

Constraints on prefixation as evidence for the history of Latin ⟨gn⟩

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This paper discusses a diachronic asymmetry in the distribution of Latin prefixes which leads to a more profound understanding of the phonology–morphology interface in general and the nature of the Latin word-initial consonant cluster written ⟨gn⟩ in particular. The distribution of prefixes accompanying such stems is dependent on, and thus evidence of, the diachronic erosion of the cluster.

The prefixed forms of the five stems beginning with ⟨gn⟩ fall into two groups: those with *ad-*, *in-* and *con-* are demonstrably more archaic than those with the other prefixes, such as *de-*, *per-* etc. This fact (which has not yet been reported in the literature) receives an explanation if one assumes that in the initial cluster ⟨gn⟩ original ***gn** first developed into a floating [+back] + **n** sequence before developing into a plain **n** (i.e. ***gn**- > [+back]**n**- > **n**-). Another general assumption is that place features do not occupy the same position in the feature geometry of consonants and vowels (cf. Clements–Hume 1995 or Morén 2003). On these two assumptions it can be demonstrated that the restriction on prefixes accompanying ⟨gn⟩-initial stems dates to the period when these stems began with a floating [+back] feature. The coronals **d n** being prone to place assimilation, the floating [+back] was able to link to their place nodes; with other consonants and with vowels this was impossible, and thus the floating [+back] would have remained trapped as an unlinked (and thus unlicensed) feature, thereby preventing such prefixed forms from emerging. The combination of ⟨gn⟩-initial stems with prefixes other than *ad-*, *con-* and *in-* became possible only after the floating [+back] was eventually lost and such stems were relexicalised in a form indistinguishable from original **n**-initial stems.

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