

# The internal syntax of *iva*- clauses in Vedic Sanskrit

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that a proper characterization of the synchronic internal syntax of clauses of comparison in Vedic Sanskrit can clarify issues of interpretation. We also briefly explore aspects of the diachrony of these structures.

## 1 Introduction

In Hale & Kissock (2021), we discussed the relationship between ‘comparison’ clauses, typically marked by *iva* or *ná* in the language of the mantras of the Vedas, and the matrix clauses within which they were embedded. That paper demonstrates that when the matrix clause is negated, the scope of the negation vis-à-vis the embedded ‘like’-clause, introduced by *iva* or *ná*, is a function of the structural position of the comparison clause.

This discovery has serious implications for two widely-held, but in our view incorrect, views on the syntax of the language of the Vedic mantras:

- (1a) that the word order is ‘free,’ and/or
- (1b) that the word order is metrically conditioned.

The claim in (1a) cannot be true if, as Hale & Kissock (2021) demonstrated, the positioning of elements directly impacts standard syntactic concepts such as ‘scope of negation’. This is inconsistent with ‘flat’ phrase structure which one would need to posit to justify labelling the word order as ‘free’. Likewise, the claim in (1b) cannot be true given our demonstration of the scope facts, which show that scope interpretation is based on structural position. Such conditioning would be inconsistent with metrically-determined positioning of the relevant elements, since the meter does not have access to information about ‘scope of negation,’ and thus cannot appropriately place elements which need to have the relevant scope relations.

We conclude, then, that the language of the Vedic mantras displays the properties of a natural human language, with hierarchical syntax of the familiar type.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 *iva* Placement

In this brief paper, we would like to turn to one of the many issues which arise concerning the *internal* structure of the clause of comparison (we’ll just call them *iva*-clauses from

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, the texts were composed over a period of time, and thus actually represent texts produced by mildly divergent grammars — i.e., different ‘dialects,’ if you will. This fact appears irrelevant to the present investigation.

now on, though comparison clauses marked by *ná* should be considered as included in the discussion). As a leaping-off point, consider the following recently edited passage from the Paippalāda recension of the Atharva Veda:

(1) AVP 6.6.6ab

*sindhuprajāno*      *madhugho*      // *aśva*      *iva nīyate*  
 Sindhu-born-NOMSG Madhugha-NOMSG // horse-NOMSG **like** is lead  
*janān*      *anu*  
 men-ACCPL among

‘Madhugha is led like a Sindhu-born horse among men’. (transl. of Griffiths 2009:84)

As you can see from the translation, Griffiths takes the adjective *sindhuprajāna-* ‘Sindhu-born, originating in Sindhu’ as modifying ‘horse’ (part of the *iva*-clause), rather than as modifying the plant-name *madhugha-*. He notes (84): ‘I take this adjective [*sindhuprajāno*—mh/mk] with *aśva-* in the next pāda, in view of BĀU 6.1.13 *mahāsuḥayaḥ saindhavaḥ*, ŚāṅkhĀ 9.7 *saindhavaḥ suḥayaḥ* ‘a (great) prize-stallion from the Indus region’...’

Of course, we must point out that the fact that there are prize stallions which come from Sindhu does not entail that there are not also plants which come from that same region. For this reason, we do not consider Griffiths’ argument for his interpretation compelling, though, up to now, nothing precludes that interpretation.

Since the *mad(h)ugha-* is a plant<sup>2</sup> and *aśva-* is a horse, and both plants and horses can be *saindhava-*, can we tell, from our study of the structure of *iva*-clauses, what *sindhuprajāna-* is modifying?

The way we will approach answering this question here is by asking a structural question: is *iva* properly positioned (a) under the interpretation which takes *sindhuprajāna-* as a modifier of *madhugha-* or (b) under the interpretation which takes *sindhuprajāna-* as a modifier of *aśva-*, or (c) under both interpretations? Relatedly, we will ask whether the kind of discontinuity seen within the *iva* clause if we take *sindhuprajāna-* as a modifier of *aśva-* is in fact permissible, or are there some relevant constraints on such things?

