

African Latin: The problem of labdacism

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ABSTRACT

In late antiquity, there has been a public opinion that African Latin is specific and different from the Latin spoken in other regions of the Roman Empire. Several grammarians also mention – in comparison with the so-called classical Latin – incorrect (linguistic) phenomena, which are associated with the Latin speakers of the African provinces. In my paper, I will examine one of these (perceived?) *Africanisms*, the wrong use of the *l* sound/letter (*labdacism*) through a selection of texts available in the grammatical tradition, and finally, with the inclusion of African epigraphical material, I will discuss the phenomenon of wrong gemination and degemination in African provinces, which might closely be related to the phenomenon called *labdacism* by grammarians.

KEYWORDS

North-Africa, Latin linguistics, *africitas*, Vulgar Latin, inscriptions, labdacism, geminates, africanism

In many late antique grammarians' notes we can read references to the often incorrect use of the Latin language, different from classical Latin. Some sources also mention regional characteristics, so we can also find comments on African Latin in several grammarians' works.

If we want to examine the characteristics of African Latin, we must distinguish between texts written with a literary need and texts written without a literary need, which may be closer to the spoken language. Language changes can therefore be examined in the form of phenomena

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different from the normative, classical Latin language usage, which mostly reflect changes in the living language and changes in the language structure.¹ A large amount of well-localized and dateable texts are needed for all of this, which were only relatively slightly influenced by the normative language, and thus provide an opportunity for the appearance of Vulgar Latin phenomena, vulgarisms. That is why the inscriptions, which might reflect the speech and language of less educated artisans and workers – that is, ordinary people – are very valuable linguistic monuments. They have the further advantage of being located geographically and of having a date assigned to them, sometimes quite precise, sometimes within a margin acceptable to the linguist, and of forming, in total, a huge group of data; thus collectively they offer a wide gamut of possibilities for statistical research, since the number of inscriptions that have survived in the main imperial provinces runs into the tens of thousands.² The most of the texts that attest details of Vulgar Latin reproduce nonstandard features because of the incompetence or casualness of their authors or copyists.³ Within the framework of the Computerized Historical Linguistic Database of the Latin Inscriptions of the Imperial Age (“Database” henceforth),⁴ we can record these so-called ‘errors’ appearing on the inscriptions, i.e. codes describing the difference between the relevant (erroneous) and the normative (classical) text, and finally analyze the data thus obtained in a comparative manner.⁵

In relation to the peculiarities of the African Latin language, one of the somewhat confusing phenomena mentioned several times by grammarians is the error related to the sound (letter) *l*, better known as the labdacism, which some people considered an Africanism even in late antiquity.

In this paper, I will examine this linguistic phenomenon: first, I will take a selection of relevant grammatical passages one by one,⁶ then I will analyze the African inscription material in relation to the gemination associated (wrongly) with the phenomenon, which I will finally compare with the inscription material of the city of Rome with the help of the Database. My questions are the following: what could the late ancient grammarians have understood by the

¹HERMAN, J.: *Vulgar Latin*. University Park, Pennsylvania 2000, 1–8, 17–18; ADAMIK, B.: In Search of the Regional Diversification of Latin: Some Methodological Considerations in Employing the Inscriptional Evidence. In BIVILLE, Fr. et al. (eds): *Latin vulgaire – latin tardif IX. Actes du IX^e colloque international sur le latin vulgaire et tardif, Lyon, 6–9 septembre 2009*. Lyon 2012, 123–139.

²HERMAN (n. 1) 18.

³HERMAN (n. 1) 17–18.

⁴<https://lldb.elte.hu/en/database/>

⁵Cf. The Guidelines for Data Collection: “For the purposes of this project, data are defined as linguistic phenomena that can be isolated at text level (in terms of surface manifestation, such phenomena can be phonetic [orthographic], morphological, syntactic, lexicographical, or lexico-semantic) and that deviate from what is called the “classical” norm. For the data collector, qualifying a phenomenon as datum is based on mere difference, as defined above, irrespective of whether that difference corresponds to his/her expectations in terms of diachronic processes that he/she may be aware of, whether it is due to linguistic or extra-linguistic (i.e. graphic or technical etc.) factors. Whenever the collector is uncertain whether a phenomenon deviates from the norm or corresponds to it, or when such a decision would require special investigations, the phenomenon should be treated as datum and thus be recorded; doubts are to be indicated by ticking the square entitled “fortasse recte” in the rubric REMARK.” https://lldb.elte.hu/admin/doc_guidelines.php?&language=eng

⁶Due to the choice of scope, I cannot examine every passage that discusses the issue of labdacism, but for a summary of this passages, see: ZAGO, A.: Labdacism: a vitium ‘from the provinces’? *Linguarum varietas* 6 (2017) 93–107, 104–106.



name ‘labdacism’ and could this linguistic phenomenon really be an African peculiarity? To what extent does the language of this remote, partly peripheral area differ from the capital and center of the *Imperium Romanum*, and are the Latin grammarians right?

We can read more about the phenomenon of labdacism in the grammarian Pompeius in the following, not entirely clear passage:⁷

*labdacismus est ille, qui aut per unum l fit aut per duo; sed per unum, si tenuius sonet, per duo, si pinguius sonet. puta llargus; debemus dicere largus. ut pingue sonet; et si dicas llex non lex: uitiosa sunt per labdacismum. item in gemino l [quando fuerint duo l], si uolueris pinguius sonare, si dicamus Metelus, Catulus. in his etiam agnoscimus gentium uitia; labdacismis scatent Afri, raro est ut aliquis dicat l: per geminum l sic locuntur Romani, omnes Latini sic locuntur, Catullus, Metellus.*⁸

That is labdacism, which is affected either by a single *l* or by a double *l*. It is affected by a single *l* if the sound is thinner (than the norm). It is affected by a double *l* if the sound is fatter. Take for example *llargus*: we should say *largus*. The result [of the double *l*] is that the sound is fat. And for example if you were to say *llex* not *lex*. These are faulty pronunciations by labdacism. Likewise in the case of double *l*, if you want to say the sound more fatly but we were to say (instead) *Metelus*, *Catulus* [that would be the inverse form of labdacism]. In these matters we also recognise the faults of (different) peoples. Africans abound in labdacisms. It is only rarely that anyone says a (single) *l* [in words such as *Metelus* and *Catulus*]. By means of a double *l* the Romans and all Latins pronounce *Catullus* and *Metellus*.⁹

