The diachrony of tense, aspect, and modality: Evidence from Vedic Sanskrit

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This contribution explores the factors conditioning the development of the Old Indo-Aryan tense/aspect/modality system, with particular reference to Vedic Sanskrit. Throughout this first phase of its historical attestation, Old Indo-Aryan underwent a series of morphosyntactic changes of which the Vedic text corpus, both the Vedas proper and the later Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas, provide a rich array of diachronic data which have hitherto only been partially explored. In the verbal system, the following morphosyntactic changes impacted the inventory of tense, aspect, and mood categories:

- Semantic bleaching of the inherited aspect stems
- Loss of the non-indicative moods of the perfect and aorist as well as general loss of the subjunctive and injunctive in (positive) assertive clauses
- Rise of a tense system with temporal remoteness and evidentiality distinctions in the past and future
- Emergence of a variety of periphrastic constructions with semantically specific aspectual meanings, e.g., resultative and progressive

Analogous developments are found in many other languages, but the Vedic text corpus stands out in that it allows for exploring these changes in some detail.

Previous studies have dealt with these developments but have mostly had a restricted focus (e.g., Tichy 1992, 2006; Dahl 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016; Lowe 2017; Grieco 2022, 2023, 2024). The present contribution explores them from a systemic perspective, aiming to establish to what extent some of them can be plausibly shown to be interrelated. Recent work on grammaticalisation emphasises its close relationship with typology (e.g., Narrog 2017, Narrog and Heine 2021, the papers in Narrog and Heine (eds.) 2018). Moreover, Bhat (1999) makes a case for the claim that languages differ with regard to the relative prominence they ascribe to tense, aspect, and modality. One likely corollary of this is that grammaticalisation processes are constrained by the prominent category type in a given language. These considerations suggest that an important function of grammaticalisation is to ensure systemic continuity and that the loss or erosion of certain semantic or morphosyntactic features facilitates or triggers the rise of newly emerging categories with analogous properties. It remains an open question whether an assumption along such lines can explain the various developments outlined above and this contribution aims to clarify this and related problems.

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