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Recurrent Replacement of the Narrative Past by a Present Perfect Tense in the History of Indo-Aryan

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*yamò vā amriyata / tē devā yamyā yamām apābruvāms (I) tāṁ yād
 aprchant sābravīd adyamrtēti / te 'bruvan nā vā iyām imām itthām
 mṛṣyate rātrīm *srjāmahā ity (I) āhar vāvā tārhy āsīn nā rātris
 (I) tē devā rātrīm asrjanta tātaḥ śvāstānam abhavat tātaḥ sā tām
 amṛṣyata (I) tāsmād āhur ahorātrāṇi vāvāghām mṛṣayantīti /*

Yama had died. The Gods tried to persuade Yami to forget him. Whenever they asked her, she said: “But it is only today that he died.” Then the Gods said: “Like this she will certainly never forget him; let us create the night.” So the Gods created night and thus there arose a morrow; thereupon she forgot him. Therefore people say: “Without doubt, day and night together let sorrow be forgotten.”

(*Maitrāyaṇī-Saṁhitā* 1.5.12; transl. R. PANIKKAR & al.)

Ich scheidet dabei den erörternden und den historischen Stil.
(I shall differentiate between the discussing and the historical style.)

BERTOLD DELBRÜCK, *Altindische Syntax* (1888)

I. Introduction

1. Basis distinction of the proposed analysis:

erörternder Stil	—	historischer Stil (DELBRÜCK 1888)
plane of discourse	—	narrative plane (BENVENISTE ([1959] 1966))
Besprechen	—	Erzählen (WEINRICH ([1964] 2001))
speech mode	—	narrative mode (PADUCHEVA 2010)
interlocutionary mode	—	story mode (FLUDERNIK 2012)

- Languages with 2 mutually exclusive sets of tenses for each plane (Old Indo-Aryan, classical French)
- Languages with tenses that have different functions on each of the 2 planes (Classical Prakrit, Russian)
- Languages that combine both possibilities (Hindi-Urdu)

Distinctions on these lines have been applied to an analysis of the tense system of literary Hindi-Urdu by MONTAUT 2016 and KIMMIG 2014.

2. *Replacement of a narrative past by a present perfect:*

In Indo-european languages:

- in modern spoken French: BENVENISTE ([1959] 1966)
- in Southern German: LINDGREN (1957), several recent studies
- in Russian: MASLOV 1964, TORRECILLAS OLIVER (1997)
- in Old and Middle Iranian: JÜGEL (2015)

Explanations:

1. phonetic and morphological erosion
(19th century style ‘decay of language’ theory)
2. semantic/functional shift
(this explanation, with variations about the details, has been adopted by all studies quoted above)

Proposed explanation:

The default tense of the narrative plane ('preterite') is replaced by a retrospective or resultative tense of the plane of discourse ('present perfect' or 'resultative perfect'). This implies a general spread of the plane of discourse into the narrative plane during a particular phase in the history of a language.

It is mainly the varied syntactical types of resultative constructions (on these, see NEDJALKOV, ed., 1988) that bring new syntactical patterns to the core of the tense system when such a replacement happens.

II. Old Indo-Aryan (Vedic)

I. Vedic I (early Vedic prose)

'Past' tenses of Early Vedic:

plane of discourse: retrospective/recent past = present perfect I
(*luñ*, 'aorist')

resultative/retrospective (*lit*, 'perfect')

resultative = (*ta/na*-participle)

narrative plane: default tense = preterite I (*lan*, 'imperfect')

NOTE: *The traditional labels of European grammar for the OIA tenses are based on morphological parallels between Classical Greek and Sanskrit and therefore inappropriate and misleading.*

This system is represented in the following short narrative from one of the earliest Vedic prose texts:

- (1) Yama had died (*amriyata* preterite_I). The Gods tried to persuade Yami to forget him (*ápābruvan* preterite_I, conative). Whenever they asked (*ápṛchan* preterite_I, probably iterative) her, she said (*abravīt* preterite_I): “But it is only today that he died (*amṛta* ‘aorist’ as present perfect).« Then the Gods said (*abruvan* preterite_I): “Like this she will certainly never forget (*mṛṣyate* future) him; let us create (*sṛjāvahai* subjunctive) the night.” So the Gods created (*asṛjanta* preterite_I) night and thus there arose (*abhavat* preterite_I) a morrow; thereupon she forgot him (*amṛśyata* preterite_I). (*Maitrāyaṇī-Saṃhitā* 1.5.12)

2. Vedic II (middle and late Vedic prose)

'Past' tenses of Middle and Late Vedic:

Middle Vedic starts replacing the old default tense of the narrative plane ('imperfect') by the resultative tense of the plane of discourse ('perfect'). However, since a resultative tense form cannot by itself establish narrative sequence, the 'perfect' (*lit*), when taking over the function of a preterite, is almost always combined with the sentence connecting particle *ha* (DELBRÜCK 1888; see also WEINRICH ([1964] 2001 for parallels in modern spoken French and German).

