

THE LATIN *BONUS – MELIOR – OPTIMUS**

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ABSTRACT

The etymology of the adj. *melior* given in etymological dictionaries is unsatisfactory not only from the formal point of view and for the lack of unambiguous equivalents, but mainly because it does not address the non-standard fact of suppletion at the level comparative vs. superlative (*optimus*). The superlative is regularly derived from the comparative. The article therefore considers the existence of types of qualities that can be expressed as being of higher degree on the scale (comparative), but not of the maximum (superlative); based on this assumption and the formal analysis alternative etymologies of the adj. *melior* are given.

Keywords: Latin; comparison; suppletion

Theoretical background

In most Indo-European languages there exists certain group of basic adjectives that – according to handbooks – “are compared irregularly”. There are essentially two types of irregularity. The first is an irregularity in principle of the same type as *sum – es – est ...*, i.e. the retention of the original inherited forms with analogical leveling not having taken place within the paradigm (in the case of comparison, within the paradigm of positive – comparative – superlative). An example of such irregularity in the category of comparison in Latin is *magnus – maior – maximus*: all the forms are derived from the root **meg^h₂*, that is, neither the comparative nor the superlative are derived from the positive (i.e. ***magnior*, ***magnissimus*),¹ in contrast with e.g. *doctus – doctior – doctissimus*. The other type of irregularity is the suppletive comparison² (i.e. in principle of the same type

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¹ By using two asterisks ** here and below I denote the forms that should have developed according to the formulated and generally accepted sound laws, but that actually do not exist.

² Suppletion is usually characterized as “maximum irregularity”, cf. for example the definition by Melčuk (2000: 511): “suppletion is a relation between signs X and Y such that the semantic difference [...] between X and Y is maximally regular [...], while the formal (i.e. phonological) difference [...] between them is maximally irregular”. After all, even ancient grammarians describe suppletive forms

as *sum – fui*), for instance the English *good – better*, Czech *dobrý – lepší*, Latin *bonus – melior – optimus*.³

The derivation by the comparative and the superlative suffix is already Proto-Indo-European, even though in the earliest period we cannot speak about the grammatical category of comparison, but about a primary derivation by the suffixes denoting higher degree of intensity of a quality, or gradation.⁴ The existence of suppletion in this case thus testifies to the fact that the root that the original adjective was derived from in the positive, expresses a quality that for some reason “defied” intensification or gradation and, consequently, comparison. During the further development there occurred a semantic shift in the adjective, which brought about the need to compare it; this, however, was in the time when the derivation by the inherited comparative and superlative suffix was no longer productive. This is why the semantically missing form was substituted by the forms of an (inherently “intensifiable”, comparable) synonym.⁵ At the same time, the condition for retention of suppletion is that the adjectives in question must be extremely frequented ones, to that extent that the analogical leveling would not occur again in the successive period, yielding the analogical forms of the type ***bonior*, ***bonissimus*.

Latin grammar books regard comparison as a general category of adjectives, or at least they do not refer to it as a category exclusive for only a certain type of adjectives.⁶ In reality, only a minority of adjectives are compared.⁷ The possibility, or impossibility of comparison depends on whether the adjective is scalar, i.e. an adjective that denotes a quality that can exist on a scale, can vary in grade (e.g. *small*, *broad*, etc., in contrast

simply as *inaequalia* or *anomala*, which are the terms used for any formal irregularity; cf. for example Prisc. *gramm.* II 95, 9–11: *exceptis anomalis, id est inaequalibus, quae sunt “bonus optimus”, “malus pessimus”, “magnus maximus”, “parvus minimus”, “multus plurimus”.*

³ However, modern theories on suppletion regard both mentioned types as examples of suppletion. Cf. Corbett (2007: 13), who distinguishes two types of suppletion from the diachronic point of view: 1) combinatory suppletion, formed by “incursion”, i.e. “invading” the paradigm from the outside (= *bonus – melior – optimus*), and 2) dissimilatory suppletion, caused by sound change, i.e. the originally uniform paradigm breaks down due to inner changes (= *magnus – maior – maximus*). (Corbett takes the terms “combinatory” and “dissimilatory suppletion” from F. Plank.)