Pompeius specifically associates the phenomenon with African Latin speakers and confuses the two pronunciations of the *l* sound with the issue of gemination, i.e. doubling.¹⁰ The labdacism is therefore a mistake related to the pronunciation of the *l* sound in two ways – *tenuius* and *pinguius*, thinner and fatter – which is to some extent related to the incorrect use of the *l* geminate.¹¹

Originally, however, the grammatical tradition distinguished three types of sounds regarding the *l* sound, which can be read in the following excerpt from Priscian:¹²

*l triplicem, ut Plinio videtur, sonum habet: exilem quando geminatur secundo loco posita, ut ille, Metellus; plenum quando finit nomina uel syllabas et quando aliquam habet ante se in eadem syllaba consonantem, ut sol, silua, flauus, clarus; medium in aliis, ut lectum, lectus.*¹³

⁷Pompeius Grammaticus was an African grammarian of the 5th century.

⁸KEIL, H.: *Grammatici Latini Vol. V. Artium scriptores minores*. Lipsiae 1868, 286, 34–287, 6. In the new edition of Olm’s *Collectanea Grammatica Latina* series, there is a different reading: *debemus dicere largus ut pinguius sonet; <et> si dicas llex non lex*. Cf. ZAGO, A. (ed.): *Pompeii “Commentum in Artis Donati partem tertiam”*. Tomo I. Hildesheim 2017, 14–15.

⁹The English translations of the Latin texts are from the J. N. ADAMS’ book *The Regional Diversification of Latin 200 BC – AD 600*. Cambridge 2007, 265.

¹⁰ADAMS (n. 9) 267.

¹¹According to the opinion of Zago, the question of labdacism is more about the nature of the sound (velar vs. palatal) than about gemination, and the grammarian uses *duo l* to indicate the palatal sound and *unum l* to indicate the velar sound. (*l* tenuis = palatal, *l* pinguius = velar) Cf. ZAGO: Labdacism (n. 6) 93–95, and ZAGO: Pompeii Commentum (n. 8) 90–91.

¹²Priscianus Caesariensis was an African grammarian from the Roman province of Mauretania Caesariensis, of the 5–6th century AD.

¹³KEIL, H. – HERTZ, M.: *Grammatici Latini Vol. II. Prisciani Institutionum Grammaticarum Libri I–XII*. Lipsae 1855, 29, 8–12.



l has a triple sound, as Pliny thinks: thin when it stands second in double *ll*, as *ille*, *Metellus*; full at the end of a word or a syllable and when it has a consonant before it in the same syllable, as *sol*, *silua*, *flauus*, *clarus*; intermediate in other words, as *lectum*, *lectus*.¹⁴

The third category, *sonus medius*, is located between the softer (*exilis*) and the fatter, fuller (*plenus*) pronunciation. There could have been some kind of intermediate sound in all cases when it was not necessary to use a soft or full *l*, such as when pronouncing the initial *l* sound (*‘lectum’*, *‘lectus’*). If we go back to the Pompeius quote, we can see that this “middle sound” disappears, or rather merges into the correctly used *pinguis* pronunciation. Pompeius’s first example – *‘largus’* – illustrates this well, as it begins with the sound *l*, which was previously an example of the *medius sonus*. The reason for this could be that probably the grammarians themselves could not feel or hear the difference between the three types of pronunciation very well.

Sidney Allen, in his work *Vox Latina*, when discussing the consonant *l*, cites this detail related to Pliny in connection with the two pronunciations of the sound *l*, which, according to him, is similar to the two types of *l* sounds used in the English language, called “clear” and “dark”.¹⁵ The former (“clear”) occurs before vowels (*‘look’*, *‘silly’*), and the latter (“dark”) occurs in all other cases, i.e. before a consonant or at the end of a word (such as *‘hill’*, *‘field’*).¹⁶ According to him, a similar thing happens in Latin.¹⁷ Pliny uses the term *plenus* to name the pronunciation of the *l* sound when it is at the end of a syllable or word, or before a consonant. These situations are very similar to the use of the English “dark” *l*, so we can assume that in the case of Latin, such a *l* sound could have been realized in the correct *plenus* pronunciation, which later grammarians associated with the term *pinguis*.¹⁸ In contrast to this is the *exilis* sound, which expresses a softer, more subtle quality of the *l* sound, which in the Plinian passage quoted by Priscian refers to the second member of the geminate *l* (*‘exilem quando geminatur secundo loco posita, ut ille, Metellus’*). This part of Priscian’s passage is very difficult to interpret, it is conceivable that we should rather think of the geminate that was split in two during the syllabification, and not that the first and second half of the geminate would have been phonetically different. This interpretation can be supported by the fact that the issue of syllables is also discussed when defining the other two categories.

For later grammarians, however, it is no longer clear when the *exilis* pronunciation should be used, they all try to define its situation and occurrence in a different way. What is common, however, is that they all – perhaps starting from Pliny’s place – connect the *exilis* sound to the geminate *l*. We can also see this in Pompeius: *‘per duo, si pinguius sonet’*, and a little later: *‘item in gemino l’*, even the example is similar to the Plinian place: *‘Metellus’*, *‘Catullus’* in Pompeius, *‘ille’*, *‘Metellus’* in Pliny. So, over time, the concept of labdacism became even more confusing, since grammarians extend the case of soft sound to gemination – i.e. *-ll-* as a whole – and do not

¹⁴ ADAMS (n. 9) 266.

¹⁵ ALLEN, W. S.: *Vox Latina. A Guide to the Pronunciation of Classical Latin*. Cambridge 1978, 33–34.

¹⁶ ALLEN (n. 15) 33.

¹⁷ ALLEN (n. 15) 33.

