



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## The etymology of Latin *adūlāre*

Vaan, M.A.C. de; George, C.; McCullagh, M.; Nielsen, B.; Ruppel, A.; Tribulato, O.

### Citation

Vaan, M. A. C. de. (2007). The etymology of Latin *adūlāre*. *Greek And Latin From An Indo-European Perspective*, 140-144. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14941>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14941>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

CAMBRIDGE CLASSICAL JOURNAL  
PROCEEDINGS OF THE CAMBRIDGE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY  
SUPPLEMENTARY VOLUME 32

Editors  
TIM WHITMARSH, JAMES WARREN

---

GREEK AND LATIN FROM AN  
INDO-EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

---

Edited by  
COULTER GEORGE, MATTHEW MCCULLAGH,  
BENEDICTE NIELSEN, ANTONIA RUPPEL,  
OLGA TRIBULATO

## The etymology of Latin *adulāre*

MICHIEL DE VAAN  
Leiden University

1 Classical Latin *adulārī* ‘to fawn (upon)’ seems originally to have been used especially in connection with dogs and other animals. Applied to humans, it came to mean ‘to court or flatter in a servile manner, to adulate’. The earliest attestation of the verb may be the past participle in a fragment from Cassius Hemina’s *Histories* (second century BC), as transmitted by Priscian (*Inst. Gr.*): *adulatique erant ab amicis et adhortati* ‘and they were flattered and encouraged by friends.’ If original,<sup>1</sup> this fragment would pre-date the other attestations by nearly a century.

The certain attestations of the verb start from Lucretius and Cicero onwards. Beside the more common deponent conjugation, a few attestations are in the active: one in Lucretius, one in Cicero, one in Apuleius and furthermore a present participle in Ovid. The following are the three finite verb forms:

Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 5.1070–72:  
*longe alio pacto gannitu uocis adulant*  
*et cum deserti baubantur in aedibus aut cum*  
*plorantes fugiunt summis corpore plagas*

‘(The dogs) fondle (their puppies) with growling voice of a far different kind than when they howl, left alone in the house, or when, whining, they flee blows with cringing body.’ (Translation after Bailey (1947) vol. 3.)

In *Tusculanae disputationes* (2.19–26) Cicero observes how heroes behave when they are in pain. In 2.24, Prometheus speaks about what the eagle does to him:

*tum iecore opimo farta et satiata adfatim*  
*clangorem fundit uastum et sublime auolans*  
*pinnata cauda nostrum adulat sanguinem.*  
*cum uero adesum inflatu renouatumst iecur*  
*tum rursum taetros auida se ad pastus refert*  
‘Then, sufficiently stuffed and satisfied with the plump liver it utters an awesome cry and, flying off high in the air, (with) its feathered tail (it) wipes off our blood.’

<sup>1</sup> Priscian only mentions a certain Cassius as the author of this fragment, but omits the cognomen. For arguments that it does concern Cassius Hemina, see Santini (1995) 198.

When, however, the liver, eaten away, has renewed itself by swelling, then it greedily returns to its foul feeding-grounds.’

There is some uncertainty about the exact image which *adulat* conveys in this passage. The editors of Cicero (Pohlenz 1912–29; Dougan 1905) assume that it translates Greek *σαίvet*, which, like *adulat*, can mean both ‘wags its tail’ and ‘fawns, flatters’. Pohlenz: ‘Sehr anschaulich ist das Bild des Adlers, der sich fest angekrallt hat und beim Auffliegen das Blut mit den Schwanzfedern abwischt.’ It is now generally assumed that Nonius’ statement that these verses were taken by Cicero from Accius is not trustworthy.

Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 5.14:

*at illae ... complexae[que] praedam suam sorores nomine mentientes thensaurumque penitus abditaefraudis uultu laeto tegentes sic adulant: ‘Psyche, non ita ut pridem paruula, et ipsa iam mater es’*

‘But those women ... after embracing their prey, pretending in name to be sisters, and covering with cheerful countenance their deeply hidden deception, flatter her like this: “Psyche, you’re not our little one, as you were before; indeed now you’re already a mother.”’ (Text and translation after Zimmerman *et al.* (2004) 210ff.)

Since these active forms occur among the earliest attestations of the verb, it is assumed that the exclusively deponent conjugation in later Latin is a secondary feature. Ernout–Meillet ascribe the switch to the deponent to analogy with *blandior* ‘to flatter’. Note also that two of the three active forms (Lucr. and Apul.) do not govern a direct object.

2 The *ā*-conjugation of *adulāre* suggests that a nominal form *\*ad-ūlo-s* or *\*ad-ūla* lies behind the verb. Theoretically, it is possible that *adulāre* was built on an earlier, uncompounded verb of the form *\*ūlere* or *\*aulere*; compare the examples of *sonere* vs. *sonāre* (cf. Meiser (1998) 186). However, this would require an earlier, laryngeal-final root of the shape *\*ūlH-*, *\*aulH-*, for which no good candidates seem available.

It is possible to regard the *l* as part of the original suffix, and to surmise that *-lāre* would have been adopted from other verbs ending in *-lāre* or *-lārī*. But as far as I can see, such verbs are always formed on the basis of nouns in *-ulus*, *-ulum* or *-ilus*: *aemulārī*, *capillāre*, *capitulāre*, *coagulāre*, *cumulāre*, *nubilārī*, *simulāre* and others. In addition, the long *ū* of *adulāre* would be problematic.

It therefore seems best to return to everyone’s first hunch, and to look for a nominal preform *\*ad-ūlo-s* or *\*ad-ūla* from which to derive the verb. Earlier scholars have compared Skt. *vāla-* ‘tail-hair’ and Lith. *valaī* ‘horse’s tail’; we can find this view in the two standard etymological dictionaries of Latin, those of Walde–Hofmann (1.14, denominative to *\*ūlos* ‘tail’) and of Ernout–Meillet (9). This idea goes back at least to Schmidt ((1889) 204). It was inspired by the tail-wagging which is indeed character-

istic of dogs when they come begging at one's knee for a piece of food, or merely for attention. In addition, some textual evidence for this view can be found in Latin itself. Ernout–Meillet cite Nonius' definition of *adulatio*: *blandimentum proprie canum, quod et ad homines tractum consuetudine est*. But we now know that the IE root for 'hair' did not have a final laryngeal in PIE: Skt. *vāra-* 'the hair of any animal's tail' and Lith. *vālas* 'fishing-line, (East Lith.) horse-hair' go back to PIE *\*uol-o-* (Derksen (2006)); Russ. *vólos* 'hair' and Skt. *váśa-* 'sprout' to PIE *\*uol-ko-* (EWA 2.527). In short, the long *ū* of Latin *adūlāre* cannot be explained from a PIE root *\*ul-*, *\*uel-* or *\*uol-*.

There is a rather large number of possible sources for long *ū* in the second syllable of Latin words. Firstly, of course, PIE *\*uH*. Secondly, several sequences of short *\*u* plus a resonant and/or stop and *\*sl* would have resulted in Latin *-ūl-*. Compare, for instance, *āla* 'wing' < *\*aksla* or *tōlēs* 'goitre' < *\*tonsleies* (cf. *tōnsillae*). Hence, sequences such as *\*-uk/gslos*, *\*-unslos*, *\*-unst/dlos*, *\*-unt/dslos* and maybe even *\*-urk/gslos* (cf. *mantēlum* 'napkin' from *tergere*) would theoretically yield the form we seek. A third group of sounds which would yield *ū* in non-initial syllables are the PIE diphthongs *\*eu*, *\*ou* and *\*h<sub>2</sub>eu*; compare *claudō* vs. *inclūdō* or *causa* vs. *excūsō*, *accūsō*. Finally, another source for *ū* would be *\*oi*, although this also yields *ē*: *commūnis*, *impūne*, but *pōmērium*.

