

BETWEEN PASSIVE AND REFLEXIVE: The Vedic presents with the suffix *-ya-*

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1. Passive, reflexive, anticausative: introductory remarks

The distinguishing between closely related intransitive derivations, such as passive, reflexive, anticausative (decausative), is one of the most intricate semantic and syntactic issues in languages with polysemous intransitive markers.

Both anticausative and passive derivations entail the promotion of the initial direct object (= Patient) and the demotion of the initial subject (= Agent). This common syntactic feature accounts for their similar morphological marking in many languages (see e.g. COMRIE 1985: 328ff.; HASPELMATH 1987: 29ff.). In the cases where the markers of the passive and anticausative (at least partly) overlap, passives without an overtly expressed agent can be distinguished from anticausatives only by semantic criteria. This semantic opposition is characterized, for instance, by COMRIE (1985: 326) as follows:

“Passive and anticausative differ in that, even where the former has no agentive phrase, the existence of some person or thing bringing about the situation is implied, whereas the anticausative is consistent with the situation coming about spontaneously.”

This general definition is also relevant for a description of the system of intransitive derivations in a number of Ancient Indo-European languages, such as Ancient Greek or (Vedic) Sanskrit.

2. The Vedic *-ya-*presents: *jāyate* ‘is born’

In what follows I will focus on the Vedic verbs built with the suffix *-ya-*, which is one of the markers used to build present tense stems. Generally, the *-ya-*presents with the accent on the suffix are passives (*kriyāte* ‘is made’, *ucyāte* ‘is called’, *stūyāte* ‘is praised’, *hanyāte* ‘is killed’), whereas the *-ya-*presents with root accentuation behave as non-passive intransitives (cf. *pādyate* ‘falls’, *būdhyate* ‘wakes’, *rīyate* ‘flows’). However, a few *-ya-*formations are generally said to be exceptions to this regularity. One of the parade examples is *jāyate* ‘is born’, derived from the root *jan*.

According to the opinion widely spread in earlier Indo-European and Indo-Iranian studies, *jāyate* (as well as its Old-Iranian cognate, Avestan *zaiieiti*) is the

original passive, with the secondary accent shift in Vedic. WHITNEY in his seminal Sanskrit grammar (1889: 273, §761b) called it “altered passive”; likewise MACDONELL in his Vedic grammar (1910: 333, §444a) claims that the original passive has been “transferred to the radically accented *ya*-class”: **jāyāte* → *jāyate*. Similar statements can also be found in later studies.¹ There is no sufficient evidence for such a hypothesis, however. Although a passive interpretation (‘is born by smb.’) is possible *per se*, it cannot be supported by the syntactic features of *jan*ⁱ. Witness the following examples from the Ṛgveda (RV), which is the most ancient Vedic text, and Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa:

(1) Ṛgveda 6.7.3a

tvád *vipro* *jā-ya-te* *vājy* *agne*
 you:ABL poet:NOM.SG bear-YA-3SG.MED prize-winner:NOM.SG fire:VOC.SG
 ‘From you, o fire, is born the poet, the prize-winner.’

(2) Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa 5.3.5.17

agnér *vaí* *dhūmó* *jā-ya-te,*
 fire:ABL.SG verily smoke:NOM.SG bear-YA-3SG.MED
dhūmád *abhrám* *abhrád* *vṛṣṭih*
 smoke:ABL.SG cloud:NOM.SG cloud:ABL.SG rain:NOM.SG
 ‘Verily, from the fire the smoke arises, from the smoke the cloud, from the cloud the rain.’

The most important piece of evidence for a non-passive analysis of *jāyate* is the lack of constructions with the instrumental of the agent (= the one who begets), which would be typical for a true passive construction (see HOCK 1985-86: 90, fn. 5), as in (1a):

(1a) * *tvāyā* *vipro* *jā-ya-te*
 you:INS poet:NOM.SG bear-PR-3SG.MED
 ‘The poet is born by you (o fire).’

