

Etymological notes on some Vedic verbs of (caused) motion: Back to the semantics of roots through their syntax and pragmatics

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The etymology of some Vedic (and, in general, Indo-European) roots and, particularly, several dramatic idiomatic semantic shifts can be readily explained if we take into account the syntax and pragmatics of the corresponding verbs and verbal derivatives.

One such root is Ved. *ṛdh* ‘succeed’ (commonly attested, in particular, with the preverb *sám-* ‘with, together’), which Mayrhofer, EWAia I, 118 qualifies as etymologically unclear (“Die Herkunft <...> ist nicht gesichert”); hesitant connection with Gr. Hom. *álthetō* ‘wurde heil’ is problematic (²LIV 262f.: “Falls das gr. Verbum nicht hierher gehört, kann nur **HeRdh-* angesetzt werden”). Yet, the existence of numerous examples of verbs of success that eventually go back to verbal roots of (caused) motion, often with preverbs, in many Indo-European branches (cf. Mid. Dutch *ergaen* ‘go (to a certain point), go well’; OHG *gi/lingen* < PGm. **ga-lingwan-* ‘succeed’ < PIE **h₁léng^{wh}-e-* ‘go fast, move easily/lightly’; Lat. *suc-cedo* [‘under + step’]; Gr. *sym-bainō* ‘with + step/go/walk’; etc.), prompts a tentative analysis of Ved. *ṛdh* as based on one of the three *r*-roots of motion (**h₁er-*, **h₂er-* or **h₃er-*; see ²LIV 238f., 269f., 299f.), with the root extension *-dh-* (eventually related to the root **dheh₁-* ‘put, set’?). Accordingly, it is possible to assume a similar semantic development for this root: ‘move’ (+ ‘put’?) > ‘succeed, be successful’.

Another verbal root that deserves a special study in the context of a systematic research of verbal roots denoting (caused) motion and their semantic developments is Ved. *han* ‘beat, hit, strike, kill’. For its Proto-Indo-European source, the root **g^{wh}en-*, one may reconstruct the original meaning of repeated strikes or lashes, supported by evidence from Balto-Slavic (see ²LIV 218). These considerations may help to explain the etymological connections of a few Vedic nominal derivatives, such as *āhanás-* ‘lustful, obscene’ and *jaghána-* ‘genitals, pubis’, that are considered etymologically unclear in Mayrhofer, EWAia I, 184, 563. I will argue that there are good reasons to connect these formations with the root *han* < PIE **g^{wh}en-* ‘beat, hit, perform repeated strikes’. This semantics could have evolved into the secondary meaning ‘perform sexual strikes / movements; fuck’ and, ultimately, underlie such forms as *āhanás-* (lit.) ‘performing sex, fucker’ and *jaghána-* (lit.) ‘[body part(s) playing major role in] sexual movements’. Similar instances of the semantic development of the type ‘beat, strike’ → ‘perform sex, sexual movements’ can also be found outside Indo-Aryan, cf. Latin *-futo* ~ *futuo* or Germanic **bautan* (> Eng. *beat*, ON *bauta*, etc.) ~ Eng. *butt(ocks)*.