The resulting system is:

plane of discourse:	retrospective = present perfect ₁ (<i>luñ</i> , 'aorist')
narrative plane:	default tense = <i>ha</i> + preterite ₂ (<i>lit</i> , 'perfect')
	habitual past = <i>sma</i> + present (<i>lat</i>)

- (2) Vṛṣa, the son of Jana, was (*āsa* preterite₂) the priest of king Tryaruna, the son of Trivṛṣan from the clan of the Aikṣvāka. Now, in the olden times, the priests used to drive (*ha sma... samgrhṇanti* present as habitual past) the chariots for their kings to ensure that ‘he did not cause damage’ (*karavat* subjunctive). The two, driving at high speed (*ādhāvayantau* ‘present’ participle as converb), cut down with a wheel of their chariot (*ha... vicicchidatuḥ* preterite₂) a Brahmin boy playing on the highway. One, always speeding up, kept heading along (*ha... abhiprayuyāva* preterite₂), while the other tried to divert (*apa āyuyāma* preterite₂, conative) the chariot. But as he already had reached (*adhigatya* converb) too close, he did not manage (*ha... śaśāka* preterite₂) to divert the chariot. So they cut down (*ha... vicicchidatuḥ* preterite₂) the boy. They said (*ha... ūdāte* preterite₂): “It’s you who killed him! It’s you who killed him! (*hantā ’si* present: ‘you are the killer’).” Then Vṛṣa threw away (*prakīrya*

converb) the reigns and, stepping down (*avatiṣṭhan* ‘present’ participle), said (*ha... uvāca* preterite₂): “It’s you who killed him!” “No,” said the other. “He who drives (*samgr̥hṇāti* present) the chariot, is its master (*īśe* present). It’s you who killed him!” “No,” said (*uvāca* preterite₂) the other, “I have tried to divert (*apa āyāṃsam* present perfect₁), but you have kept heading along (*abhiprāyausīḥ* present perfect₁), it’s you who killed him!”
(*Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa* 3.94)

However, the use of the past tenses in middle and late Vedic texts is far from being straightforward. Often, one finds a bewildering mixture of preterite₁ (‘imperfect’) and preterite₂ (‘perfect’), which seems to resist analysis (WHITNEY 1892 and 1893). The situation clearly reflects a phase of transition and is comparable to the one described by LINDGREN (1957) for Southern German around 1500.

There is evidence that the process started in the east and spread to the west during the Middle Vedic period (WITZEL 1989)

The finite ta-/na-participle in Vedic

The finite *ta-/na*-participle is used as a resultative perfect since the earliest texts. As a resultative, it can also express a recent past, something that has happened ‘just now’, as in the following late Vedic text:

- (3) “Bring (*āhara* imperative) a banyan fruit.” – “Here it is (nominal sentence, implied present), sir.” – “Cut it up (*bhinddhi* imperative).” – “I’ve cut it up/It’s cut (*bhinnam* present perfect, resultative), sir.” – “What do you see (*paśyasi* present) there?” – “These quite tiny seeds (nominal sentence, implied present), sir.” – “Now, take one of them and cut it up (*bhinddhi* imperative).” – “I’ve cut one up/It’s cut (*bhinnā* present perfect, resultative), sir.” – “What do you see (*paśyasi* present) there?” – “Nothing, sir.”
(*Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* 6.12.1, transl. by Olivelle, modified)

This use of the *ta-/na*-participle brings it close to the sphere of the present perfect_I (*luṅ*, ‘aorist’) as in (1) and (2). (Pāṇini 3.2.102 on *niṣṭhā*?)

III. Early Middle Indo-Aryan and Pāli

The transition of the tense system of Middle and Late Vedic to the one of early MIA is not attested in texts, but can be reconstructed on the following lines:

1. the present perfect₁ ('aorist') spreads into the function of the preterite₂;
2. the *ta-/na*-participle spreads into the function of the present perfect₁ ('aorist'), as in text (3).