Besides, there are no good phonological reasons which could explain the supposed accent shift **jāyāte* → *jāyate*. Most likely, *jāyate* belonged with anticausatives, not with passives, from the very beginning, meaning ‘come into being, arise’. Then, how the widely spread passive analysis of *jāyate* can be explained? I presume it may have emerged under the influence of the passive morphology of its translations in European languages, such as Engl. *is born*, Germ. *ist geboren*, Fr. *est né*. Note, incidentally, that the Russian translation of this Vedic verb seems to be free of such dangerous side effects: Rus. *roždat’sja* is a non-passive intransitive (anticausative), which cannot be

¹ *jāyate* is qualified as an original passive, e.g. in MAYRHOFER’s grammar (1965: 93), albeit not consistently; see HAUSCHILD 1965: 216; cf. also HARTMANN 1954: 186f.; ETTER 1985: 215, fn. 290; 245; KELLENS 1984: 126ff., note (15); WERBA 1997: 288 (“intr. Pr. [= Pass.]”).

employed in a passive construction of the type 'X is born by smb.'

3. *mriyáte* 'dies': a pseudo-passive

Another Vedic *-ya*-formation which is relevant for our discussion is *mriyáte* 'dies', which, in a sense, illustrates an opposite case. While *jáyate* is regarded as a passive by meaning, non-passive by form, *mriyáte* is taken as a passive by form, but non-passive by meaning, being quoted in all Vedic and Indo-European grammars as a handbook example of the non-passive usage of a *-ya*-present with suffix accentuation.² A few attempts to analyse this present as a passive proved unsuccessful. For instance, NEGELEIN (1898: 38) treated it as the passive of the transitive *mṛ* (< **melH-*) 'crush, destroy' ["Der Inder mag sich den Hergang des Todes sehr wohl als ein Zermalmtwerden (*mṛ malmen*) vorgestellt haben"], which is etymologically impossible. HARTMANN in his book *Das Passiv. Eine Studie zur Geistesgeschichte der Kelten, Italiker und Arier* (1954: 186ff.) even assumed a particular passive conceptualisation of death in Ancient India. The fact that two verbs which belong to one and the same semantic domain, *jáyate* 'is born' and *mriyáte* 'dies', show such a striking dissimilarity in accentuation, which generally corresponds to the functional opposition "passive/non-passive" did not escape his attention. But his conclusions from this remarkable fact in the vein of *Geistesgeschichte* are untenable:

"Trotz gewisser Übereinstimmungen im Gefühlswert beider Verba kann jedoch kein Zweifel darüber bestehen, daß das Ausmaß des ‚passiven‘ Einschlages *j á y a t e* geringer gewesen sein muß als bei *m r i y á t e*, da das Gefühl des Ausgeliefertseins an eine außerhalb des Subjektes liegende Macht bei einem Ausdruck für das Zurweltkommen einer Seele nicht so groß gewesen kann wie beim Sterben."

Needless to say that this explanation hardly deserves any serious discussion. *mriyáte* never functions as a passive (see e.g. JAMISON 1983: 150, fn. 92) and, semantically, belongs with the root-accented *-ya*-presents of change of state, together with its counterpart *jáyate* 'is born'. An explanation of the abnormal suffix accentuation can be given in phonological terms: the *-ya*-presents of the structure *Criya-* could not bear the accent on the root and, hence, in some of them, the suffix accentuation is secondary (cf. also *dhriyáte* 'stays', *ā-driyáte* 'heeds').³

4. *yabh* 'copulate' and its *-ya*-present

To conclude, I will discuss the *-ya*-present derived from the root *yabh* 'copulate'. Like *jan* 'be born' and *mṛ* 'die', this root is inherited from Proto-Indo-European, as the Greek and Slavic cognates show, but, in contrast to the first two verbal roots, it belongs to the tabooed lexical sphere and therefore has left much less traces in the modern Indo-European languages.

² Cf. DELBRÜCK 1874: 167f.; WHITNEY 1896: 277, §277; MACDONELL 1910: 333, §444a.