⁴ Cf. Sihler (1995: 356): the suffix **-yos-* was “an intensive marker signifying ‘very, rather; to a marked degree’”, the suffix **(t)ero-* then “particularizing and by implication antonymic: ‘the hot one (and not the cold one)’; ‘our (own)’”.

⁵ The author of this article claims that the same explanation holds true for the adjectives with periphrastic comparison: I believe that the reason for the fact that regular forms of comparatives and superlatives did not develop cannot consist in a certain “phonetic unsuitability”, but in the original non-scalar character of given adjectives and their obtaining scalar character only when derivation ceased to be productive. I have noted this briefly earlier (Pultrová 2011: 31, 35, 45). The issue is, however, contentious, and I intend to elaborate it further elsewhere; therefore, I leave only this footnote in the present article.

⁶ For example Menge, Burkhard, Schauer (2000: 44): “Außerdem sind die Adjektive i.d.R. komparativonfähig” and further on the same page: “Einige Partizipien des Perfekts (PPP), seltener des Präsens (PPA), sind weitgehend zu Adjektiven geworden, können u. U. regelmäßig gesteigert werden [...] und ein Adverb bilden” – the comparison is understood here as a characteristic feature of adjectives. Cf. also Hofmann, Szantyr (1965: 151): “Vom Subst. ist das Adj. durch die streng durchgeführte Motions[...] und Steigerungsfähigkeit sowie durch die Möglichkeit der Bildung eines Adverbs deutlich geschieden.” Typically, however, grammar books go straight *in medias res*, i.e. to the way of formation; thus e.g. Oniga (2014: 88): “Adjectives decline in three possible degrees.” Touratier (2013: 75) formulates more adequately, employing potential modality: “Die Adjektive können mit besonderen Morphemen verbunden werden, die den Grad einer durch das Adjektiv ausgedrückten Eigenschaft anzeigen.”

⁷ For example Cvrček (2010: 205) claims, on the basis of corpus data, that only 6% (!) of Czech adjectives are compared.

to non-scalar adjectives, e.g. *red* or *Latin*). At the same time it is true that an originally non-scalar adjective can take, and often does, also scalar meanings, e.g. *zlatý* (“gold”) in Czech frequently means “extremely kind”, “sweet”, and having this meaning, it can exist in the comparative *zlatější* (“goldier”) and superlative *nejzlatější* (“goldest”). The text could be *latinštější* (“Latiner”), denoting the quality of being “close to native/standard, classical Latin”; “greener” will be perceived nowadays as “more focused on ecological issues”; the sound of an instrument can be “more metallic”; etc.

The quality of “good” (expressed by the adj. *bonus*) can undoubtedly exist on a scale. Nevertheless, Indo-European languages very often do not regularly compare adjectives with this meaning. Nor they have a uniform expression for this quality,⁸ which suggests that the given meaning of the relevant adjectives stabilized only in the post-Indo-European period, having developed from other (semantically related) adjectives.

Etymology of *bonus*, *melior* and *optimus*

The etymology of the Latin adj. *bonus* is not quite unambiguous. It is usually associated in particular with the Greek δύναμαι, “to be able to”, and the Gothic *taujan*, “to make”, both being derived from the root to which Pokorny (1959: 218: **deu-*, *du-*) ascribes the meaning of “(religiös) verehren, gewähren”, LIV (123: **dewh*₂) then “to combine”. However, the attested inscribed form *duenos* can be formally derived from this root only with difficulty.⁹ Besides this etymology de Vaan (2008: s. v. *bonus*) suggests also the possibility of the relation to the root **deh*₃*w-*, “to give” (cf. Latin *duim*).¹⁰ In any case, the prevailing – and probably semantically most acceptable – opinion (= LIV), namely that it is an original verbal adjective from the root with the meaning “to combine”, is in accord with the theoretical hypothesis that it was originally non-comparable.