The resulting system is first attested in the inscriptions of Aśoka. It is also basically the system of literary Pāli (BECHERT 1953).

I. plane of discourse: retrospective = present perfect₂ (*ta/na*-participle)

(4) (a) *duvāḍasavasābhisitenā devānaṃpiyenā piyadasinā lājinā*
(instrumental) *iyam̐ likhitā*.

Twelve years after his consecration, king Devanampiya Piyadassi has written this inscription/this (edict) has been written by king Devanampiya Piyadassi. (Aśoka, RE IV K, Erragudi)

(b) *aṭhavasābhisitassa devānaṃpiyasa piyadasine lājine* (genitive) *kaligā vijitā*.

Eight years after his consecration, king Devanampiya Piyadassi has conquered Kalinga/Kalinga has been conquered by king Devanampiya Piyadassi. (Aśoka, RE XIII A, Erragudi)

As in Vedic, the agent of the participle tense of transitive verbs may take the instrumental (a) or the genitive (b) case.

narrative plane: default tense = preterite₃ (old ‘aorist’ + ‘imperfect’)

- (5) *atikamṭam aṃtalam devānaṃpiyā vihālayātam nāma
nikhamisu. hidā migaviyā aṃnāni cā heḍisānā abhilāmāni husu.
 devānaṃpiye piyadasi lājā dasavasābhisite samtam nikhamithā
 sambodhi.*

In times past the Devanampriyas used to set out on so-called pleasure-tours. On these (tours) hunting and other such pleasures were (enjoyed). When king Devanampiya Piyadassi had been anointed ten years, he went out for enlightenment.

- (6) *puluvaṃ mahānasasi devānaṃpiyasa piyadasine lājine
 anudivasam bahūni pānasatasahasāni ālabhiyisu.*

Formerly in the kitchen of king Devanampiya Piyadassi many hundred thousands of animals were killed daily for the sake of curry.

Narrative sections in Aśoka are always introduced by words like ‘formerly’. Note the new MIA passive aorist *ālabhiyisu* ›were killed‹ in (6).

IV. Classical Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrit)

During the phase following Early Middle Indo-Aryan, the preterite₃ ('aorist') was slowly replaced by the present perfect₂ (*ta-/na*-participle).

In the resulting system, both present perfect and preterite are expressed by the same morphological form, i.e. the *ta/na*-participle.

plane of discourse: retrospective = present perfect₂ (*ta/na*-participle)

narrative plane: default tense = preterite₄ (*ta/na*-participle)

The last phase of the transition between early and classical MIA is marked by a text like the *Vasudevahiṇḍi* (probably 3rd century CE), which uses the *ta/na*-participle already regularly as a preterite, but still has some isolated forms of the preterite₃ ('aorist'), particularly of common verbs, e.g. *kāsi* 'did' (ALSDORF 1937; for more forms see ESPOSITO 2012)

V. The *ta-/na*-participle tense of transitive verbs

The finite *ta-/na*-participle has been treated by traditional Sanskritists (e.g. SPEIJER) as a passive to the active past tenses, especially to the aorist:

‘past’:	active:	passive:
	<i>sa akārṣīt</i> (‘aorist’)	<i>tena kṛtam</i> (participle)
	‘he did’	‘it was done by him’

However, the distinction between the 2 forms in MIA is not one of voice, but one of tense; there is no ‘active’ corresponding to the form *tena kṛtam*.

narrative past:	active	passive
	<i>akāsi</i> ‘he did’	<i>abhedī</i> ‘was split’ (Pāli)
	(old ‘aorist’)	(old passive ‘aorist’, rare)
		<i>ālabhiyisu</i> ‘were killed’, in (6)
		(new MIA passive aorist)

present perfect:	no voice contrast, ergative with transitive verbs
	<i>teṇa katam</i> ‘he has done/it has been done by him’

Post-vedic Sanskrit (epical and classical), on the other hand, did indeed create an ‘active’ participle tense: the form in *tāvat*:

tena kṛtam vs. *sa kṛtavān* ‘he has done’
tena bhuktam vs. *sa bhuktavān* ‘he has eaten’

NOTE: *kṛta-vat* can be analysed as ‘someone who owns/has something done’, just as *dhana-vat* as ‘someone who owns riches’. The form is strikingly analogous to the have-perfect of Germanic and Romance languages: *I have done*, *j’ai fait*, *ho fatto* etc.

