

# Latin *au-* ‘away’, an allomorph of *ab-*

Michiel de Vaan

Universiteit Leiden  
m.a.c.de.vaan@let.leidenuniv.nl

---

*La interpretación del preverbio latino au- (auferō y aufugiō) que acepta la mayoría de manuales modernos (<\*h<sub>2</sub>eu, ‘fuera’) debe ser descartada. Tanto los datos de la epigrafía latina como la distribución de alomorfos de ab- en la lengua clásica demuestran que au- debe considerarse el reflejo regular de ab- en frente de f-.*

*Most of the handbooks derive Latin au- (in auferō and aufugiō) from PIE \*h<sub>2</sub>eu ‘away, off’, but this must be rejected. Inscriptional evidence as well as the distribution of the allomorphs of ab- in Classical Latin show that au- must be regarded as the regular reflex of ab- in front of f-.*

---

*Una praepositio est af quae nunc tantum in accepti tabulis manet ac ne his quidem omnium, in reliquo sermone mutata est; nam amovit dicimus et abegit et abstulit, ut iam nescias a’ne verum sit an ab <an> abs. Quid, quod etiam abfugit turpe visum est et abfer noluerunt, aufugit et aufer maluerunt? Quae praepositio praeter haec duo verba nullo alio in verbo reperietur.*

“The same preposition is *af*, which now exists only in acknowledgements of receipt and not even in all of them; in other usage it has changed. For we say *amovit* and *abegit* and *abstulit*, so that you do not know whether *a* is true or *ab* or *abs*. And what is more, even *abfugit* seemed ugly and no one wanted *abfer*, that is why everybody prefers *aufugit* and *aufer*. Except for these two words, this preposition is not found in any other word.”

Cicero, *Orator* 158 (text according to Kroll 1913)

The Latin preverb *au-* ‘away’ only occurs in *auferō* ‘to carry away’ and *aufugiō* ‘to flee’, both attested from Plautus onwards. None of the other Italic languages have a prefix which goes back to Italic *\*au-*. In many handbooks, *au-* is regarded as the regular reflex of PIE *\*h<sub>2</sub>eu* ‘away, off’, and cognate with Greek *αὖ* ‘again, on the other hand’, Old Church Slavic *u-* ‘away’, Old Prussian *aumūsnan* ‘ablution’ and Old Irish *ó, úa* ‘away, from’. Thus, e.g., in Sommer 1914: 263, Walde-Hoffmann 1938 I: 79, Pokorny 1959: 72, Ernout-Meillet 1959: 2, Sommer-Pfister 1977: 194, Leumann 1977: 61. It seems likely that this PIE word is indeed contained in Latin *aut* ‘or’, Oscan *aut*, *avt* ‘but, or’ < *\*au-te/i*.<sup>1</sup> Latin *autem* ‘on the other hand’ probably represents a more recent formation of *aut* plus *\*-em* (cf. *item*, *idem*, *quidem*). The speakers of Latin, however, could not deduce an element *au-* from *aut* or *autem*. We thus observe that *auferre* and *aufugiō* are completely isolated within Italic, and also, that there is no semantic difference within Latin with the very frequent preverb *ab(s)*. These data suffice to doubt the identity of *au-* with PIE *\*h<sub>2</sub>eu*, and they feed the suspicion that *au-* derives from *ab-*.