### 3 *iva* Placement

MacDonell (1916: §180, s.v. *iva*) describes the most frequent usage of *iva* in the Rigveda (and the only one that will interest us) as:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps < *madhu-dugha-* or even *madhu-dogha-*, ‘giving honey as milk’ *vel sim.*, both RV+, via haplology, as already suggested by Brugman (1897:860). The explanatory possibilities are quite broad for each of the attested forms (with and without aspiration on the first non-nasal stop), including *madhudugha-* > \**madhugha-* while Grassmann’s Law was still active and *madhudugha-* > *madugha-* directly, via anticipatory haplology, for the unaspirated form, and, for the aspirated form, either of those developments plus folk-etymological restoration of the aspiration, or *madhudugha-* > *madhugha-* directly after Grassmann ceased to be active.

<sup>3</sup>This is virtually an English translation of Grassmann’s entry, s.v. *iva*.

**iva** . . . means *as if, as, like* in abbreviated similes in apposition, never introducing a clause like **yáthā**. It follows the word with which comparison is made; if the comparison consists of several words, the particle generally follows the first, less commonly the second.

The vast, vast majority of instances of *iva* involve simple ‘second position’ placement of the particle. In the interest of time, we will not present supporting evidence here. There is a wealth of data both familiar and readily accessible to those interested.

Nevertheless, the ‘vast, vast majority’ is not *all*, and, as the MacDonell (1916) quote indicates, we do in fact find occasional instances of *iva* in what we might term a ‘delayed’ position in the mantra texts. This can be seen from examples such as the following:

(2) RV 2.5.3cd

*pári víśvāni káviyā // nemís cakrám iva-*  
 around-PV all-ACCPL wisdoms-ACCPL // **rim-NOMSG wheel-ACCSG like**  
*-abhavat*  
 he comes to be

‘He surrounds (=comes to be around) all wisdoms, like the rim (surrounds) the wheel’.

(3) RV 9.50.1ab

*út te súśmāsa īrate // síndhor ūrmér*  
 upwards-PV your-CL strengths-NOMPL move // **river-ABL SG waves-GEN SG**  
***iva svanáḥ***  
**like rush-NOMSG**

‘up move your strengths, like the rush of waves (move up) from the river’

MacDonell pretty clearly implies, with the statement ‘less commonly the second,’ that *iva* may not occur *later* in the string making up the comparison than after the second word. As can be seen from these examples, that generalization does not hold:

(4) RV 1.116.15a

***parṇá mṛgásya patáror iva- -ārábha // úd***  
**wings-ACCPL wild-animal-GENSG flying-GENSG like to seize // up-PV**  
*aśvinā ūhathuḥ śrómatāya kám*  
 Aśvin-VOC DU you two conveyed for obedience-DATSG PostP

‘You have conveyed (him) upwards for obedience like (you convey upwards) the feathers of the flying wild animal for seizing’

Unfortunately, since the comparison in (1) would “consist of several words” if *sind-**huprajāna-* modifies *aśva-*, the MacDonell observation would allow *iva* to follow *aśva-* in such a case. And, of course, if it does not, then *iva* would be in ‘second position’ after *aśva-*—the most common pattern. So it isn’t clear that the distribution of *iva* can be helpful in this case. What about considerations of *discontinuity*?

#### 4 Discontinuity in *iva* Clauses

If we are to take the elements of the comparison in (1) to be *sindhuprajāno... aśva iva* ... ‘like a Sindhu-born horse,’ we must recognize that the elements which make up the terms of comparison can be *discontiuous* — in this case broken up by the intervention of the subject *madhugha*. In general, as can be seen from examining the data we have already cited, the elements of the term of comparison form an uninterrupted constituent. So we can ask the question: do the elements of a comparison *have* to be continuous, or can they be interrupted (as required for Griffiths’ interpretation of (1))?