Both participial forms were treated under one heading (*niṣṭhā*) by Pāṇini when analysing their temporal properties (3.2.102).

The *tāvat*-participle, perhaps an innovation in epical Sanskrit and related dialects, allows for an active – as against ergative – structure of the sentence. It may be analysed as a first attempt of the ‘language’ at bringing back the active sentence pattern of other tenses to the participial tense.

The *tāvat*-participle, however, is virtually absent in all attested forms of MIA (Pali, Aśoka and the later Prakrits). So the attempt at escaping ergativity did not catch on.

VI. Epical and Classical Sanskrit

Epical and Classical Sanskrit are literary languages that branched off from the mainstream development of spoken Indo-Aryan.

The tense system of Epical Sanskrit reflects basically early Middle Indo-Aryan syntax, but in distinction to MIA has retained and combined the 3 Vedic ‘past’ tenses to a mixed preterite. The resulting system is:

plane of discourse: retrospective = present perfect² (*ta/na*-participle, *tāvat*-participle)

narrative plane: default tense = mixed preterite (‘perfect’, ‘imperfect’, ‘aorist’)

Despite some deviations, this is the regular pattern in the *Mahābhārata* and in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (for the latter, a substantial part of Books 2–4 has been checked). A detailed analysis of a passage from the *Rāmāyaṇa* is given on slides 25ff.

The dialogue of classical drama, whether in Sanskrit or Prakrit, follows strictly the rules of Classical MIA (see section IV.). Forms of the 3 Vedic ‘past’ tenses are extremely rare (checked for Kālidāsa). On such case is:

(7) *mithaḥsamayād imāṃ madīyāṃ duhitaraṃ bhavān upayeme.*

You married this daughter of mine by mutual agreement.

(*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* V, after v. 15; transl. by S.VASUDEVA)

This sentence is reported verbally (*iti*) as it had been spoken by Rishi Kāśyapa and, with its use of the ‘perfect’ (*liṭ*) *upayeme*, surely reflects the language of the erudite Brahmin. However, there is more to it: Pāṇini teaches that *liṭ* is used for past events the speaker did not witness (*parokṣe*; 3.2.115). Kāśyapa did indeed learn only after the fact that the king had married his foster child Śakuntalā secretly.

NOTE: The varia lectio *upāyamsta* (‘aorist’, *luṅ*) appears only in the later Southern recension and is obviously less significant than *upayeme* shared by the elder recensions of the text.

On the other hand, in epic verse, the tense system is more or less the same as in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (again checked for Kālidāsa).

→ The tense system of Classical Sanskrit works depends on the literary genre.

VII. Pitfalls of Syntactical Analysis

There is no such thing as context-free data.

1. BUTT (2005: 11, repeated in BUTT 2010) gives an example of a *ta/na*-participle in ‘finite’ function, i.e. as an example of narrative past:

- (8) (a) *evam uk-tā tu haṃsena damayantī*
 so-say-Part.Nom.Sg then goose.Inst.Sg Damayanti.Nom.
 Sg.F.
 1. ‘Then Damayanti was spoken to like that by the goose.’
 2. ‘Then the goose spoke to Damayanti thus.’
 (*Nalopākhyāna* I, 30ab)

Read as a complete sentence, (8a) sounds rather odd or defective to anyone acquainted with the language of the epic.

Read in context, the phrase demands a quite different analysis. A straightforward Hindi translation shows unambiguously how the syntactical structure is understood by someone familiar with the language of the text.

- (b) *evam uktā tu haṁsena damayantī viśāṁ pate*
abravīt tatra taṁ haṁsam “tam apy eva nalaṁ vada”
 (Nalopākhyāna I, 30 = Mahābhārata 3.50.30)

HINDI: राजन ! हँस के इस प्रकार कहने पर दमयन्ती ने उससे कहा – “पक्षि-
 राज ! तुम नल के निकट भी ऐसी बातें कहना” ।

(Geeta-Press Edition, trans. by Ram Narayan Datt Shastri)

ENGLISH: At these words of the goose, O lord of the people,
 Damayanti said to that goose: “Speak so also to Nala!”
 (transl. by van Buitenen)

The participle *uktā* ‘spoken to’ is by no means a finite verb, but a converb, the finite verb of the complex sentence being *abravīt* ‘said’, i.e. one of the 3 interchangeable forms of the narrative past in Epical Sanskrit.

