Agentivity and prominence: the case of differential subject marking in Old Indo-Iranian

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Vedic Sanskrit possesses two forms for the nominative plural masculine of *a*-stems, a shorter variant in $-\bar{a}s$ ($\dot{a}\dot{s}v\bar{a}s$ 'horses') and a longer one in $-\bar{a}sas$ ($\dot{a}\dot{s}v\bar{a}sas$ 'horses'). Cognates of these two forms are also found in Avestan and Old Persian (Av. $-\hat{a}$: OP $-\bar{a}$: Ved. $-\bar{a}s$ vs. Av. $-\hat{a}\eta h\bar{o}$: OP $-\bar{a}ha$: Ved. $-\bar{a}sas$) so that this variation is probably of Proto-Indo-Iranian age.

This presentation is part of a larger research project, the goal of which is to investigate the original distribution of these two variants. This goal can best be achieved by examining primarily data from Vedic Sanskrit, for the Old Iranian text corpus does not contain sufficient data that are relevant for this investigation. Due to a preliminary investigation of the data the following research hypotheses have been established: (i) The feature which is expressed by the opposition $-\bar{a}s$ vs. $-\bar{a}sas$ is a feature of the entire noun phrase since in each noun phrase only one form exhibits the long variant. (ii) The function of these two variants is to indicate where the respective noun is located on the agentivity scale. Thus, $-\bar{a}sas$ is used to indicate a high degree of agentivity whereas $-\bar{a}s$ is used to indicate a low degree of agentivity. This hypothesis is based on the observation that nominalized adjectives tend to exhibit the nominative plural in $-\bar{a}sas$, when the context in which they appear requires a higher degree of agentivity. Otherwise, the short form in $-\bar{a}s$ appears to be used. (iii) The long form $-\bar{a}sas$ reflects a univerbation of the short form (Ved. $-\bar{a}s < \text{PIE } *-\bar{o}s$) with the Indo-European reflexive pronoun (PIE *s-, nom.pl. *s-es).

The focus of this presentation lies on research hypothesis (ii). A preliminary run-through of the material (using the database in MÜTH 2007) suggests that the opposition $-\bar{a}s$ vs. $-\bar{a}sas$ is used to alter the agentivity value of nominal entities within the noun phrase (similarly already KURYŁOWICZ 1960: 162). Here the long form $-\bar{a}sas$ functions as a means of contextually upgrading the agentivity value of lexemes with a low inherent agentivity. A noun phrase containing the long variant is therefore associated with features like [volition], [causation] and [autonomous movement] (regarding these features and their relation to animacy see DOWTY 1991: 571–575 and PRIMUS 2012: 16–27). In contrast, the employment of the short form seems to function as a means of downgrading the agentivity value in lexemes with a high inherent agentivity. Thus, it disassociates a noun phrase with the features mentioned above. These observations imply that the opposition of $-\bar{a}sas$ vs. $-\bar{a}s$ is a complementary one. As an example of the function of this opposition, cf. the sentences in (1):

(1a) $\bar{a}\dot{s}\bar{i}rvantas$ $sut\dot{a} [= -\dot{a}s]$ $im\dot{e}$ with.milk:NOM:PL juice:NOM:PL this:NOM:PL 'These juices (are) mixed with milk' (RV 1.23.1)

(b)	prá	vaķ	sutā́so [= -ā́sas]	harayanta		
	forth	you:ACC:PL	juice:NOM:PL	fetch:PRS:INJ:MID:3PL		
	pūrņās					
	full:N	OM:PL				
	'The juices fetch you forth, (when they are) full'				(RV 4.37.2)	

The sentence in (b) requires that the 'juices' be higher on the agentivity scale than in sentence (a). As a result, in (b) they are marked with $-\bar{a}sas$ whereas in (a) they are marked with $-\bar{a}s$.

One specific goal of this investigation is to determine whether all of the agentivity features mentioned above (or only a proper subset of those) are relevant for this opposition.

References

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