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Saussure's Law: A new interpretation and its consequences for Baltic morphology

One of the best established Lithuanian sound laws is Saussure's Law (SL), which draws the accent onto an acute vowel from an accented non-acute vowel immediately to its left. In some cases the triggering acute vowel goes back to a tautosyllabic sequence of vowel + laryngeal (e.g., nom. sg. *rankà* < **rankā̇* < **rānkā̇* < **-eh₂*);¹ in others it goes back to an inherent long vowel not in absolute final position (e.g., loc. sg. *ratè* < **ratē̇n* < **rātē̇n* < **-e-en*); in yet others it goes back to an originally non-acute vowel with secondary acuteness (e.g., OLith. 1 sg. *esmì* < **esmĕ̇* < **èsmē̇* < **-mai*, with acuteness analogically extended from 1 sg. **-ō̇* < **-oh₂*). When the triggering acute vowel stands in a final syllable, it undergoes shortening and de-acuting by Leskien's Law.

The interaction of acuteness, loss of acuteness, and SL gives rise to puzzling effects in the case of diphthongs. A particularly difficult case is the PIE nom. pl. in **-oi*, originally confined to pronouns, but extended in Balto-Slavic (as in Greek, Latin, and Celtic) to masculine *o*-stem nouns and adjectives. While this ending uniformly gives *-i* in Slavic, it has two reflexes in Lithuanian — acute *-i(e)* < **-ē̇* in pronouns and adjectives, triggering SL (e.g., dial. *anrì* (2)); and non-acute *-ai* in nouns, not triggering SL (*rātai*). The distinct profiles of the endings *-i(e)* < **-ē̇* and *-ai* have led some scholars to doubt their common origin. Such doubts are unwarranted. According to the scenario advocated in this paper, both acute *-i(e)* < **-ē̇* and non-acute *-ai* go back to PIE **-oi* through an ordinary mixture of sound change and analogy. A major new proposal is that SL, at the time of its operation, was not triggered by diphthongs. The correctness of this restriction on SL is confirmed by the treatment of other problematic endings.

¹ /' / = position of accent; underlining = acuteness.