ē in the following syllable ¹	3) Raising between a coronal or velar and a nasal before *i/y in the following syllable
<i>nisi</i> < * <i>nesē</i> ‘if not’	<i>abiegniīs</i> < * <i>abiegneēs</i> ‘of fir wood’	<i>cinis</i> ‘ash’ < * <i>kenis</i>
<i>sibi</i> < * <i>sebē</i> ‘to him-, herself’	<i>dīīs</i> < * <i>deēs</i> ‘to gods’	<i>nimis</i> < * <i>nemis</i> ‘too much’
<i>tibi</i> < * <i>tebē</i> ‘to you’	<i>īīs</i> < * <i>eēs</i> ‘to them’	<i>nimius</i> < * <i>nemīos</i> ‘too much’
<i>sine</i> < * <i>seni</i> ‘without’ (or under rule 3)	<i>mihi</i> < * <i>meē</i> < * <i>mehē</i> ‘to me’	<i>simītū</i> < * <i>semeytū</i> ‘together’
	<i>mīīs</i> < * <i>meēs</i> ‘mine’	<i>sine</i> < * <i>seni</i> ‘without’
	<i>nihil</i> < * <i>neēl</i> < * <i>nehēl</i> ‘nothing’	<i>sinister</i> < * <i>senisteros</i> ‘left’

¹ Note that from at least the early second century BC intervocalic h was lost and remained in spelling only as a marker of hiatus.

References

Fries, Simon (2019). Kleines Lautgesetz, große Wirkung. Die Formen *nisi*, *nimis*, *nihil*, *mihi*, *tibi*, *sibi*, *iīs* und ihre Gemeinsamkeiten. *Indogermanische Forschungen* 124, 61-114

Keywords

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