Of the remaining two forms, *melior* and *optimus*, it is the superlative that is less etymologically problematic, even though there is by no means any certainty either. De Vaan (2008: s. v. *ob*) summarises the up-to-now debate on the etymology of the adj. *optimus*¹¹ and presents two leading – rivalling – interpretations. The first¹² derives the form *optimus* from the adverb/preposition *ob* (< **h*₁*opi*) “towards” (according to de Vaan, with the presumed meaning “foremost”). The other interpretation¹³ assumes the derivation from the subst. *ops* in the sense “wealth”, “power”, i.e. *optimus* as “the one endowed with the supreme power”. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Jupiter’s epithet *Optimus Maximus* is a translation of the Greek stock epithet used to address the supreme god

⁸ Cf. for example Greek ἀγαθός, Sanskrit *bhadrá-*, Latin *bonus*, Gothic *goþs*, Old Church Slavonic добръ, etc.

⁹ **duh*₂-*nós* > ***dūnos*, or ***dwanos*; **du-nós* (according to Pokorny) > ***dunos*.

¹⁰ The etymology is again formally problematic; there would have had to take place a non-standard elimination of the laryngeal followed by anaptyxis: **dh*₃*w-nós* > **dw-nós* > *duenos*.

¹¹ Cf. also Dieu (2011: 374–379).

¹² Cf. Leumann (1977: 316–318); Sihler (1995: 440); this etymology is favoured also by de Vaan (2008: s. v. *ob*).

¹³ For example Walde, Hofmann (1938–1956, s. v. *optimus*); Ernout, Meillet (1932: s. v. *ops*); with uncertainty Pokorny (1959: 780).

Zeus: κύδιστε μέγιστε.¹⁴ Both etymologies are formally acceptable and in accord with the reconstructed function of the superlative suffix **-tmh₂o-*, which makes a pair with the comparative suffix **-tero-* and which used to derive the superlative adjectives from adverbs¹⁵ or substantives.

The most problematic appears to be the etymology of the middle form, *melior*. De Vaan (2008: s. v. *melior*) gives a construction **mel-ios-* and the Greek μάλα, μάλλον and μάλιστα as equivalents,¹⁶ but at the same time he admits that the etymology is weak (formally and semantically), and provides a possible connection with the Greek μέλω, “be anxious, care for”, and the Hit. *māl-*, “mind” < **mol-*. Neither the latter etymology, however, resolves the formal complications: the PIE comparatives with the suffix **-iēs-* have proterodynamic paradigm (i.e. the stress is on the root in the strong cases, on the suffix in weak ones).¹⁷ As follows from the analysis carried out in the monograph Pultrová (2011) on a number of Latin word-formative types, the results of which cannot be discussed again in detail within the scope of this article, during the process of analogical leveling in Latin it is the forms of strong cases that level to the weak ones, not vice versa. This is to say that the words with an originally proterodynamic paradigm finally have the root in Latin paradigm that corresponds to the zero grade (e.g. nom. **mér-tis*, gen. **mṛ-téis* > **mers*, *mortis* > *mors*, *mortis*). Other Latin inherited (i.e. non-analogical) comparatives fully correspond to that: *minor* (albeit with a problematic etymology; in any event, its initial syllable *mi-* cannot be but in the zero grade), *maior* < **m_(e)g²-*; another comp. *peior* is itself ambiguous, the first syllable can formally issue from both the full and the zero grade. In the case of the adj. *melior*, however, we encounter a problem, because the zero grade of its root, the way it is commonly reconstructed (**mḷ-*), should yield ***mol-* in Latin; this form is actually attested in the adj. *multus* (< *moltos* < **mḷ-tós*), classed with the same base in etymological dictionaries. Even if we were – theoretically – considering the presence of a laryngeal in the root, we would not, according to the generally acknowledged Latin sound laws, arrive at the form *mel-*: the zero grade of the root **meHl-*, i.e. **mHl-*, should yield ***mal-* in Latin; the root in the form **melH-*, i.e. **mlH-* in the zero grade, would before the given suffix, that is one beginning in *-j-*, probably yield **mol-* again (**mlā-* before an occlusive). In brief, the vowel *e* can develop in Latin in the given sound environment in zero-grade syllable only with difficulty; nor can we presume an analogical leveling (what to, considering that the form is a suppletive one both to the form of the positive and the superlative?). At the same time, it is not possible *ad hoc* to presume that the ablaut relations in the adj. *melior* would have been different than in other representatives of the same word-formative type, even though such an interpretation in this concrete case would be, in the first plan, phonetically befitting. It is therefore necessary to search for other possible explanations.