2. BYNON quotes two ‘subsequent’ accounts (a and b) of the same chain of events as evidence that the 3 forms of the epic preterite and the *ta/na*-participle are interchangeable:

(9) (a) *sarayūm* *anu+agām* *nadīm.*
 Sarayu.ACC PV+go.1SG.AOR river.ACC
 ‘I set out along the river Sarayu.’ (R 2.57.14)

(b) *aham* *sarayutīram* *āgataḥ.*
 I.NOM Sarayu.bank.ACC PV.go.PP.NOM.M
 ‘I came to the bank of the Sarayu.’ (R 2.58.12)

(10) (a) *aśrauṣam*... *ghoṣam.*
 hear.1sgAOR noise.ACC
 ‘I heard a noise.’ (R 2.57.16)

(b) *śruto* *mayā* *śabdo.*
 hear.PP.NOM.M I.INS sound.NOM
 ‘I heard a sound.’ (R 2.58.13)

Bynon comments:

“The syntactic variation is between, in the first version, the inherited old-style grammar, which employs finite aorist forms with the subject/agent marked in the verbal ending and, in the second version, the new-style grammar which employs predicative ta-participles with the subject/agent in the form of an overt personal pronoun (in the nominative when the verb is intransitive, in the instrumental when it is transitive). Since the corresponding clauses occur *in the same positions in the discourse* they must be considered as equivalent alternative encodings, the selection of one or other being simply a matter of register.” (BYNON 2005: 11; emphasis mine)

This analysis is, to put it mildly, a complete misreading of the narrative structure of the whole passage under discussion:

1. The tense forms quoted under (9a) and (10a) belong to a first person narrative. King Daśaratha *relates* how he accidentally killed a Brahmin boy at least 20 years before:

- (II) (a) At this most pleasant of seasons I decided (*kṛtasamkalpaḥ* functioning as converb) to take some exercise, and with bow and chariot I set out (*anvagām* preterite, here ‘aorist’) along the Sarayu river. I was an intemperate youth, eager to kill (*jighāmsuḥ* desiderative verbal adjective as converb) a buffalo at the water hole in nighttime, an elephant coming down to the river, or some other wild animal. Now, in the darkness I heard (*aśrauṣam* preterite, here ‘aorist’) a noise, beyond the range of vision, of a pitcher being filled in the water, but just like the sound an elephant makes. I drew out (*uddhṛtya* converb) a shaft that glared like a poisonous snake. I shot (*amuñcam* preterite, here ‘imperfect’) the keen-edged arrow, and it darted like a poisonous snake. (*Rāmāyaṇa* 2.57.14–17, transl. by Sheldon Pollock)

2. The tense forms quoted under (9b) and (10b) belong to direct speech within the narrative. King Daśaratha *reports* the accidental killing that has just happened to the unlucky parents of the unlucky boy:

- (b) I am (nominal sentence, implied present) Dasharatha, a kshatriya, not a great one's son. A sorrowful thing, which all good men would condemn, has happened (*prāptam* present perfect) by my own doing. Holy one, I came (*āgataḥ* present perfect) to the bank of the Sarayu, bow in hand, eager to kill (*jighāṃsuḥ* desiderative verbal adjective as con-verb) some animal, an elephant perhaps, coming down to the water hole. There I heard (*śruto mayā* present perfect) the sound of a pitcher being filled in the water and, thinking it an elephant, I shot (*abhihato mayā* present perfect) an arrow at it. (*Rāmāyaṇa* 2.58.11–13, transl. by Sheldon Pollock)

3. The grammatical distinction between the tenses in sets (a) and (b) is obviously the same as the Vedic distinction between narrative preterite ('imperfect' or *ha* + 'perfect') and the present perfect of the plane of discourse in (1) and (2).

VIII. Conclusion

Language, like a Lévi-Straussian bricoleur, never starts from scratch, it rather reuses material at hand.

The first 2 replacements of the narrative past by a present perfect in Indo-Aryan replaced a tense with nominative-accusative syntax for transitive verbs by another tense with the same syntactical pattern (as in many Slavic languages, i.g. Russian, Polish and Czech).

The third replacement – after 2 present perfects with nominative-accusative syntax had been ‘used up’ – brought a resultative structure with ergative syntax to the core of the verbal system (as in Iranian, despite the fact, that the actual trajectories in Indo-Aryan were remarkably different, see JÜGEL 2015).

Linguistic change may be analysed in retrospect, but is hardly predictable in detail and in many respects basically contingent.

Obrigado!

धन्यवाद! Thank you!

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