In fact, the idea that *au-* is a phonetic variant of *ab-* is anything but new. It was proposed by Wölfflin (1892: 506) and, independently it seems, by Bréal (1894: 48). However, in his influential introduction, Brugmann (1911: 810) writes: “Im historischen Latein nur noch *au-fero*, *au-fugio*. Diese Formen zeigen, dass sich hier *ab-* auf Kosten von *au-* ausgebreitet hat. Jene Komposita behaupteten sich, weil *aff-* = *\*ab-f-* oder *\*abs-f-* zweideutig geworden war (vgl. *affero* = *ad-fero*).” In 1920, the Dutch classicist Muller discusses the problem from all angles, and—to my mind—convincingly shows that *au-* must indeed have developed from *ab-*, and is unlikely to be a descendant of PIE *\*h<sub>2</sub>eu*. After his article, one would expect the issue to have been closed, and his conclusions adopted by the handbooks. Such was not the case, however. In 1923: 205f., Eduard Hermann briefly mentions *au-* in his book on *Silbenbildung*, claiming that Muller was wrong about the descent from *ab-*. Hermann only spends a few lines on the complex of forms which took Muller five pages, and it is clear from his discussion that he has misunderstood the Dutchman. Hermann lays the assumption that *auf-* derives from *abs-f-* at Muller’s door, but this is exactly what Muller had *not* claimed. Muller (p. 113) assumes that *\*apsfero* would have yielded *\*asfero* (admittedly, a doubtful view), and that *abs-tulī* and *ablātum* suggest earlier *\*abfero*.<sup>2</sup> Hermann’s short-hand dismissal of Muller’s conclusions appears to

<sup>1</sup> The source of *\*-ti/e* is uncertain. Final *\*-ti* could have been taken from *\*ati* (> Lat. *at* ‘but’) or *\*eti* (> Lat. *et* ‘and’); final *\*-te* may be connected with Skt. *utá* ‘and’ (less clear is Gr. *αὖτε* ‘again’, which may have PIE *\*-k<sup>wo</sup>e*). O. *auti*, U. *ute*, *ote* ‘or’ cannot be derived from *\*-ti*, but must have had a longer vowel in the auslaut, *\*-ī* or *\*-ei* (UNTERMANN 2000: 137).

<sup>2</sup> More recently, RUSSELL (1988: 168) has also noted that *au-* < *\*ab(s)-* “would make more sense” in view of the perfect *abstuli*.

have played a decisive role in the explicit rejection by Walde-Hoffmann 1938 of the assumption *ab-* > *au-*. The authority of the most comprehensive Latin etymological dictionary was accepted without any discussion by Ernout-Meillet in their dictionary (1959), as well as by the subsequent handbooks (e.g. Leumann 1977: 157f., 561). A last echo of the opposite view was heard from Marstrander (1928: 245), who writes that "*aß* hat sich offenbar in *au* entwickelt vor einem bilabialen *f*, dem es sich, um von *ad* getrennt zu bleiben, nicht assimilierte."

As Muller already argued in 1920, Brugmann's reasoning that *au-* was retained in order to avoid the coalescence with *aff-* < *\*ad-f-*, is built on quicksand. Firstly, the assimilation of *\*ad-f-* > *aff-* was a relatively recent Latin development, as is shown by Oscan *ad-* in *adjust* 'he will be present', Umbrian *ařfertur* 'high priest', probably < *\*ad-b<sup>h</sup>er-tor-*, and Archaic Latin *apurfinem* 'apud finem' (CIL 5, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Lake Fucinus), *arfuise* 'adfuise' (Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus, 186 BC). Thus, *au-* would have had to survive with a recognizable meaning well into Latin times. But there are no indications that *au-* ever existed in Faliscan, Sabellic, or Venetic. Of course, since the other Italic languages are preserved in only a fraction of the amount of evidence for Latin, it cannot be considered proven that *\*au-* did not exist there; but neither is it very likely. Even less so since the meaning of this *au-* would have been the same or nearly the same as that of *ab-*. Secondly, the recent date of the assimilation *\*ad-f-* > *aff-* also implies that the preverb *au-* changed from being a semantically recognizable preverb to a nearly extinct one in a very short period of time. This cannot be completely excluded, but I would regard it as very improbable. Thirdly, *au-* would have been dropped everywhere but remained in front of *f-*, in order to disambiguate *\*afferō* (< *\*ab(s)*) from *afferō* (< *\*ad*). This explanation is untenable: a form cannot be preserved in order to remedy a future merger. One could only assume that *au-* was introduced from elsewhere to the position in front of *f-*, because *aff-* had now become ambivalent. But in view of the absence of *au-* from the entire remaining Latin lexicon, this is extremely unlikely. Fourthly, both Brugmann and Marstrander assume that *\*ab(s)f-* would have phonetically yielded *\*aff-*, but this remains to be proven. Unlike *ob* and especially *sub*, which are seen to assimilate their *b* to many different following consonants (yielding, e.g., *oc-*, *of-*, *og-*, *om-*, *op-*), no such development is attested for *ab*.