¹⁴ From κύδος in the original meaning of “miraculous power” (cf. Chantraine 1968: s. v. κύδος; Beekes 2010: s. v. κύδος), not that of “glory”; see Latte (1960: 151), cf. also Dieu (2011: 375).

¹⁵ There are numerous parallels in Latin, e.g. *inter(ior)* – *intimus*, *ulter(ior)* – *ultimus*, *poster(ior)* – *postumus* etc.

¹⁶ Thus also Pokorny (1959: 720; he ascribes the meaning of “strong, big” to the root), Walde, Hofmann (1938–1956: s. v. *melior*), and Ernout, Meillet (1932: s. v. *melior* [with the reference to the adj. *multus*]).

¹⁷ Cf. Rix (1992: 167); Pultrová (2011: 147 [on *ō* in place of PIE **é* in Latin suffixes]).

Possible alternative solutions of the etymology of *melior*

When searching for the etymology, it is also, or rather mainly, the semantics that should be considered. The mere fact that we deal with an adjective that supplanted the paradigm of another adjective with the meaning of “good” will not provide us with any clear lead, since, as can be seen in other Indo-European languages, semantic shifts could be diverse in this case (the comparative could have originally meant “stronger”, “more honest”, “prettier”, etc.). The key question here is not the (quite trivial) fact of suppletion on the level positive vs. comparative, but – not at all trivial – suppletion also at the level of comparative vs. superlative (in contrast, e.g. to English *better* – *best* or Czech *lepší* – *nejlepší*). The semantics of the root of the adj. *melior* should thus be of such nature to prevent the formation of regular superlative derived from the form of the comparative (i.e. ***mellimus* or ***melissimus*). The key question now therefore is: **What types of qualities can be expressed as being of the higher degree on the scale (comparative), but not of the maximum one (superlative)?**

An example of this type can be the Greek ἀμείων (vs. the superlative ἀριστος) in the etymological interpretation offered in Pokorny (1959: 711): he claims it is an adjective derived by a privative suffix from *μείων, i.e. “non-smaller”. The superlative ***“the most non-small/non-smaller”* would then be semantically meaningless. This example, however, is rather extreme (disregarding the fact that this etymology is not universally accepted – for the summary of the individual views see Dieu 2011: 47–54). Another feature is more common: One characteristic of gradable adjectives – according to Hock (1999: 209–210) it is actually the main characteristic, of more consequence than the fact itself of being able to be expressed on the scale – is that the “quantity” of the quality expressed by the positive is not absolute, but that the positive of an adjective denotes certain comparison of the quality to the norm of the given class (Hock cites the famous Sapir’s example “A small elephant is a large animal”). In my opinion, however, this cannot be considered to be the feature of all gradable adjectives. There are also such adjectives that, on the contrary, denote the absolute measure of a quality, independent of the meaning of the substantive they modify, e.g. *empty* or *honest*. Such adjectives denote already in the positive directly the full degree of a quality. To emphasise the maximum degree we can use the expressions like *completely empty* or *absolutely honest*. The superlatives *the emptiest* or *the most honest*, on the other hand, refer not to the reality of the maximum measure of “emptiness” or “honesty”, but to the one of the “not completely empty” or “not absolutely honest” most closely approaching it. The regularly formed superlatives thus have only a limited use. The comparatives *emptier* or *more honest* denote a lesser degree of a quality than the positives *empty* and *honest*. The logical (not the grammatical) scale is in fact more likely thought of as follows: “little honest – (slightly) more honest – absolutely honest”, within which the grammatical superlative *the most honest* has no place. The quality denoted by the root from which the comparative *melior* is derived must have most probably been of this type. The root **mel-* understood as denoting the meaning “strong, big” does not support such an interpretation; nor does the existence of the Greek superlative μάλιστα.

