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Wheeler's Law

"Wheeler's Law" refers to a phonologically conditioned accent retraction process reconstructed for an early pandialectal stage of Greek by which oxytone words became paroxytone if they ended in a heavy-light-light syllable sequence (HLL), e.g. *[poĩkilós] > [poĩkílos] 'multi-colored', *[dedegmenós] > [dedegménos] 'awaiting, expecting' (LHLL). Note that word-final syllables ending in a short vowel followed by one consonant (e.g. [os]) count as light for Wheeler's Law, just as they do for the Law of Limitation. The accent retraction was originally proposed by Benjamin Ide Wheeler (1854–1927) in 1885; for further insights, analysis, and references, see Probert 2006.

Evidence for Wheeler's Law comes especially from the comparison of several Greek suffixes with their Vedic Sanskrit cognates: Greek [-ménos] vs. Vedic [-a:nás] forming perfect middle/passive participles; Greek [-úlos] vs. Vedic [-urás] and [-ulás], and Greek [-ílos] vs. Vedic [-irás] and [-ilás] forming adjectives. There is a strong case to be made that the Greek suffixes were originally oxytone as in Vedic, and that the retraction was phonological. First, language change typically affects classes of words defined by shared phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic properties, or a combination thereof. Most Greek perfect middle/passive participles in [-menos] and virtually all adjectives in [-ilos] and [-ulos] end HLL, i.e. they have a phonological property in common, whereas the Vedic suffixes do not. Second, a number of the Greek formations of that type that did not meet the HLL condition appear to have escaped the retraction. For example, [pak^hulô:s] 'roughly' (HLH) presupposes and adjective *[pak^hulós] 'rough' (LLL) that forms a word equation with Vedic [bafulás] 'thick, broad'. Additionally, personal names and appellatives that derive from participles in -menos, e.g. [ork^homenós] 'Orchomenos' (HLLL) and [deksamené:] 'reservoir' (HLLH), suggest that at an

earlier stage of the language, all Greek middle/passive participles in [-menos], regardless of tense/aspect, were oxytone, since there is no known rightward accent shift in the history of Greek (Kiparsky 1967:75). Third, the only accentable segment in the PIE suffix *[-mh₁nos] (Klingenschmitt 1975:161–163) is the vowel [o].

Assuming the validity of Wheeler's Law, it was followed by analogical changes that promoted accentual uniformity among related words and grammatical forms. Speakers avoided accent alternations within the inflectional paradigm, e.g. between the paroxytone masculine nominative singular *[poĩkílos] (HLL), which underwent retraction, and the oxytone masculine/neuter dative singular *[poĩkílb̄:i] (HLH), which did not, by virtually always generalizing the accent of the (masculine) nominative singular of adjectives and nouns to the remaining forms of the paradigm: [poĩkílos], [poĩkílb̄:i]. This may reflect a base-derivative relationship within the inflectional paradigm, where the accent in the other case forms was derived from the (masculine) nominative singular. That was the view of the ancient grammarians, and that relationship is often assumed for didactic purposes in modern handbooks (Probert 2003:54–60). The result was accentual uniformity within inflectional paradigms.

Speakers also preferred for words with the same suffix to be uniformly accented. Where Wheeler's Law produced paroxytone suffix variants such as [dedegménos] (LHLL) beside unaffected oxytone variants such as *[kek^humenós] 'having been poured' (LLLL), [pelasgíkos] 'Pelagian' (LHLL) beside *[orp^hanikós] 'orphaned' (LLLL), they generalized one of the two variants, perhaps the more frequent one (cf. Probert 2006:93–96): [dedegménos], [kek^huménos]; [pelasgíkos], [orp^hanikós]. Those analogical changes effectively extended and reversed the results of Wheeler's Law.

The accentual alternations that arose from Wheeler's Law are partly preserved in compounds of the type [psu:k^ho-pompós] 'soul-escorting', [patro-któnos] 'father killing', where the second member is the head of the compound, has an active meaning (e.g. 'killing' not 'killed'), and consists morphologically of a verbal root, usually with o-vocalism (e.g. [pomp] not [pemp]),

followed by the theme vowel. In Vedic, that type of compound is oxytone, e.g. [f̥asta-graːbhás] ‘hand-grasping’, [bʰuʋana-t̪ʃ̥iʋás] ‘world-shaking’. In Greek the compounds all end in a light syllable. They are oxytone if the penultimate syllable is heavy, i.e., where the HLL condition for retraction did not apply, e.g. [psuːkʰo-pompós] (HLHL). Where it is light, they are paroxytone, both where the HLL condition was met, e.g. [teukʰes-pʰóros] ‘armor-wearing’ (HHLL), and where it was not, e.g. [teukʰo-pʰóros] ‘id.’ (HLLL). We arrive at the attested situation if we assume that speakers began predicting the accentuation of these compounds on the basis of the weight of the penult alone.

The phonetic motivation for Wheeler’s Law remains unclear. As an accent retraction process sensitive to syllable weight patterns it is akin to Vendryes’ Law (Attic only) and Bartoli’s Law (chronology and dialectal distribution disputed).

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