

BOOK REVIEW

Sievers' Law and the History of Semivowel Syllabicity in Indo-European and Ancient Greek. By PETER BARBER. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xv + 437. Hardcover, \$185.00. ISBN 978-0199680504.

Sievers' Law refers to an alternation between *-i-* and *-iy-*, which is most robust in Gothic and Vedic Sanskrit. In the latter for instance, we find *asūryá-* 'sunless,' which scans quadrisyllabically as *asūriyá-*, beside *ajuryá-* 'unaging,' which does not. This alternation has given rise to an enormous literature, which, broadly speaking, has focused on determining the scope (Does it apply to other sonorants besides *y*? Can it target any syllable in the word or is it restricted to the final one?) and antiquity of the phenomenon (Does it go back to Proto-Indo-European?). Scholars have long sought evidence for the phenomenon outside of Gothic and Vedic. In this book, a revised 2007 Oxford D.Phil. thesis, Peter Barber takes up the question of Sievers' Law in Greek and what the evidence there tells us about the age of the phenomenon. He argues that there is in fact limited evidence for Sievers' Law in Greek, and reconstructs the phenomenon to PIE.

After a short Introduction, Barber embarks on Part I, which first examines the Gothic¹ and Vedic evidence for Sievers' Law (chapter three), and then explores issues of diachrony (chapter four). Part II is devoted to Greek nominal categories, and Part III to verbal categories, the last chapter of which rounds out the entire work with a conclusion. This is a cautious and painstaking evaluation of a huge body of data. The discussion makes clear that the candidate forms for Sievers' Law in Greek are often open to multiple interpretations. We owe Barber our gratitude for marshalling together so much evidence and meticulously assessing the individual histories of the forms in question.

¹ In addition to the Gothic evidence for Sievers' Law, there is also material from Runic inscriptions. See E.H. Antonsen, *A Concise Grammar of the Older Runic Inscriptions* (Tübingen: Niemeyer 1975).

Above the level of individual lexical items, the book raises several concerns, in particular in the areas of prosodic phonology and the reconstruction of Sievers' Law in PIE. Given the role that the syllable has played in the discussions of this phenomenon (going back to Sievers himself in fact), it is odd that there is no preliminary discussion of the Ancient Greek syllable or syllable structure. This would perhaps have saved him from his decision (page 3, n. 7) to follow a suggestion of Beekes in using the term *sequence* instead of *syllable*. His motivation is the following: a string such as VCyV (V = vowel, C = consonant) would result in a syllable that scans heavy, VCyV. But for Sievers' Law, VC. would count as a light syllable (i.e. no epenthesis, or vowel insertion, would be triggered).² Barber's decision to refer to sequences instead of syllables increases the vagueness of the discussion, because *sequence* is not an explicitly defined category and the reader has to perform the syllabifications himself. Much simpler would have been to say that V: and VC. syllables do not trigger *i*-epenthesis, while V:C and VCC. do (as do syllables with more than two consonants in the coda), as already formulated by Cowgill and Mayrhofer.³ Generalizing over these latter syllables, we can then say that *i*-epenthesis is triggered after superheavy syllables (i.e. syllables with minimally three morae). This formulation steers clear of the confusion that motivates Barber's decision without retreating to a less informative descriptive/theoretical apparatus.

Although problems such as these could have been avoided by delineating the theoretical framework of the book at the outset, Barber in fact appears to have a bias against the assumption of abstract categories. On page 55 for instance, he refers to foot structure as a "technical device." The metrical foot is a constituent of the Prosodic Hierarchy⁴ one level above the syllable: syllables are grouped into metrical feet for purposes of rhythmic organization. While foot structure does require the assumption of abstract constituent structure, it is an assumption that

² This type of phenomenon is actually well known. J. Blevins, *Evolutionary Phonology: The Emergence of Sound Patterns*. Cambridge (Cambridge University Press 2004), p. 188, for instance notes: "There are many languages in which the syllables which count as heavy for the purposes of one phonological pattern must not count as heavy for another." See further M.K. Gordon, "A phonetically-driven account of syllable weight." *Language* 78 (2002), 58–80, as well as *Syllable Weight: Phonetics, Phonology and Typology* (London: Routledge 2006).

³ W. Cowgill and M. Mayrhofer (1986). *Indogermanische Grammatik. Band I* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1986), 165.