The basic variant of the prefix is *ab-*, corresponding to Umbrian **ap-** in **apehtre** 'from outside'.<sup>3</sup> The voiced word-final stop in Latin points to Proto-

<sup>3</sup> Maybe also to Paelignian and Oscan compounds in *af-*, viz. P. *afded*, O. **aflakus**, **aflukad**, **afstist**, but the meaning and interpretation of these forms is very uncertain, cf. UNTERMANN 2000: 56-60.

Italic *\*ap* (compare Archaic Latin *feced* < *\*fēket*),<sup>4</sup> which must derive from PIE *\*h<sub>2</sub>epo* ‘away’. The absence of final *\*-o* in Italic is problematic, but this problem does not concern us now.<sup>5</sup> The distribution of the allomorphs of the prefix is as follows:<sup>6</sup>

before vowel and <i>h-</i>	<i>ab-</i>
before voiced dentals ( <i>d, i, l, n, r</i> )	<i>ab-</i>
before <i>s-</i>	<i>ab-</i>
before voiceless stops ( <i>p, t, c, qu</i> )	<i>abs-</i>
before voiced labials ( <i>b, m, v</i> )	<i>ā-</i>
before <i>f-</i>	<i>au-; ā-</i>
before <i>l-, v-, m-</i> in some inscriptions	<i>af</i> (as a preposition)

It is clear that *ab-* was the original variant in front of vowels, whereas *abs-* is always used in front of voiceless stops, apparently in order to avoid a voiceless variant *ap-*. The form *abs* is likely to be inherited, if we compare it with Gr. ἄψ ‘back, again’; see Russell 1988 for more evidence and a theory on the origin of preverbs and adverbs with and without *\*-s*. In front of *p-* and *sp-*, dissimilation has led to *a(s)-*: *asportō, aspernor*. In front of *s-*, we simply cannot see whether we are dealing with *\*ab-* or with *\*abs-*.

The interpretation of *ab-* in front of voiced dentals and *ā-* in front of labials is less easy. Leumann 1940: 8 suggests an original distribution of *ab-* in front of vowels, *abs-* in front of consonants; he accordingly traces *ā-* to *\*abs-*. But there is no direct evidence for *\*s* in front of the voiced obstruents; its reconstruction is motivated by the parallelism with *ē-* < *\*eks-* ‘out’ as in *ēuertō, ēmergō*, cf. Sommer 1914: 263. If *\*abs-* originally also stood in front of voiced dentals, it is unclear why *\*abs-d-* did not yield *ād-*, or *\*abs-n-* > *ān-*. One might assume that *\*abs-* was only introduced before voiced labials, in order to avoid a collision of two labials; but nobody addresses this point.

<sup>4</sup> SZEMERÉNYI (1973: 59) argues that “Italic as a whole shows the development of final voiceless stops to voiced stops”, whereas RUSSELL (1988: 151) is much more hesitant. Reconstructing Proto-Italic *\*ap* is problematic because of the Oscan prepositions *σνπ* ‘under’, *úp*, *op* ‘at’, which contrast with O. *-d* < *\*-t*. The alternative explanation for Latin *-b* is from voicing in front of voiced anlaut, cf. SOMMER 1914: 275 who gives as an example *abdūcō* < *\*ap(o)doukō*.

