

The Sanskrit periphrastic future
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I discuss the paradigmatic status of the Sanskrit periphrastic future. The crucial question is whether, or to what extent, the periphrastic future construction can be distinguished from a syntactic collocation of agent noun plus copula. If it cannot, then the periphrastic future does not exist as a distinct part of the Sanskrit verbal paradigm. I show that, although widely recognized, the close relation and interaction between *-tr-* and *-tā-* has been severely underestimated. Crucially, all the criteria for distinguishing *-tā-* as a distinct tense formation from a sequence of agent noun plus copula are problematic, except in a small set of Sanskrit texts. I argue that a nuanced diachronic and dialectal approach to the status of the periphrastic future is required: in early Vedic Prose, there is evidence for a paradigmatic tense formation, although it remains somewhat in flux. Excepting this period, which attests a number of other linguistic peculiarities which are not continued in later Sanskrit, the formation is not a true periphrasis, but merely a special use of the agent noun. This special use is not without parallel even in the Ṛgveda, which is not thought to attest the periphrastic future. This reassessment of the periphrastic future has a number of important consequences, including regarding the diachronic dialectology of Sanskrit, the date of Pāṇini, the definition of periphrasis, and the contrast between traditional grammatical assumptions and the evidence of texts.

None of the criteria available for identifying the periphrastic future as a paradigmatic part of the verbal system, distinct from a sequence of agent noun plus copular, prove successful, except for one criterion — but this criterion applies only in early Vedic prose. The only undeniable evidence for the paradigmatic status of the periphrastic future is the morphological form of the 1st and 2nd person dual and plural active forms of the paradigm, e.g. 1pl. *kartāsmah* ‘we will make’, and the existence of a morphological mediopassive, e.g. 1pl. *kartāsmāhe* ‘we will make for ourselves, we will be made’. Such forms cannot be analysed as syntactic sequences of agent noun plus copula, since (for active and mediopassive) the agent noun does not show the appropriate number, and (for the mediopassive) the copula does not have a mediopassive paradigm. These forms can only be paradigmatic verb forms, and hence the periphrastic future must be a part of the verbal paradigm.

However, it has not previously been recognized that these crucial forms are highly restricted in their distribution. They are found in early Vedic Prose, are specified by Pāṇini and occur in grammatical works, but beside this they are unattested until relatively late Classical Sanskrit, where they are obvious Pāṇinisms. Most importantly, in the huge corpus of Epic Sanskrit, and the even larger corpus of the Purāṇas, such forms are completely unattested, but in the place of active 1/2.du/pl. forms we find analytic combinations, e.g. *kartārah smaḥ* ‘we will make’.

Thus in Epic and related forms of Sanskrit, the periphrastic future is indistinguishable from a syntactic sequence of agent noun plus copula, and cannot therefore be treated as a part of the verbal paradigm. It is not a true periphrasis, but a syntactic collocation with specialized sense. In early Vedic Prose and in Pāṇini’s Sanskrit, on the other hand, the periphrastic future must be part of the verbal paradigm, but there is actually no evidence that it is periphrastic: all forms of the paradigm may be treated as single morphological words. I propose that the periphrastic future was grammaticalized in the verbal paradigm in early Vedic Prose, but that the dialects underlying Epic Sanskrit and other early non-Vedic varieties of Sanskrit did not share this development. The existence of the periphrastic future later is entirely attributable to its appearance in Pāṇini’s grammar.