

On Grammaticalization in Sanskrit

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In my paper I will deal with ‘incomplete’ grammaticalization in Vedic Sanskrit, especially with the development of what I would like to call ‘quasi-auxiliary’ verbs with the basic meaning “to go, to walk”.

Grammaticalization can be described as a series of linguistic changes leading from a lexical morpheme into a function word or into a grammatical affix. Various semantic and phonological changes are involved in this process. The grammaticalization process in general can be divided into several stages: Desemanticisation (‘bleaching’), extension, decategorialization, and erosion.

For example, the well-known English construction *be going to* developed into a kind of near future, which is still quite transparent. It must have started with a construction in which *be* plus gerund *going* is a progressive form. In *Mary was going to visit John*, *going* still has its meaning as a directional verb and *to visit John* is a purpose clause. Syntactic reordering led to the derived construction, in which *be going to* is considered as an expression with a unique meaning expressing future. Phonological erosion to *be gonna* marks the (temporary and present) final point of this grammaticalization process.

In the case of the Sanskrit roots *car* and *ay* “to go, to walk” semantic bleaching and the use as a ‘quasi-auxiliary’ verb together with a participle can be observed in a few instances as early as the Rigveda in order to express a kind of continued action, similar to the English expression *go on* plus gerund denoting continued action. There are also some examples from later texts, e.g. from the Atharvaveda and some Brahmanas.

Many instances of the Sanskrit verbs *ay* and *car* “to go, to walk” plus present participle combined with an animate actor as subject still show the directional meaning, for example

- (1) (Rigveda)
vicākaśac [shining brightly / prs.ptc.act.nom.sg.m.] *candrāmā* [moon / nom.sg.m.]
nāktam [night / fem.acc. of direction or adv.] *eti* [go / 3.sg.prs.ind.act.]
 “the moon walks shining brightly through/in the night”

where the moon is thought of as a deity being able to move. These constructions are very common in the Vedic texts. But there are some examples where it is not possible to interpret *ay* and *car* as directional verbs, e.g.

- (2) (Śatapathabrahmana)
tè [these / nom.pl.m.] *'sya* [his / gen.sg.m.] *grhāḥ* [house / nom.pl.m.] *paśáva* [cattle / nom.pl.m.] *upamūryāmāṇā* [destroy / prs.ptc.pass.nom.pl.m.] *īyuh* [go / 3.pl.perf.act.]
 which has to be translated as “his houses and cattle would go on being destroyed” or “were continuously destroyed”

It is impossible to understand *īyuh* as a verb denoting “to go”: houses don't move, even in the superstitious Vedic times.

Expressions like the Rigvedic example could be the trigger for this extension, because they allow to understand the verbal action as specific and generic.

The use of *ay* and *car* plus participle seems to have been a rarely used possibility to express continued action, but it didn't develop into a completely grammaticized periphrastic construction, and vanished after Vedic times.