³ For details, see KULIKOV 1997.

Also in Vedic it was apparently considered vulgar, therefore we find very few attestations of this root. Its *-ya*-present *yabhyate* occurs only once, in a relatively old text, the RV-Khilani (RVKh.), also known as “Apocrypha of the Ṛgveda”. The text of the RVKh. is badly preserved and quite often gives wrong accents, which is important for our discussion. The relevant verse runs as follows:

(3) Ṛgveda-Khilāni 5.22.3

yád álpikā sválpikā +karkandhukéva +pácyate
 when little:NOM.SG very.little:NOM.SG jujube-fruit.like ripens
+vāsantikam iva téjanam yábh-ya-mān-ā
 spring:ADJ like bamboo copulate-YA-PRTC.MED-NOM.SG.F
ví nam-ya-te
 apart bend-PASS-3SG.MED

The verse was translated and discussed by Karl HOFFMANN (1976: 570f.):⁴

‘Wenn die Kleine, ganz Kleine wie eine Brustbeere reif wird, biegt sie sich wie ein Frühlingsschilfrohr beim Begatten hin und her.’ (HOFFMANN)

Relying upon the root accentuation, HOFFMANN suggested a non-passive translation for the participle *yábhyamānā* (‘sie begattet sich’). HOFFMANN believed that the non-passive *yábhyate* with root accentuation might develop on the model *pacyáte* ‘is cooked’ ~ *pácyate* ‘ripens’. As he explains:

“Da z.B. neben dem Passiv *pacyáte* ‘wird gekocht’ (RV.) mit anderem Akzent und intransitiver Bedeutung *pácyate* ‘wird reif’ (RV.) steht, kann sich zu einem Passiv **yabhyáte* ‘wird begattet’ ein intransitives **yábhyate* ‘begattet sich (von einer Frau)’ entwickelt haben, das in *yábhyamānā* vorliegt” (HOFFMANN 1976: 571).

This argumentation falters for a number of reasons, however:

1) Usually a root builds *-ya*-presents either only with the suffix accentuation or only with root accentuation (cf. examples in Section 2).⁵ Thus the pair *pacyáte* ‘is cooked’ ~ *pácyate* ‘ripens’ is the only clear example of the opposition between a suffix-accented *-yá*-passive and a non-passive intransitive *-ya*-present with root accentuation built on the same root and therefore could hardly serve as a productive derivational model.

2) The semantic difference between *pacyáte* ‘is cooked’ and *pácyate* ‘ripens’

⁴ I have greatly benefitted from discussing HOFFMANN’s translation with Werner ABRAHAM, Martin HASPELMATH and Heinz VATER.

⁵ For less than 20 *-ya*-presents both accentuations are attested (e.g. *múcyate* / *mucyáte* ‘becomes free’), but the accent placement does not depend on their meaning. The suffix accentuation is secondarily introduced in certain Vedic texts/dialects, in particular, in the Atharvaveda and Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā; for details, see KULIKOV 1998.

does not amount to the passive/non-passive distinction. In other words, ‘ripens’ does not mean ‘is cooked by itself’ (anticausative) or ‘cooks oneself’, but results from some idiomatic semantic change, although ‘is cooked’ and ‘ripens’ certainly do have a common semantic denominator (which might be defined as ‘becomes ready’ or the like). I see no semantic development parallel to ‘is cooked’ → ‘ripens’, which might apply to the original passive meaning of **yabhyáte* ‘is copulated, fucked’.