In fact, discontinuity amongst the elements of the comparison clause is attested in mantra texts. We will cite these examples somewhat more fully, since we are going to need them in the discussion which follows, and since, while attested, they are somewhat rare and can thus be hard to find.

(5) RV 1.116.15a

*carítram hí vér iva- -āchedi parṇám*  
leg-NOMSG because **bird-GENSG like** is broken **wing-NOMSG**

‘For the leg is broken, like the wing of a bird’.

The comparison clause is *vér iva... parṇám* ‘like the wing of a bird’. The verb form *āchedi* ‘interrupts’ the elements of the comparison clause.

(6) RV 5.60.1c

*ráthair iva prá bhare vājayádbhiḥ*  
**chariot-INSTRPL like** forth-PV I bear myself **prize-seeking-INSTRPL**

‘I hasten forth like (one hastens forth) with prize-seeking chariots’.

Here the elements in the comparison are *ráthair iva... vājayádbhiḥ* ‘like with prize-winning chariots,’ and they are ‘interrupted’ by the verb form *prá bhare* ‘I bear myself’ = ‘I hasten forth’.

(7) RV 6.75.4ab

*té ācárantī sámanā- -iva*  
these-NOMDU wandering-hither-NOMDU gathering-ACCPL like  
*yóṣā // mātā- -iva putrám bibhṛtām*  
maiden-NOMSG // **mother-NOMSG like son-ACCSG** bear-3DUIMPV  
*upásthe*  
**lap-LOC SG**

‘let these two wandering ones bear (it), like a maiden (bears it) to gatherings, like a mother (bears) a son in her lap’

In this example, the comparison of interest (the second one) consists of the elements *mātā-iva putrām... upāsthe* ‘like a mother a son in her lap’. It is interrupted by the third person dual imperative *bibhrtām*.

(8) RV 7.103.5ab

*yád eṣām anyó anyásya vācam // śāktásya-*  
 when of-them one-NOMSG another-GENSG word-ACCSG // **teacher-GENSG**  
**-iva vádati śíkṣamāṇaḥ**  
**like speaks learning-one-NOMSG**

‘when one of them speaks the word of the other, like the learning one (speaks the word) of the teacher’

Here we once again see that the elements in the comparison, *śāktásya-iva śíkṣamāṇaḥ* ‘like the learning one (the word) of the teacher,’ are interrupted by the finite verb form *vádati* ‘speaks’.

(9) AVP 5.25.2c

*sénā- -iva- eṣi tvíṣīmatī*  
**army-NOMSG like you go impetuous-NOMSG**

‘you go like an impetuous army (goes)’ (after Lubotsky 2002)

Finally, in this example we have a comparison clause *sénā-iva... tvíṣīmatī* ‘like an impetuous army,’ which is interrupted by the second person singular finite verb *eṣi*.

These examples provide a clear characterization of the context within which ‘discontinuity’ is permitted in the elements which make up the comparison: the only open-class lexical item<sup>4</sup> which can ‘interrupt’ an *iva* clause is the verb (which may be accompanied by its preverb, unsurprisingly).

We can also see something else from these examples: when the *iva* clause displays ‘discontinuity,’ the *iva* seems to invariably accompany the first element. Thus although in general, given a multi-element *iva* clause, ‘postponement’ of *iva* is possible, it seems that this is *not* possible in DISCONTINUOUS *iva* clauses.

The interpretation of (1) in which *sindhuprajāna-* is interpreted as a modifier of *aśva-* would violate both of these generalizations. We would have a discontinuous *iva*-clause whose discontinuity arose via the interposition of an open-class element *madhughas* (pre-sandhi) which is not a verb and, in spite of the discontinuity, we would have a ‘postponed’ *iva*. For these syntactic reasons, therefore, *sindhuprajāna-* should be interpreted as a modifier of *madhugha-* and, when seeking to identify this plant, we should look for one for which ‘produced in the river (area)’ or ‘in the area of the Sindhu’ is a sensible attribute.