¹⁸ The terms *plenus* and *pinguis* are used to refer to the acoustic quality of back vowels, as against *exilis* for front vowels. Cf. ALLEN (n. 15) 34.



take into account that originally it was realized only in the second member of the geminate, and probably only during syllabification.

According to Consentius,¹⁹ the error of labdacism lies in the fact that the sound is pronounced either more subtly (*subtilius*) or richly (*pinguius*):²⁰

*Labdacismum uitium in eo esse dicunt, quod eadem littera uel subtilius a quibusdam uel pinguius ecfertur.*²¹

They say that the fault of labdacism takes the following form, that the letter is pronounced either more subtly (than the norm) by some or more richly.²²

Then he continues like this a few lines down:

*Romana lingua emendationem habet in hoc quoque distinctione. nam alicubi pinguius, alicubi debet exilius proferri; pinguis cum uel b sequitur, ut in albo, uel c, ut in pulchro, uel f, ut in adelfis, uel g, ut in alga, uel m, ut in pulmone, uel p, ut in scalpro; exilius autem proferenda est, ubicumque ab ea uerbum incipit, ut in lepore, lana, lupo, uel ubi in eodem uerbo et prior syllaba in hac finitur et sequens ab ea incipit, ut ille et Allia.*²³

The Roman tongue has a correction to make in this matter also by way of distinction. For in some places the sound should be thicker, in others thinner; thicker when *b* follows, as in *albus*, or *c*, as in *pulcher*, or *f*, as in *adelfi*, or *g*, as in *alga*, or *m*, as in *pulmo*, or *p*, as in *scalprum*; but it should have a thinner pronunciation wherever a word begins with it, as in *lepus*, *lana*, *lupus*, or where in the same word the preceding syllable ends with this letter and the following begins with it, as *ille* and *Allia*.²⁴

¹⁹Publius Consentius was a 5th century Latin grammarian, probably from the Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis.

²⁰Consentius also writes about other mistakes before the quoted part, such as iotacism, the mistake about the sound *i*, where he talks about three types of pronunciation, *pinguis*, *exilis* and *medius sonus*: *Iotacismum dicunt uitium quod per i litteram uel pinguius uel exilius prolatam fit. Galli pinguius hanc utuntur, ut cum dicunt ite, non expresse ipsam proferentes, sed inter e et i pinguiorem sonum nescio quem ponentes. Graeci exilius hanc proferunt, adeo expressioni eius tenui studentes, ut, si dicant ius, aliquantulum de priori littera sic proferant, ut videas dissyllabum esse factum. Romanae linguae in hoc erit moderatio, ut exilis eius sonus sit, ubi ab ea uerbum incipit, ut ite, aut pingior, ubi in ea desinit uerbum, ut habui tenui; medium quendam sonum inter e et i habet, ubi in medio sermone est, ut hominem. mihi tamen uidetur, quando producta est, plenior uel acutior esse; quando autem brevis est, medium sonum exhibere debet, sicut eadem exempla, quae posita sunt, possunt declarare. Cf. KEIL (n. 6) 394, 11–21. For this problematic text (with translation and commentary), see ADAMS (n. 9) 245–250 and MARI, T.: *Consentius' De barbarismis et metaplasmis. Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary*. Oxford 2021, 74–77.*

²¹KEIL (n. 8) 394, 22–24. In the critical edition of Mari: *Labdacismi uitium in eo esse dicunt, quod eadem littera uel subtilius <a> quibusdam uel pinguius ecfertur*; cf. MARI (n. 20) 76.

²²ADAMS (n. 9) 265. Cf. MARI (n. 20) 77: “They say that the fault of labdacism consists in the fact that some speakers pronounce the letter *l* more thinly or richly.”

²³KEIL (n. 8) 394, 29–36. Cf. MARI (n. 20) 76: *pinguius cum uel 'b' sequitur ut in 'balbo' (...), uel 'p' ut in 'Calpe'*.

²⁴ADAMS (n. 9) 266. Cf. MARI (n. 20) 77: “In this matter too the correctness of the Roman language lies in a distinction. For in some places *l* must be pronounced more richly, in others more thinly: more richly when *b* follows as in *balbus*, or *c* as in *pulcher*, or *f* as in *Adelfi*, or *g* as in *alga*, or *m* as in *pulmo*, or *p* as in *Calpe*; on the other hand, it must be pronounced more thinly whenever a word begins with it, as in *lepus*, *lana*, *lupus*, or when in the same word the preceding syllable ends with this letter and the following begins with it, as in *ille* and *Allia*.”



Consentius also mentions only two categories, the softer and the fuller, fatter pronunciation of the sound *l*, but he merges the third case, *medius sonus*, into the former, while in Pompeius we saw that the pronunciation of word-initial *l* (*largus*) is still *pinguis*, belongs to the full sound.

While in Pompeius the place of the *l* sound within the word is of little importance – in contrast to Pliny’s place, where it determines the three different qualities of the *l* –, Consentius tries to determine which pronunciation and where the *l* sound is found within the word, without much success. The word-initial position originally meant the intermediate, *medius* pronunciation, in the case of the geminate position, it is not mentioned that the softer pronunciation would only apply to the second member of the syllabic geminate.²⁵ And he links the fuller, fatter pronunciation to the consonants that follow the sound *l*, listing six examples for each case (*b, c, f, g, m, p*), while Pliny only had to apply the condition that in the same syllable some consonant should precede the *l* sound (“*plenum ... quando aliquam habet ante se in eadem syllaba consonantem*”).

