

**The good, the bad and the ugly: the sound change PIE *oiHC > Proto-Italic *āC,
paradigmatic leveling, and the thematic optative in Italic**

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The Indo-European branches show an interesting pattern with regard to the thematic optative; whereas the Indo-Iranian, Greek and Germanic branches (etc.) attest forms with a diphthong between root and ending (reflecting Proto-Indo-European *-oih₁-), the ancient Italic languages have “subjunctives” to thematic stems with -ā- instead:

*Table 1. Optatives/‘Subjunctives’ to the PIE root *b^her- ‘to bear’; singular and plural active.*

Person/number	Vedic	Greek	Gothic	Latin
1. Sg.	<i>bháreyam</i>	φέροιμι	<i>baírau</i>	<i>feram</i>
2. Sg.	<i>bháres</i>	φέρεις	<i>baírais</i>	<i>ferās</i>
3. Sg.	<i>bháret</i>	φέρει	<i>baírai</i>	<i>ferat</i>
1. Pl.	<i>bhárema</i>	φέροιμεν	<i>baíraima</i>	<i>ferāmus</i>
2. Pl.	<i>bháreta</i>	φέροιτε	<i>baíraiþ</i>	<i>ferātis</i>
3. Pl.	<i>bháreyur</i>	φέροιεν	<i>baíraina</i>	<i>ferant</i>

Most scholars take this as an *argumentum e silentio* for the loss of the PIE thematic optative in Italic (cf. Weiss 2020:444, “[i]n Italic and Celtic the thematic optative appears to have been eliminated (...) in favor of the ā-optative”, Vine 2017:782: “[t]he PIE optative has been lost as a category, but survives in some synchronic subjunctives”, and l.c.: 785: “[t]here is no trace in Italic of the PIE thematic optative”, or Meiser 2010:201: “Das thematische Optativsuffixes [sic!] -oih₁- scheint im Italischen nirgends mehr nachweisbar”).

Based on an observation made by Trubetzkoy (1926), Cowgill (1965:160, Fn. 43) suggested to explain the Italic forms with -ā- as regular descendants of PIE *-oih₁-; however, he failed to come up with supporting evidence and later retracted his own explanation (Cowgill 1970:141; see also Bammesberger 1984:77f.). Rix adopted Cowgill’s idea (Rix 2003:10f.), but likewise presented no additional evidence in favor of the proposed phonological development *-oih₁- > *-ā- (in his own words, the development was “not supported by any parallels”, Rix 2003:11). Probably due to this lack of additional evidence, current handbooks or introductory chapters like Vine (2017:785) or Weiss (2020:444f.) do not even mention the phonological account.

In my talk, I will demonstrate that each stage in the proposed development of PIE *oiHC > Proto-Italic *āC (with *C = any consonant, perhaps with the exception of *n) is either directly supported by additional evidence or at least not falsified by the data. In particular, one must assume that 1.) the laryngeal in a sequence *oih₁C was not lost, but instead regularly vocalized (*oih₁C > *oiaC; problems to be dealt with: Saussure effect, mono- or disyllabic scansion of the sequence *oih₁); that 2.) the intervocalic semivowel/glide was lost; and that 3.) the resulting sequence *oaC did not contract to *ōC (as is usually assumed), but to (*)āC instead. If correct, we may reckon with a new sound law relevant for Italic, namely PIE *oiHC > Proto-Italic *āC. The sound change resulted in forms with ā-vocalism in 4 of 6 paradigmatic slots in the paradigm of the thematic optative (2nd and 3rd singular, 1st and 2nd plural), and paradigmatic leveling/analogy subsequently generalized -ā- as a new modal marker.

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