Let us return to the issue of the form now. Let us proceed from the presumption that the Latin root should correspond to the zero grade. The vowel *-e-* obviously can, and

commonly does, occur in Latin even in the zero grade syllables, including in the morphemes ending in a stop (e.g. *decet* < **d_(e)k'-h₁jé-*, *sedeō* < **s_(e)d-h₁jé-*, *sessus* < **s_(e)d-tós* etc.).¹⁸ This, however, never happens in the position before *l*, as was described earlier. Therefore, let us consider the possibility that the *-l-* in *melior* was not etymological, but resulted from the Latin sound changes.

The consonant *l* alternates in Latin with two other consonants, namely with *r* in the instances of the so called liquid dissimilation (mainly in suffixes) and – under not completely clear conditions – with *d*, e.g. Archaic Latin *dacruma* > *lacrima*, *dingua* > *lingua* and others.¹⁹ So, let us look at the possibility of the development *meliōr-* < **m_(e)r-iés-* or **m_(e)d-iés-*.

Etymology with /r/

The dissimilation of *l-r* usually goes vice versa, i.e. if the suffix containing the consonant *l* is attached to the base that also contains *l*, the *l* in the suffix changes in *r*, e.g. *consul-aris*, *exempl-aris*, etc. × *nav-alis* and others. The etymological *l* thus changes into *r*. Nevertheless, there exist also sporadic examples of a reverse change: *caerulus* < **caelulus* < *caelum* or the Late Latin **pelegrinus* (hence the English *pilgrim*) < *peregrinus*, etc. In our case we are considering the possibility that *meliōr-* developed from **meriōr-*.

First, immediately apparent problem is the fact that the *r* in the suffix *-iōr-* is not etymological, either, but is a result of rhotacism. That means that if we were to consider the possible dissimilation *mer...r...* > *mel...r...*, it would have had to be chronologically younger than rhotacism.²⁰ A very serious counter-argument here could be the form *meliose*, i.e. “already” with an *l*, but still with an *s*, attested by Varro (*ling.* 7, 3, 27): --- *f<o>edesum foederum, plusima plurima, meliose meliorem, asenam arenam, ianitos ianitor*.²¹ However, the relevance of Varro’s evidence could be contested from two aspects. First, the *-r* in the subst. *ianitor* is etymological (suffix **-tér-/tor-*), i.e. the form *ianitos* never really existed and is only a Varro’s construction. This obviously casts slight doubt also at the attestation of the other given forms (albeit in the other instances²² rhotacism is undoubtedly a reality; the form *meliose* however could be only a construction,

¹⁸ These cases are sometimes referred to as “new full grade”, but it is actually nothing but the vocalization of the syllable in the zero grade so that the root syllable is maintained.

¹⁹ Cf. for example Mar. Victorin. *gramm.* VI 26, 1–5: *communionem enim habuit <l> littera <cum d> apud antiquos, ut dingnam et linguam et dacrimis <et> lacrimis et Kapitodium et Kapitolum et sella a sede <et> olere ab odore: <est> et communitio cum Graecis, nos lacrimae, illi δάκρυα, olere ὀδωδέναι, meditari μελετᾶν.* Cf. e.g. Meiser (1998: 100), Leumann (1977: 155–156).

²⁰ It is generally held that rhotacism took place in the fifth century BC, with reference to the records of yet unrhotalized forms in older Latin inscriptions. It must be said, however, that such records are rare. Safarewicz (1932: 15ff.) aptly pointed out that there are not many definite proofs: NVMASIOI on *Fibula Praenestina* need not necessarily correspond to the classical *Numerio*; ESED on the Forum Romanum Cippus need not be the classical *erit* and IOVESAT of the so called Duenos Inscription need not necessarily correspond to the classical *iūrat* (particularly with regard to the vertical line between IOVE and SAT, and – let us add – the syntactically rather problematic attachment of the ensuing DEIVOS), as is generally assumed. In Safarewicz’s time, there were no other records of unrhotalized forms. Later, however, quite unequivocal *Lapis Satricanus* with VALESIOSIO was found.