Servius, enumerating the various errors of language, makes the following brief remark about labdacism:²⁶

*labdacismi fiunt, si aut unum l tenuius dicis, [solocismus] ut Lucius, aut geminum pinguius, ut Metellus.*²⁷

labdacisms occur if you either say one *l* more thinly, as in *Lucius*, or a double more thickly, as in *Metellus*.²⁸

According to Servius’ formulation, one *l* should be pronounced more fully, and two – thus the geminate – should be pronounced weaker and thinner. Based on these, it seems that the essence of labdacism was that the two pronunciations, softer and fuller, were used incorrectly, i.e. they were interchanged, and the correct pronunciation was tied to whether an *l* or a geminate was present in the given word.²⁹

We can also discover this “confusion” in Isidore in the 6th and 7th centuries,³⁰ who defines labdacism as follows:

*Labdacismus est, si pro uno l duo pronuntientur, ut Afri faciunt, sicut colloquium pro conloquio; uel quotiens unum l exilius, duo largius proferimus. Quod contra est; nam unum largius, duo exilius proferre debemus.*³¹

²⁵“Consentius seems to have shifted ground and to be talking about simplification of the geminate.” See ADAMS, J. N.: *Bilingualism and the Latin Language*. Cambridge 2004, 433.

²⁶Marius (or Maurus) Servius Honoratus, flourished 4th century AD in Rome, Latin grammarian, commentator and teacher.

²⁷KEIL, H.: *Grammatici Latini Vol. IV. Probi, Donati, Servii qui feruntur de arte grammatica libri, et notarum laterculi*. Lipsiae 1864, 445, 12–13. For the recent edition of this text, see ZAGO, A.: *Vitia et virtutes orationis nel commento di Servio a Donato (GL IV, 443. 28–448. 17) edizione critica, traduzione, note di commento*. *Latinitas* 4/2 (2016) 93–134.

²⁸ADAMS (n. 9) 268.

²⁹For the interpretation of this text, see also ZAGO: *Vitia* (n. 27) 116, 62 n.

³⁰St. Isidore of Seville (Isidorus Hispalensis, c. 560 – 636) theologian, bishop, and encyclopedist.

³¹Isidorus Hispalensis: *Étymologies. Livre 1. La Grammaire*. Texte établi, traduit et commenté par O. SPEVAK. Paris 2020, 133. (I 32. 8). For the French translation, see p. 132: “Le labdacisme se produit si deux *l* sont prononcés au lieu d’un, comme le font les Africains, par exemple *colloquium* au lieu de *conloquium* « entretien »; ou chaque fois que nous prononçons un *l* trop faiblement ou deux *l* trop largement. C’est à l’inverse, car nous devons prononcer un *l* plus largement et deux *l* plus faiblement.”



Labdacism is when instead of one *l* two are pronounced, as is done by Africans, as for example in *colloquium* for *conloquium*; or when we say one *l* more thinly or two more thickly. This is the opposite (of what is required), for we should say one more thickly and two more thinly.³²

It is clear that with Isidor, the incorrect gemination of *l* already becomes part of the labdacism, “*labdacismus est, si pro uno l duo pronuntientur*”, i.e. “labdacism is when two *l*s are pronounced instead of one *l*”. However, his example for this – so ‘*colloquium*’ instead of ‘*conloquium*’ – has nothing to do with the pronunciation of the *l* sound, since in this case we are talking about the assimilation of the prefix.³³ Both versions are classical, one with an etymological spelling (*con-l-*), the other with an assimilated one (*col-l-*). From the second half of the text, “*nam unum largius, duo exilius proferre debemus*”, it is also clear that the correct use of the *l* sound, corresponding to its two different sounds, has been confused with the position of the *l* geminate/degeminate.

However, Isidore’s short comment that this kind of mistake is particularly characteristic of Africans (“*ut Afri faciunt*”) shows a congeniality with the text of Pompeius, who also considered it important to emphasize that Africans are full of labdacisms (“*labdacismis scatent Afri*”).

So we can see that the definition and interpretation of labdacism is confusing even with the cited late ancient grammarians, which could have developed somewhere earlier, in the grammarian tradition, and continued to be handed down in this form.³⁴ In addition to the fact that the different pronunciations of the *l* sound became blurred over time, and they began to connect it with the wrong gemination and degemination of *l*, they thought they discovered a kind of vernacular peculiarity in the phenomenon of *labdacism*, which they associated with African speakers.³⁵

If not the pronunciation of the *l* sound, we can examine its correct or incorrect gemination and degemination on the material with African inscriptions.³⁶ For the sake of illustration, I compare the results with Rome, the center of the Roman Empire, since there are many inscriptions in the capital, and the North African area is similarly abundant in inscriptions and data.³⁷ The data used here come from *Africa proconsularis* and *Numidia*.³⁸

³²ADAMS (n. 9) 268.

³³ADAMS (n. 9) 268; ZAGO: Labdacism (n. 6) 102–103, and KISS, L.: *Les transformations de la structure syllabique en latin tardif*. Debrecen 1971, 68.

³⁴ADAMS (n. 9) 268.

³⁵ZAGO: Labdacism (n. 6) 93–108, 102–103.

³⁶Contrary to Kiss’ claim that there is no gemination in the African inscription material, based on the data of the Database, we can see that there are quite a few examples of it from the provinces of *Africa proconsularis* and *Numidia*. See KISS (n. 33) 37. “Inscriptions d’Afrique: pas d’exemple.”