<sup>5</sup> Proto-Italic *\*h<sub>2</sub>ep* might have been formed next to *\*h<sub>2</sub>eps* on the example of *\*ek(s)*, cf. Sabellic *\*ek* (O. *eh*, U. *eh*, *ehe*, *e*, SPic. *e*) beside Latin *ex*, and Celtic *\*ek-* beside *\*eks-*; see RUSSELL 1988. Similar problems surround *sub* < PIE *\*[s]upo* and *ob* < PIE *\*hiopi*. It has been argued that Venetic shows traces of unapocopated *\*opi* and *\*upo* in compounds (cf. LEJEUNE 1974: 120-122), but the evidence consists only of names, and is therefore inconclusive.

<sup>6</sup> The variants of the independent preposition are given by SOMMER 1914: 298 for Plautus: *ab* usually before vowel, *i-, r-*; *ā* before *v-, p-, b-, m-, f-, c-, qu-, g-*, usually also before *n-*, stronger vacillation before *t-, d-, l-, s-*; *abs* often before *tē, tuō*; but also *abs terrā, aps quā, abs Pseudolō*. See KOLLMANN (1976) for statistics on *ā, ab, abs* in other authors, and (1977) for a classification according to the initial consonant of the following word.

And in any case, Latin shows no such scruples for *ob* and *sub*, which easily combine with a following labial into *obb-* (only in *obbrūtēscō*), *off-*, *omm-* (only in *omittō*; otherwise *obm-*), *opp-*, *subb-*, *suff-*, *summ-*, *supp-*.

It seems at least equally likely that *ab-* in front of voiced dentals reflects *s*-less *\*ab-*, and that the same prefix yielded *ā-* in front of voiced labials. In fact, I think that the inscriptional evidence for the preposition *af* in front of labials, which can hardly reflect *\*abs*, confirms that we may posit *\*ab-* in front of all voiced consonants. In addition, *af* shows that the development of *b* may have been different after *a* than after *o* and *u*.

The form *af* occurs on a few inscriptions from Rome as well as from outside town; in all cases, it concerns a preposition rather than a prefix. The attestations have been discussed by Vine 1993: 175-189, who concludes that the original locus of *af* was in front of *l-* and *v-* followed by a back rounded vowel: *af.louco* (CIL 2444, Nemus Dianae, 3<sup>rd</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), *afluclo* (CIL 2869, Ager Capenatis, ca. 200 BC), *af.Lyco* (CIL 728, Rome), *af Lucretia* (CIL VI 17780, Rome, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD), *af.vobeis* (CIL 586, Epistula ad Tiburtes, ca. 159 BC). Vine (p. 188) infers that the bilabial stop was assimilated to the following labial(ized) continuant, and *af* was probably pronounced as [aβ]. In his view, this is a "non-urban" treatment of *ab*. It may have been the case that *af* remained in use as a technical term, explaining why we also find it in some inscriptions in front of other consonants, e.g. in *af.Capua* (CIL 638, 132 BC, Tabula Popilliana, in Lucania), *af.solo*, *af speculu*. *af.vinieis*, *af villa*. Praenestian *af.muro* (CIL 1471) may also contain an original instance of *af*, since the noun also has a voiced labial plus back vowel. Finally, also the form *afvolant* 'āvolant' in Paulus Diaconus, *Epitoma Festi* p. 26, would be consistent with the inscriptional evidence for *af* in front of *v-*.

Vine's account confirms the explanations mentioned above by Wölfflin, Bréal and Muller. Bréal assumed a chain of developments *ab* > *af* > *av* > *au* (whence *auferō*, *aufugiō*) > *ā* (whence *āmittō*, *āvertō* etc.). Commenting on the evidence from inscriptions (the same which Vine used, except for CIL 2444 which was published in 1931), he notes that the change of *ab* to *af* appears to be especially frequent in front of *v-*, that this must have been the road to *āvellō* and *āvertō*, and that the Romans probably pronounced *av-vertō*. If we follow Vine in interpreting written *af* as /aβ/, we can simplify Bréal's schema by one degree: *ab* > *aβ* > *au* > *ā*. Maybe, we can even do with three degrees: *ab* > *aβ* > *au* in front of *f-*, and *ab* > *aβ* > *ā* in front of *b-*, *m-*, *v-*.