²¹ Cited according to ed. G. Goetz – Fr. Schoell, Leipzig: Teubner, 1910.

²² Possibly with the exception of *asena* – *arena*: the subst. *arena* has quite unclear etymology.

which in this form, that is with the sequence *-l-s-*, may not have ever really existed). Second, Varro's interpretation refers to the citation from *Carmen Saliorum* given in the previous paragraph (*ling.* 7, 3, 26), which is attested as follows: *dunus Ianusue uet pom melios eum recum*. The text is wholly unintelligible and the adjective in question is in the form *melios* – which says nothing about whether rhotacism had or had not taken place.

The second counter-argument is again a formal one: for the root ending in *r* practically the same holds true as for the root ending in *l* – the zero grade of the root should standardly vocalize in Latin into *or*, i.e. *m_r- > mor-*, even if in the case of *r* this vocalization is not so unambiguous as in the case of *l* (there are also the instances of *r > ur*, *r > ar*²³ and then secondary derivations *r > er* of the type *ager*).

Overall it can be said that even though there is no unequivocal counter-argument, the formal doubts are apparently too numerous for this interpretation to prevail over the absolutely straightforward derivation of Latin *mel-* < PIE **m(e)l-*. Nevertheless, if we approach the whole issue primarily from a semantic viewpoint, a candidate for the base of the comparative *melior* could be found: the adj. *merus*, “pure, core”, derived from the root **merH-* (hence also the Hit. *marri* “just so, gratuitously”, cf. de Vaan [2008: s. v. *merus*]). There is no comparative ***meriōr-* nor superlative ***merissimus* attested to the adj. *merus*. In addition, the vocalization of the zero-grade of the root ending in *-rH-* > *-er-* is attested.²⁴

An objection can surely be raised against the hypothesis that the *l* in *meliōr-* developed through dissimilation, namely that there exist comparative forms in *-riōr-* (e.g. *pūrior*). But what plays role here is the strength of analogy: the other forms of the paradigm positive – comparative – superlative prevent dissimilation. In the case of *meliōr-* there is no paradigm to have such an effect.

Etymology with /d/

The other consonant that has in Latin a close relation (*communio*, as writes Marius Victorinus – cf. above note 19) to *l*, is *d*. The derivation of *meliōr-* from **m_(e)diōr-* would have one advantage, namely absolutely uncomplicated explanation of the *e*-vocalism in the root, but at the same time one indisputable disadvantage, namely that it is generally held that the group *dj* in Latin assimilates to *jj* and consequently reduces to *j*.

A usual example of the change *dj > (j)j* in Latin grammar books is the comparative of the antonym of the discussed adjective, *peiōr-* < **pei-iōr-* < **ped-iōr-*, and then *Jovis* < *Diovis*.²⁵ It must be added, however, that these examples are the only (possibly with the exception of the extremely poorly documented *caia*, *caiare*), and ambiguous, ones. Firstly, there are also counter-examples, in the case of the name *Jov-* directly from its own family: *dies* and its derivations (including the extraparadigmatic *hodie*), *diu*. In addition, there is also one more instance of an inherited formation with the group *-diV-* in the original, that is non-assimilated form: *ordior*; moreover, the question is whether the cases should

²³ Cf. for example Meiser (1998: 63–64).

²⁴ E.g. *verbum* (< **w_rh₁-*, see de Vaan [2008: s. v. *verbum*]); however, the reconstruction **w_erd^h-om* is also well possible here) and probably also others, e.g. *terō*, and, after all, *merus* itself.

²⁵ Cf. for example Sihler (1995: 189), Meiser (1998: 120), Baldi (2002: 271), Weiss (2009: 159).

not be added as well of *medius*, *fidius*, *gradior* or *radius*, where the reconstruction of **d^h* is either accepted or deemed possible: the loss of aspiration should in all probability have preceded the assimilation. To put it briefly, in contrast to the groups *-giV-* and *-siV-*, which are usually treated together with the group *-diV-* in historical grammars, the assimilation of the last-named is not completely provable.

What is definitely worth mentioning is the fact that the preverb *ad-i-* does not assimilate, which points to the relative phonetic distance of the two sounds.