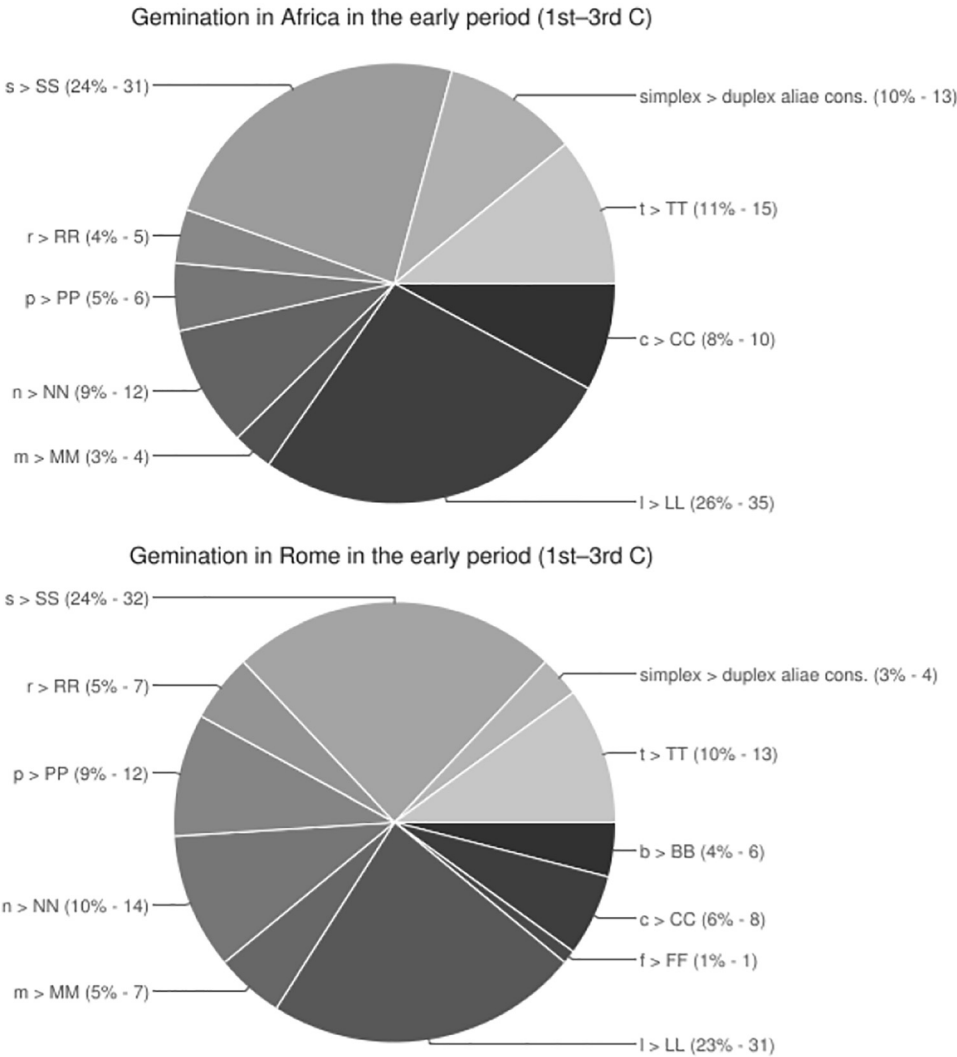
³⁷The LLDB data forms referred to in this survey represent the status of the LLDB Database on 31/05/2022.

³⁸It is important to note that the inscription’s collections are not uniform regarding the two provinces, since *Numidia* will only be an independent province during the reign of Septimius Severus, so some collection, which consider the previous territorial division, classify the Numidian inscriptions under *Africa proconsularis*. However, within the framework of the Database, we always work with the borders designated by Septimius Severus, treating the two provinces separately, so in this study, North Africa will mean *Numidia* and *Africa proconsularis*. (Consequently, the inclusion of inscription’s material from the westernmost North Africa province, *Mauretania*, will be the next step in the processing of this complex problem.)



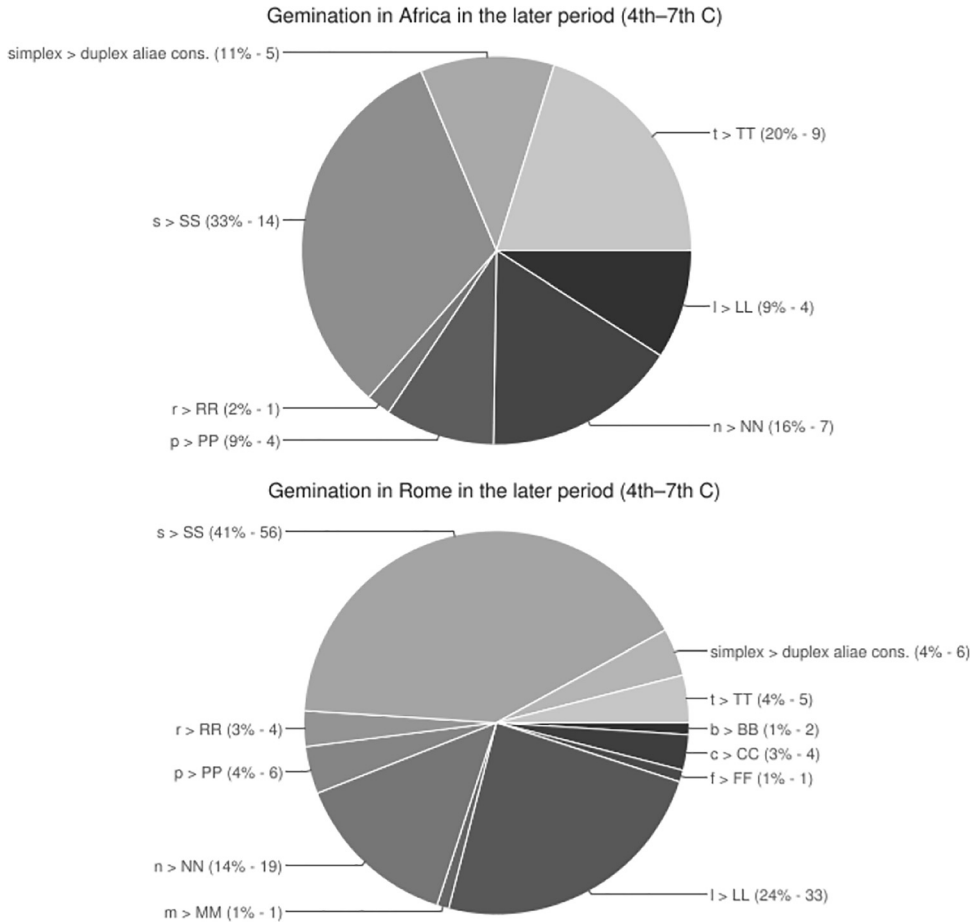
In the case of gemination, when *ll* are used wrongly instead of one *l*,³⁹ the diagrams of Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the distribution of the data, also first in the early and then in the late period in Africa and in Rome.

Table 1. Geminations in Africa and Rome in the early period



³⁹For example, LLDB-42709: *l* > *ll*, AV|RELLIAE = Aureliae, *ILAlg* 1, 241, 1–2 = *CIL* 8, 5328, 1–2, Africa proconsularis, Calama, 170–217 AD.