<sup>4</sup>Occasionally, a second position clitic intervenes, which is obviously to be attributed to a quite distinct set of factors.

## 5 A Possible Diachrony of *iva* Clauses

We now turn briefly to the question of how *iva* clauses may have come to have their somewhat peculiar properties. Vine (1978) has presented a plausible story about the similar-seeming *ná* clauses, but it seems quite implausible that that account would work for *iva*, which shows no traces of the negative semantics which is required for his explanation to work here. Instead, *iva* seems like the clitic version of *yáthā* (like *ca* is the clitic version of *utá*), but differs significantly from *yáthā* in not allowing a verb to occur in its ‘clause’. Could these two peculiar properties of *iva* clauses, — namely, that it permits ‘interruption’ only by verb forms and that it cannot itself contain a verb form, — be plausibly related?

In examples with an ‘interrupting’ verb it is on some occasions clear that that verb must be from the main clause (see exx. 6, 7, 9 above). On other occasions, however, the verb works equally well as either an *iva*-clause predicate or as the main-clause predicate (see exx. 4 and 8 above). The latter is most common when one is dealing with third person arguments in both clauses, as is quite frequently the case. Never in Vedic mantra texts does the verb agree only with the subject of the *iva*-clause. Thus, the verb can *always* be taken as representing the matrix finite verb.

Imagine that, originally, like *yáthā*, clauses introduced by *iva* could have their own verb, and that, since that verb was often identical to the main clause predicate, it was frequently gapped. When not gapped, and appropriate to either clause, it would be ambiguous as to whether it was the main clause predicate, or the *iva* clause predicate. If a speaker wrongly concluded that it was the main clause verb, (s)he would then need to allow main clause verbs to intervene amongst the elements of the *iva* clause.

This speaker would then, of course, begin to insert unambiguously main clause verbs into *iva* clauses (but only verbs). When such examples were combined with the many ambiguous ones, plus the ones where the verb of the subordinate *iva* clause was gapped, one can see, perhaps, how the current situation came into being.

## 6 Diachrony and Synchrony

We know that diachrony can give rise to idiosyncratic *morphological* properties: *keep* : *kept*, *go* : *went*, *foot* : *feet*, etc. And diachrony can give rise to ‘unnatural’ phonological rules, weird gaps in segment inventories, etc. In the case of morphological oddities, we have made allowance in our formal models for ‘listed’ (i.e., stored, not generated) forms, as seems required. In the case of phonology, we have allowed a computational component which licenses a relatively unconstrained and idiosyncratic ‘rule’ system.

But, if something like our diachronic story about *iva*-clauses containing matrix verbs is correct, how are we to account for this *synchronically*? Does the syntax license such oddities? Is there, as Chomsky has often said (but never elaborated on much) both a ‘core’ and a ‘periphery’ in the syntactic computational system? What do the two systems, if they both exist, look like and how do they interact? How do we constrain them? We leave these questions for future research, or as an exercise to the interested reader.

## 7 Conclusions

In this brief contribution we have presented arguments from the internal syntax of *iva*-clauses for the following points:

- The only open-class lexical item that can interrupt an *iva*-clause is the matrix verb.
- The plant *mad(h)ugha-* is from a river basin (or, less plausibly, is a river itself).
- Understanding the syntax of *iva* clauses can be important for discovering the correct semantics for lexical items.
- There is still much we don't know about *iva*-clauses, but which we hope to get clear about relatively soon.

More importantly, we can see how critical a proper characterization of the *synchronic* syntactic details of a structure is to developing a plausible account for the diachrony of that structure. There is nothing surprising in this — it would be strange indeed if we could develop a compelling story of how a structure came to be what it synchronically is without first knowing, in fact, precisely *what* it is, synchronically — however, it is our feeling that this fundamental fact, known since Saussure as the ‘primacy of synchronic linguistics,’ is overlooked by many of those working on diachronic syntax.

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