3 In my view, the best etymology is a connection with the adjective *avidus* 'eager'. This requires postulating a compound adjective *\*ad-avidos*, and a subsequent development to *\*ad-audos* and further to *\*ad-ūdos* and *\*adūlos*. This involves a few morphological and phonetic changes for which no perfect parallels can be found in Latin. But for each of these steps we do find closely related changes, which imply that the new etymology is by no means far-fetched.

The semantic side of this etymology is the least problematic: a form *\*ad-avidos* would have meant 'eager towards, greedy towards'. This can easily specialize into 'expectant, hopeful, fawning' in the case of dogs.

The most important morphological question we must ask ourselves is the following: is it likely that a preform *\*ad-avidos* came into being at some point? Against this hypothesis, it may be argued that no compounds of *ad* plus a member of the family of *aveō* 'to be eager' or *audeō* 'to dare' are attested in Latin. Moreover, since *avidus* already means 'eager', the addition of *ad* would have added little to the meaning of the word in order to become 'fawning upon'. Combinations of preverbs plus other adjectives in *-idos* are not frequent in Latin. They usually indicate various degrees of the adjective, and they are rarely found in the oldest playwrights. We find *perlepidē* 'very pleasantly' once in Plautus, then *subhorridus* 'somewhat rough' in Cicero, *impavidus* 'fearless' in Vergil+, *praecalidus* 'very hot' in Tacitus etc. No form with *ad-* is attested.

In defence of a possible *\*ad-avidos*, however, I would claim that the absence of other compounds of *ad* plus *aveo* is not necessarily meaningful. Also, the fact that *ad* seems to be adding little to the semantics of the adjective is not decisive: languages regularly create new hyper-characterized formations, which look like pleonasms. In Latin, an adverb that comes close in form and time is *adaequē* 'equally'. This word, attested from Plautus onwards, presupposes an adj. *\*ad-aequus* 'equal to', and the latter probably also formed the basis for the verb *adaequāre* 'to make equal', which is attested from Cicero onwards. Of course, the verb may also have been formed directly from *adaequē*.

We can now direct our attention to the phonological development. The first step which we must assume is the development *\*ai* > *au* in internal syllables, for which I have found no perfect parallels. Still, there is ample evidence for this change in initial syllables: for instance in the participles *cautus* 'cautious' and *lautus* 'washed' (to *caueō* and *lauō*), in *faustus* 'fortunate' to *fauor* (thus Niedermann (1945) 49), in *auspex* 'diviner' to *avis*, in *naufragus* 'shipwrecked' to *nāuis*, probably in *gaudeō* from *\*gāuidēō*; and finally, of course, syncope of *i* has clearly taken place in *audeō* 'to intend, to dare', which must be denominal to *avidus* (thus Leumann (1977) 71, 97).<sup>2</sup> The examples *cautus* and *lautus* seem to be in conflict with the retention of the sequence *ai-* in the first syllables of *avidus*. But there is a straightforward solution to this problem: the analogical restoration of the suffix *-idos*. Since the deverbal character of this suffix remained clear all along, *avidus* may have been restored to *aveō* at any time. Apparently, no such restoration took place in *\*ad-ai-idos*, which therefore developed into *\*ad-audos*. The next change is that of *\*ad-audos* to *\*ad-ūdos*, which requires that the reduction of *\*au* to a monophthong in non-initial syllables be dated later than the reduction of *\*-ai-* to *\*-au-*. In fact, we seem to possess evidence for this chronology in Plautus and Cato's *inlūtus* 'unwashed' < *\*in-lautus* < *\*in-lauatus*. On the other hand, *-lūtus* might be analogical to the type *abluō*, *ab-lūtus*, where long *ū* in the participle is a productive feature. If the etymology of *claudō* from *\*klāui-de/o-* 'to lock' (thus Meiser (2003) 122) is correct, this would also provide the proof we need, for in the compound *in-clūdō*, *-au-* has reached the stage of *ū*. However, we cannot be sure that *claudō* really goes back to the disyllabic base of *clāuis* 'key': Schrijver (1991) 175 offers either *\*kleh<sub>2</sub>u-d-* or *\*kleh<sub>2</sub>uVd-* as reconstructions. But even if these examples are inconclusive, we can observe that nothing contradicts the chronology *\*ad-avidos* > *\*ad-audos* > *\*ad-ūdos*.