Table 2. Geminations in Africa and Rome in the later period

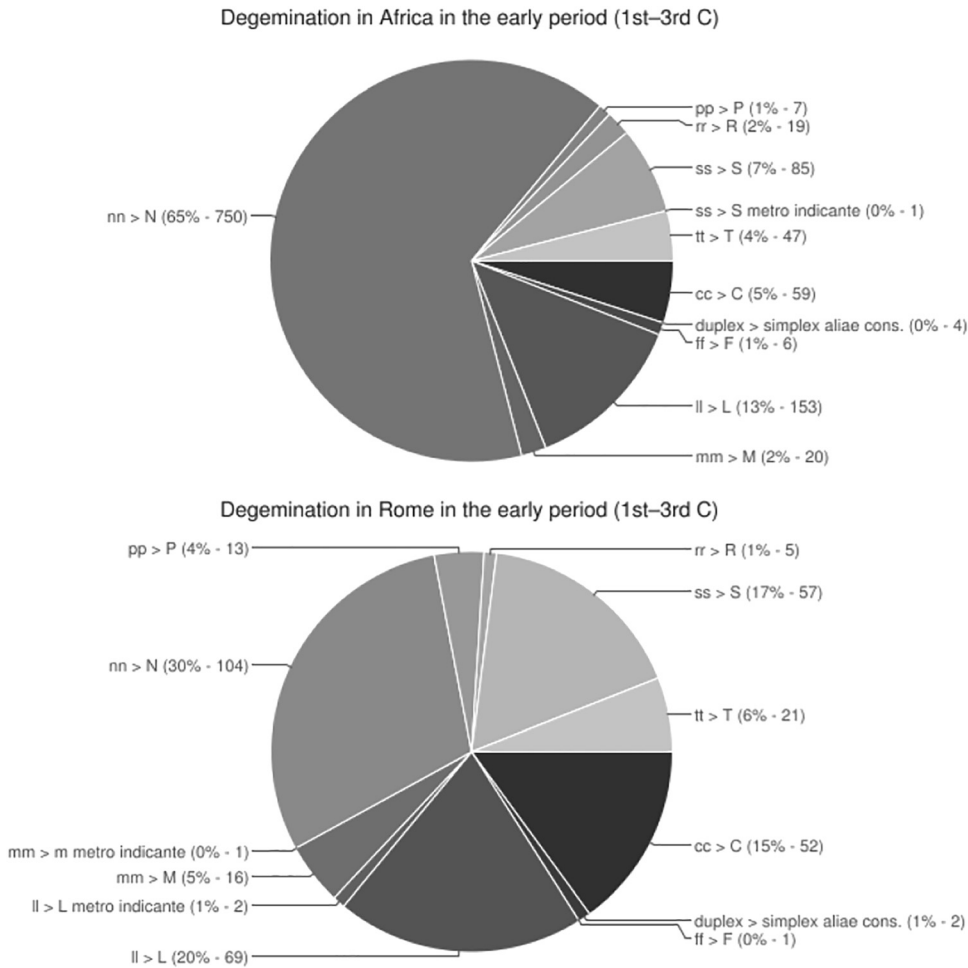
In the early period, the false gemination of *l* can be said to be more significant in Africa, where it ranks first among errors with 26%. In Rome, we can see a barely smaller percentage, it accounts for 23% of the wrong gemination phenomena, but here the wrong gemination of *l* is pushed to the second place – behind the consonant *s*. For the late period, we can see a completely different distribution: while in Africa the gemination of *l* decreases significantly – from 26% to 9% – we can observe a small increase in Rome – from 23% to 24%. While in Africa the wrong gemination of *l* is relegated to the fifth place, it is still in the second place in Rome. Based on these, we can say that in the early period, the wrong gemination of *l* could be present with roughly the same intensity in both areas, however, by the 4th–7th century, it receded behind other gemination phenomena in the African provinces, while it was still significant in Rome.



In the case of degeminations, when one *l* is used wrongly instead double *ll*,⁴⁰ the diagrams in Tables 3 and 4 show the distribution ratios, also first in the early and then in the late period.

Regarding the early diagrams, it is clear that the wrong degemination of the *nn* is very pronounced in Africa, which accounts for about three quarters of the phenomena depicted on the diagram, a total of 65%. The mis-simplification of the *ll* geminate occupies the second place in the chart of early Africa, but with a much smaller percentage, only 13%. On the other

Table 3. Degeminations in Africa and Rome in the early period

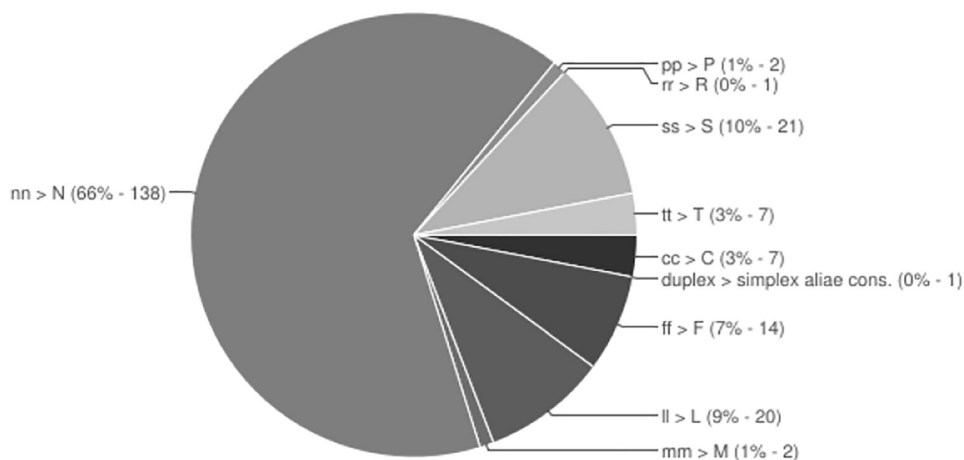


⁴⁰For example, LLDB-86250: *ll* > *L*, TVLIO = Tullio, LBIRNA 732, 11 = AE 1911, 110, 11, Numidia, Cuicul, 364–367 AD.