⁴ On which, see E. Selkirk, "The Syntax-Phonology Interface," in *The Handbook of Phonological Theory*, ed. by J. A. Goldsmith, J. Riggle, and A. C. L. Yu, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell 2011), 435–484.

has proven extremely insightful cross-linguistically,⁵ including Greek⁶ and Latin.⁷ In fact, according to Kiparsky,⁸ Sievers' Law in Gothic is motivated by a constraint on foot structure (as Barber himself reports on page 19). Perhaps it is the case that foot structure plays less of a role in Greek or PIE than scholars have thus far thought. That would be an interesting claim, but labeling the metrical foot a technical device runs the risk of missing generalizations that exist at precisely that level of abstraction.

Turning to the question of reconstruction, Barber reports (page 45) that he has not found alternations comparable to Sievers' Law outside of Indo-European (we are not, however, told what languages he investigated), and that he therefore considers the phenomenon typologically rare. But it is not clear what is typologically rare—high-vowel epenthesis (or deletion)? Vowel epenthesis specifically as a repair for superheavy syllables? Resyllabification? A ban on Cy-onsets? Prosodically-conditioned allomorphy? Barber in fact nowhere lays bare the inner mechanics of Sievers' Law, so without a more explicit sense of what Sievers' Law is synchronically (or was diachronically) it seems difficult to even investigate its typological status.

The view that Sievers-type alternations are typologically rare directly impacts Barber's view of the age of the phenomenon (page 388): "In the absence of clear evidence that a rule of this kind would be likely to arise independently in three separate branches of the family, it seems reasonable to take the evidence for Sievers' Law in Greek, Germanic, and Indo-Iranian as a basis for attributing such a rule to their immediate common ancestor." The logic here is questionable. Barber is defaulting to reconstruction on the basis of survival in a decided minority of subgroups, three of ten branches (the number of sub-branches recognized of course varies, but ten is what one will often find in the handbooks),

5 See M. Liberman, "The Intonational System of English," PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1975; M. Liberman and A. Prince, "On Stress and Linguistic Rhythm," *Linguistic Inquiry* 8 (1977), 249–336. B. Hayes, *Metrical Stress Theory: Principles and Case Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995).

6 D.C. Gunkel, "The Emergence of Foot Structure as a Factor in the Formation of Greek Verbal Nouns in -μα(τ)-," *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft* 65 (2011), 77–103.

7 A. Mester, "The Quantitative Trochee in Latin," *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 12 (1994), 1–61.

8 P. Kiparsky, "Analogy as Optimization: 'Exceptions' to Sievers' Law in Gothic," in *Analogy, Levelling, Markedness: Principles of Change in Phonology and Morphology*, ed. A. Lahiri (Berlin: de Gruyter 2000), 15–46.

two of which (Greek and Indo-Iranian) are well known for their shared traits. Furthermore, if it is true that Sievers-type behavior arose independently in Tocharian, as Barber believes, this would seem to fly in the face of the phenomenon being rare.

As noted above, the literature on Sievers' Law is vast, and total coverage is perhaps unfeasible. While one will likely not miss reference to now dated literature such as Aly (1873),⁹ important references such as Calabrese (1999)¹⁰ on Sievers' Law in Vedic (his 1994 article on Sievers' Law in Gothic is, however, cited) or Kobayashi (2004)¹¹ should be taken into consideration. Given the role that prosody plays in discussions of Sievers' Law, it is mystifying that there is no mention of Devine and Stephens (1994).¹² Perhaps even more surprising is the lack of engagement with Byrd (2010)¹³ (it is, however, mentioned in a footnote), which is a recent, theoretically-informed, and philologically-attuned analysis whose claims are of direct relevance to Barber's topic (an extended version of the analysis is to appear in Byrd forthcoming¹⁴). Especially worth considering in Byrd's analysis is the possibility that Sievers' Law is not an event that either occurred once in the proto-language if it is inherited or several times in the individual daughter languages if it is an innovation, but rather as a constraint whose effects continue (and perhaps differ) over a broad swath of time. We are fortunate to have Barber's fine-grained study of the Greek data to further pursue such questions.

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9 G.F. Aly, *De nominibus io suffixi ope formatis* (Berolini: G. Schade 1873).

10A. Calabrese, "Sievers' Law in Vedic," in *The Syllable: Views and Facts*, ed. by H. van der Hulst and N. A. Ritter (Berlin: de Gruyter 1999), 673–751.

11 M. Kobayashi, *Historical Phonology of Old Indo-Aryan Consonants* (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages, Cultures of Asia, and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies 2004).

12 A.M. Devine and L. D. Stephens, *The Prosody of Greek Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994).

13 A. Byrd, "Motivating Sievers' Law," in *Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference*, ed. by S. W. Jamison, H. C. Melchert, and B. Vine (Bremen: Ute Hempfen 2010), 45–67.

14A. Byrd. *The Indo-European Syllable*. Leiden: Brill.