At one of the stages *\*ad-avidos*, *\*ad-audos* or *\*ad-ūdos*, the second *d* must have been dissimilated to *l*, yielding *\*adūlos*. Such a dissimilation would be similar to the one yielding *r* in the word *meridiē* 'midday' from *\*medi-diē*. A perfectly parallel form in which *d<sub>1</sub>d<sub>2</sub>* was dissimilated to *d<sub>1</sub>l* does not exist, but we do find the sound change of a single *\*d* to *l* in intervocalic position, even if no certain conditioning

2 The earlier meaning 'to be eager' of *audeō* can still be seen in Plautus' interjection *sōdēs* 'if you please' < *\*si audēs*.

environment has been determined yet. This change gives contrasting sets of words such as *oleō* 'to smell (intr.)' and *olfaciō* 'to smell (tr.)' besides the retention of *d* in *odor* 'smell' and *odefacit* 'to smell (tr.)' (Paul. Fest.); *solium* 'seat' to *sedeō*; *ūligō* 'marsh' besides *ūdus* < *uuidus* 'wet, soaked'; and *mālus* 'pole; mast' from earlier *\*mazdos*. In addition, Latin shows a number of words in which word-initial *\*d-* has turned into *l-*, such as *lingua* 'tongue' < *dingua*, *lēuir* 'brother-in-law' < *\*daeuer*, *lautia* 'the entertainment for foreign guests' < *dautia* and *lacrima* 'tear' < *dacrima*. In none of these cases (except for *lautia*)<sup>3</sup> was there a neighbouring dental consonant which might have caused what we would call a dissimilation. This renders it all the more likely that such a dissimilation could have happened in the postulated preform *\*adūdos*.

In short, I postulate an adj. *\*ad-aidus* 'eager for'. Once the connection between *\*ad-audus* or *\*ad-ūdos* 'eager for' and plain *aidus* had become opaque to the speakers, the second *d* dissimilated to *l*, yielding *\*ad-ūlos*. From this adjective, then, the verb *adūlāre* 'to be eager' was derived, which specialized into the meaning 'to fawn (upon), to flatter'.

Published by The Cambridge Philological Society  
[www.classics.cam.ac.uk/pcps/pcps/home.html](http://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/pcps/pcps/home.html)

© The Cambridge Philological Society, 2007

ISBN 978-0-906014-31-8

This book is available direct from Oxbow Books, Park End Place, Oxford, OX1 1HN  
[www.oxbowbooks.com](http://www.oxbowbooks.com)

Printed by Cambridge University Press  
[www.cambridge.org/printing](http://www.cambridge.org/printing)

3 On the etymology of *lautia*, cf. most recently Driessen (2003) 354f., who reconstructs *\*dautia* < *\*douH(o)-tieh<sub>2</sub>*, to a root *\*deuH-* 'to present with a gift'. Whereas *dautia* is a hapax from Paul. Fest., *lautia* only occurs in the *Senatusconsultum de Asclepiade* (CIL 1.588.8), Livy and Apuleius. It always co-occurs with *locus* or *loca*: *locum lautiaque* (SC), *loca lautia* (Apul.). Hence, *l-* for *d-* may be due to perseveration of the *l-* in *loca* (Walde-Hoffmann 1.324).