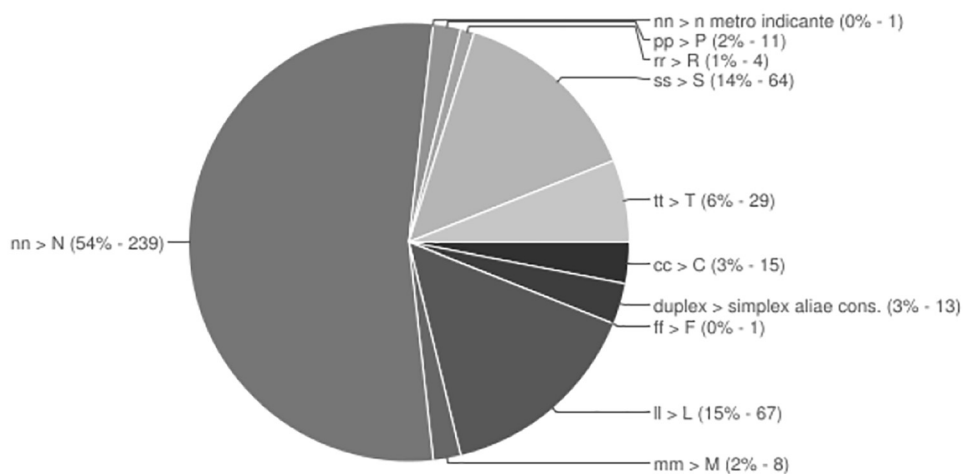


Table 4. Degeminations in Africa and Rome in the later period

Degemination in Africa in the later period (4th–7th C)



Degemination in Rome in the later period (4th–7th C)



hand, in Rome in the early period, we can see a much more balanced distribution on the diagram: erroneous degemination of *nn* can be said to be the most significant phenomenon here as well and represents 30% of false degeminations, but it is not as extreme as in the case of early Africa. The wrong degemination of *ll* also ranks second in early Rome with 20%. Based on these, we can say that the simplification of the *ll* geminate may have been more significant in early Rome (20%) than in early Africa (13%). It is interesting that the sequence of the most frequently occurring false degeminations (*nn*, *ll*, *ss*) is the same in both areas.

By the late period, we can see a decrease in the false simplification of the *ll* geminate in both areas: in Africa it decreases from 13% to 9%, in Rome from 20% to 15%, and it declines with



roughly the same intensity in both areas: in Africa by 4%, in Rome by 5%. It is interesting that in late Africa, the false gemination and degemination of *l/ll* will be 9% less compared to the early era. The simplification of the *nn* geminate in late Africa can still be said to be very significant, 66%, but Rome also caught up, where by the 4–7th centuries, 54% of the degemination phenomena are caused by the error of *nn* within the diagram. The specific genre and wording of the inscription material – especially the year of life (*vixit annos/annis*), which is almost always indicated on the tombstones – may have contributed significantly to such a high rate of erroneous shortening of the *nn* geminate in both areas.

All in all, based on the analysis of the diagrams, we can say that in both the early and late periods, the wrong degemination of *ll* is more significant in Rome than in Africa. Although in the case of the wrong gemination of *l*, Africa “leads” in the early period, ahead of Rome by only 3%, where, however, we can see a slight increase and stagnation in the late period (from 23% to 24%), while in Africa there is a significant decrease (26%–9%).

Because of the question of general distribution of the different geminates in Latin classical texts, i.e. the frequency and statistics of geminates, as a control statistics for the above data, we also included in the examination the analysis of two surviving Latin prose texts from the early and late periods too:⁴¹ in the case of the former, the two works of Apuleius of the 2nd century, of North African origin,⁴² and from the late period Augustine of the 4–5th century⁴³ and his approximate contemporary Ammianus’ texts,⁴⁴ in which we examined the occurrence rates of geminates and finally represented them in diagrams, in Table 5.

In the case of the two early texts, we can see roughly the same distribution with minor differences, which may have been influenced by the particular choice of words in the given text: for example, the term *‘ecce’* appears very often in the excerpt from *Metamorphoses*, obviously as an important element of storytelling.⁴⁵ The occurrence distribution of the geminates shown here is similar to the early distribution of inscribed material in Africa and Rome: the two highest occurrences can be observed in connection with the *s* and *l* geminates: Apuleius has 29% and 23% *ss* geminate, 29% and 28% *ll* geminate.

In the case of the other two late texts, at first glance, the two diagrams are not so similar with regard to the *ll* geminate: while Augustine has 13%, Ammianus has 25%. However, here too we have to take into account the specific wording of the given passage: the Ammianus passage also tells a story in which the noun ‘war’ *‘bellum’* and the name ‘Gallus’ often occur.⁴⁶ If we exclude them, we get roughly 16% instead of 23%. We can therefore see that the pattern of occurrence rates of geminates for both the early and late periods roughly corresponds to the gemination distribution of the African inscribed material. Based on this, we can say that since geminates occur in roughly the same proportion in Latin prose texts as in the diagrams of Roman and

⁴¹Based on The Latin Library (<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com>). Each examined text consists of roughly 60,000 characters.

⁴²Apuleius, *Florida* I–XXIII and Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* I–II 28.

⁴³Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* I 1–23.