In addition, in the case of *peior* the etymology is not by far that clear. The derivation of an adjective with a similar meaning from the root **ped-*, “feet”, has no equivalents and is by no means semantically straightforward. What could be semantically more acceptable is the root **peth₁-*, “fall” (LIV 477). Beside this, Sihler (1995: 189, note 1) writes that an “alternative reconstruction **pes-yōs* is sometimes suggested”. He himself (ibid. and p. 368) rejects both the variants (< **pes-* and **pet-*), but does so based on the consideration I do not deem to be entirely correct: Sihler says that with regard to the form *optimus* the same superlative suffix, i.e. in his rendition **-tm̥mo-*, is to be presumed also in the adj. *pessimus*; neither the sequence **pes-t-* nor **pet-t-* would then in Latin yield the resulting *pess-* (in contrast to this, the development *-d-t- > -s-s-* is standard, cf. e.g. *sessum* < **s_(e)d-tó-* etc.). In my opinion, however, the argumentation cannot be based on the fact that antonyms need to be derived by the same suffix. What is important is that the superlative suffix **-tm̥h₂o-* is connected with the comparative suffix *-tero-* (cf. already earlier note 15), which would not hold true in the given case (*peior*), and next that by this suffix are also derived the superlatives from substantives and adverbs (the latter condition seems – regarded superficially – to hold, if we take the root with the meaning of “feet” as a base; then, however, the resulting superlative would apparently have to have the meaning “the most feet-like” or “the most feety” – cf. Sanskrit *vīratama-*, “the most manly”). It is therefore much more probable that the suffix in the adj. *pessimus* is **(i)sHmo-*, and that all the three options, i.e. **ped-s-*, **pes-s-* and **pet-s-*, are formally absolutely equal: they would all yield *pess-* in Latin.

So, we do not find a clear argument for claiming that the sound law *-dj- > -(j)j-* works in Latin. Therefore, from the formal point of view, the possibility that *meliōr-* derives from **m_(e)diōr-* cannot be completely excluded. Let us then take a look again at whether there is a root **med-*, from which the meaning of “better” could be derived and which would comply with our stipulation that the base adjective from the given root should express the absolute degree of a quality. From the root *med-*, “to measure” (Pokorny 1959: 705; LIV 423) no primary adjective in the positive is formed in Latin; however, the semantics of this root very well corresponds with what we are looking for: a positive denoting the absolute degree “appropriate, right” (cf. also Umb. *meřs*, “right, what is right”),²⁶ a comparative (expressing a lesser degree of the quality than positive) “more appropriate, righter”. The semantic shift towards “better” would then be only very subtle.

²⁶ Cf. Untermann (2000: 461).

Conclusion

To draw any unanimous conclusions about the etymology of the given adjectival form is practically impossible, as is usually the case with the words with no clear equivalents at least in one other Indo-European language. The current etymology of the adj. *melior* is problematic both from the formal and the semantic view. The newly suggested options, i.e. the derivation from the root **merH-* or **med-*, are at first sight formally less straightforward, but, on the other hand, they solve the conflict the formerly suggested etymology has with the rule which in Latin is really close to be called “a law”, i.e. **l > ol* (× *-e-* in *melior*). From the point of view of semantics, I believe that both forwarded options are better than the existing etymology, explaining the suppletion in the paradigm at the level comparative – superlative.

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LATINSKÉ *BONUS – MELIOR – OPTIMUS*

Shrnutí

V etymologických slovnících tradovaná etymologie komparativu *melior* je neuspokojivá nejen z formálního hlediska a kvůli nedostatku jasných ekvivalentů, ale zejména proto, že se nevyrovnává s nestandardním faktem supletivismu na úrovni komparativ vs. superlativ (*optimus*). Superlativ je běžně odvozen od komparativu. Článek se proto zabývá otázkou, zda existují nějaké druhy kvalit, které lze vyjadřovat ve vyšší míře na škále (komparativ), avšak již nikoli v míře maximální (superlativ), a na základě této úvahy i formálního rozboru jsou pak navrženy alternativní etymologie adj. *melior*.

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