3) Even assuming that *yábhyate* may have been built as the non-passive counterpart of **yabhyáte* ‘is fucked’, we can hardly understand what this non-passive intransitive might mean; HOFFMANN’s translation ‘sie begattet sich’ barely clarifies its meaning. By virtue of its semantics (and leaving aside anatomical and biological curiosities), *fuck* and *begatten* (as well as the more vulgar quasi-synonym of the latter, *ficken*, which is a more exact translation of *yabh*) are fundamentally transitive verbs, which can be passivized (*wird begattet* ≈ *wird gefickt*), but not anticausativized or reflexivized. As for other intransitive derivations available in European languages, they cannot be merely expanded to the hypothetical *yábhyate* for several reasons:

(a) The reflexive pronoun *sich* would be appropriate in a reflexive causative construction (*sie läßt sich begatten*),⁶ which is nearly identical to simple passive. However, this meaning is usually expressed in Vedic by a causative with the suffix *-áya-* and middle inflexion, so that we might rather expect the form **yābháyamānā* in this sense.

(b) GRIMM’s *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1854, Bd. I, 1278) adduces the reflexive verb *sich begatten*, explained as “*jungi, coire, von menschen und thieren*” and illustrated by such examples as *die tauben wollen sich nicht begatten; ungleiche thiere begatten sich nicht untereinander*. Both examples suggest a reciprocal interpretation. However, as a number of native speakers of German pointed out to me, such an interpretation is highly unusual, if possible at all, for *sich begatten*, at least in Modern German. Reciprocal constructions are indeed possible, for instance, for the Russian cognate of *yábha-* (with the “reflexive” suffix *-sja*), i.e. *ebat’-sja*, but we certainly cannot expand this syntactic model to the Vedic middle *yabhya-*^{6e} (whatever its accentuation), since the present suffix *-ya-* never expresses the reciprocal meaning. We rather might expect a middle form with the preverb *sám* or *ví* in this sense, i.e. **(sam-/vi-)yábhamānā*.

(c) One more intransitive derivation which, at first glance, might be relevant for our discussion is the object deletion of the type *John eats* or *She fucks* (= *Sie hat Geschlechtsverkehr*),⁷ which indeed can be expressed with middle forms in some European languages, cf. the function of the Russian reflexive suffix *-sja* in (4b):

- (4) a. *Sobaka* *kusaet* *Ivana*
 dog:NOM.SG bite:3SG.PR Ivan:ACC.SG
 ‘The dog bites Ivan.’

⁶ For this type, see, in particular, NEDJALKOV 1971: 10, 85-107 [= 1976: 16, 114-154].

⁷ Other terms are ‘antipassive’ or ‘suppressif objectal’ (MEL’ČUK 1994).

- b. *Sobaka kusaet-sja*
dog:NOM.SG bite:3SG.PR-REFL
'The dog bites.'

The Vedic present suffix *-ya-* never has this function, however. Moreover, this syntactic type is quite uncommon for the Vedic middle in general.

4) Finally, the text of the RVKh. is too corrupt (in particular, as far as the accents are concerned) to uncritically deduce the non-passive meaning from the root accentuation of *yábhyamānā*. Note, incidentally, that HOFFMANN emended accentuation in another *-ya-*present found in the very same stanza, *+pácyate*.

To sum up, the hapax *yábhyamānā* cannot be anything but the passive counterpart of the transitive present *yábhati*, and its accentuation should be emended correspondingly: *+yabhyámānā*.⁸

5. I hope to have drawn attention to some dangers with which a linguist is confronted when translating some forms or constructions (in my case, from Sanskrit) into his own native language, most often one of the modern European languages: Germanic, Romance or Slavic. In some cases such a translation perfectly makes sense in the target language, but its idiomatic character may be a reason of an inadequate analysis in the source language. This is the case with *jāyate*, analyzed as a passive in spite of its non-passive morphology (root accentuation) and syntax in Sanskrit, most likely, because of the passive morphology of its English and German equivalents. By contrast, in some other cases a scholar may arrive at wrong conclusions when taking into account only formal features of a given form, disregarding the system-related considerations. This was probably the case of *mriyāte* and *yabhyate*. Only in the case where our analysis or translation makes sense both in the source and target language, we have a chance to escape from these Scylla and Harybdis both in a philological study of ancient languages and in a field work.

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⁸ Thus hesitantly emended (with a question mark) by WERBA (1997: 221).

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