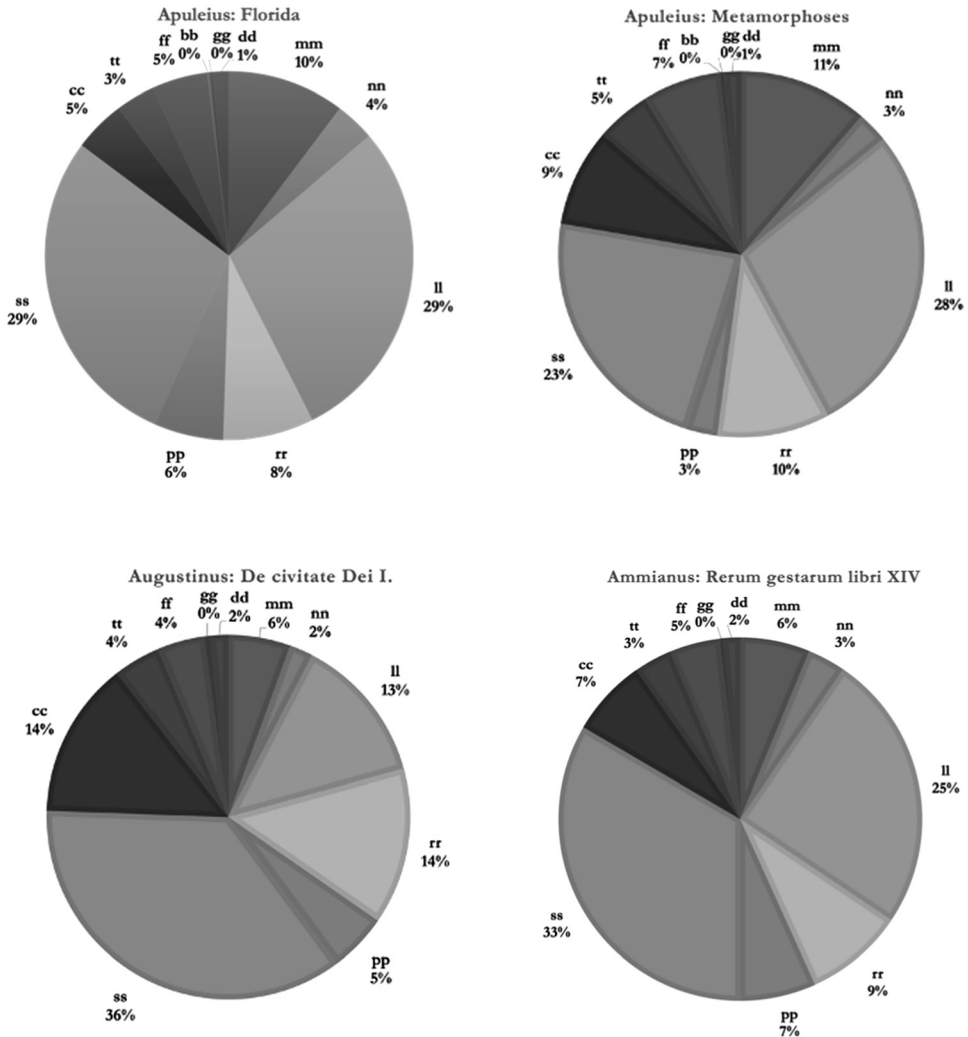
⁴⁴Ammianus, *Rerum gestarum libri* XIV 1–11, 20.

⁴⁵A total of 57 *cc* geminates occurs in the examined text, and 18 times in the word *‘ecce’*. If we subtract 18 from 57, we get only 6%, which is very similar to the 5% of the *Florida* text’s *cc* geminate.

⁴⁶A total of 177 *ll* geminates occurs in the examined text, and 15 times in the word *‘bellum’* or *‘bellator, bellicosus, rebellis’*, and 14 times in the Latin name *‘Gallus’*. If we subtract 29 from 177, we get 21%.



Table 5. Distribution of geminates



African inscriptions, that compared to the general occurrence of geminates, the wrong gemination of *l* could not have been much more significant in Africa: since the *l* sound/letter is one of the most common in Latin prose texts.⁴⁷ At the same time, for example, the 2–3% occurrence of *nn* geminate in the two 4th-century texts compared to the inscriptional material confirms the

⁴⁷Furthermore, the data provided by S. Giannini and G. Marotta show a general prevalence of *ll* geminates in the Latin lexicon. Cf. GIANNINI, S. – MAROTTA, G.: *Fra grammatica e pragmatica. La geminazione consonantica in latino*. Pisa 1989, 234–235, and 255 (Table 4).



importance of the genre of the texts: in the case of the text corpus consisting mostly of epitaphs, the *nn* geminate and its associated errors are obviously more common (here the previously mentioned *vixit annis/annos* formula should be recalled.)

CONCLUSION

From the analyses of the African and Roman inscription material available to us, processed so far, we can conclude that the source of the discussed grammatical places could originally have been related only to irregularities and deviations around the pronunciation of the *l* variants. There may have been some kind of African characteristic in this regard, which a grammarian could have noticed, but by the time this observation reached the later grammarians who dealt with the phenomenon, it was probably no longer significant, i.e. the different pronunciation of *l* was not perceptible. Thus – since they no longer really understood what the essence of the phenomenon was – they began to confuse it with the problem of geminates/degemination, i.e. the wrong lengthening and shortening of *l* from a normative point of view, as is evident from the text of Isidore of Seville, for example.⁴⁸

Thus, taking this into account, we can conclude that the answer to the question posed in the title, whether labdacism is an Africanism, is twofold: on the one hand, the pronunciation of the *l* sound may indeed have had some kind of “African” characteristic, but this may have lost its significance already in late antiquity. On the other hand, however, the gemination and degemination of *l* cannot be considered a barbarism specifically characteristic of African Latin: on the inscription material, only in the case of wrong gemination does Africa precede Rome in the early period, in the other cases we encounter a higher proportion of wrong gemination and degemination of *l* in Rome.

NOTE

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⁴⁸ According to Zago: “more generally, the simplification of [ll] (and not only of this geminate consonant) to the single consonant appears to be a very widespread feature in African inscriptions from as early as the II century. However, it would seem rather rash to hypothesize that these forms should be seen as linked directly or *in toto* to the problem of the velar pronunciation of palatal geminate [ll].” See ZAGO: Labdacism (n. 6) 104. The issue of gemination/degemination probably had nothing to do with the two pronunciations of *l* (velar and palatal), but it can be seen from the grammatical passages that over time the two phenomena – the velar/palatal pronunciations of *l* and the wrong gemination/degemination – began to be confused at the later grammarians.