The opposition between, on the one hand, *auferō* and *aufugiō*, and, on the other, *āfuī* (Pl.+), *āfore* (Catul.+), 'to be absent' and *āfluō* 'to flow (away)' (Cic.+), can hardly be explained from a different phonetic treatment of the sequence *\*ab-f-*: the presence in Plautus of both variants, and the same vowel *u* following on *f* in *aufugiō* and *ā-fuī* leaves no room for such a game. Here I adopt the solution first proposed by Wölfflin, viz. of a different chronology: whereas *au-* is the original phonetic outcome, *ā-* can be

analogical after words in *b-*, *m-*, *v-*. The question of why this analogy did not reach *aufērō* and *aufugiō* must remain unanswered.

### References:

- BRÉAL, Maurice  
1894: *Étymologies latines et grecques, Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 8, 45-52 [8. La préposition AB devenue AF et A, p. 48-49]
- BRUGMANN, Karl  
1911: *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen. Zweiter Band: Lehre von den Wortformen und ihrem Gebrauch. Zweiter Teil.* Strassburg: Trübner.
- ERNOUT, Alfred and Antoine MEILLET  
1959: *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine.* 4<sup>me</sup> édition, 3<sup>me</sup> tirage, Paris.
- HERMANN, Eduard  
1923: *Silbenbildung im Griechischen und in den andern indogermanischen Sprachen,* Göttingen.
- KOLLMANN, Ernst  
1976: Observations on the occurrence of the parallel forms 'a' = 'ab' and 'e' = 'ex' in Latin literature, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 119, 14-29.  
1977: Some more information on *a* and *ab*, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 120, 346-364.
- KROLL, Wilhelm  
1913: *M. Tulli Ciceronis orator: als Ersatz der Ausgabe von Otto Jahn,* Berlin.
- LEJEUNE, Michel  
1974: *Manuel de la langue vénète,* Heidelberg.
- LEUMANN, Manu  
1940: Literaturbericht für das Jahr 1937, *Glotta* 28, 1-21.  
1977: *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre. Neuauflage der 1926-1928 in 5. Auflage erschienenen LLuF,* München.
- MARSTRANDER, Carl  
1928: Review of F. Muller, *Altitalisches Wörterbuch.* In: *Norsk tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap* 1, 243-247.
- MULLER, Frederik  
1920: Zum lateinischen Präfix *au-*, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 49, 112-117.
- POKORNY, Julius  
1959: *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch,* Bern.
- RUSSELL, Paul  
1988: Preverbs, prepositions and adverbs: sigmatic and asigmatic, *Transactions of the Philological Society* 86, 144-172.
- SOMMER, Ferdinand  
1914: *Handbuch der lateinischen Laut- und Formenlehre, 2. und 3. Auflage,* Heidelberg.
- SOMMER, Ferdinand and Max PFISTER  
1977: *Handbuch der lateinischen Laut- und Formenlehre. Vierte, neubearbeitete Auflage. Band I: Einleitung und Lautlehre,* Heidelberg.

SZEMERÉNYI, Oswald

1973: Marked-unmarked and a problem of Latin diachrony, *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1973, 55-74.

UNTERMANN, Jürgen

2000: *Wörterbuch des Oskisch-Umbrischen*, Heidelberg.

VINE, Brent

1993: *Studies in Archaic Latin inscriptions*, Innsbruck: IBS.

WALDE, Alois and Johann Baptist HOFFMANN

1938-1954: *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Two volumes, Heidelberg.

WÖLFFLIN, Eduard

1892: 'af', *Archiv für lateinische Lexikographie und Grammatik* 7, 506.