

Re-evaluating the Status of *rah-* within the Aspectual System of Hindi: From Auxiliary to Progressive Affix

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-evaluates the status of *rah-* within the aspectual system of Hindi. While previous studies have often classified *rah-* as an auxiliary verb, I argue that it has grammaticalized further into a bound progressive morpheme. The analysis is based on four diagnostics: incompatibility with the habitual marker *-t-*, restrictions on negation, absence in negative imperatives, and morphological opposition with habitual *-t-*. These distributional patterns demonstrate that *rah-* diverges from the profile of canonical auxiliaries and vector verbs, which inflect independently, modify event structure, and participate in monoclausal [V1+V2] constructions.

A central contribution of this study is to refute the long-standing “perfective *rahā*” hypothesis. Because the progressive form *rahā* is formally homonymous with the perfective participial ending *-ā*, earlier accounts have analyzed progressive constructions as containing a perfective morpheme. This yields the paradoxical conclusion that the progressive encodes perfective aspect—an untenable analysis, since progressive and perfective are incompatible. By distinguishing the true perfective marker *-(y)ā* from agreement suffixes *-ā/-ī/-e*, and by recognizing *rah-* as the sole progressive exponent, the analysis resolves this inconsistency.

The findings are situated within complex predicate theory and the grammaticalization literature. The trajectory of *rah-* aligns with Lehmann’s grammaticalization cline (lexical verb → auxiliary → TAM affix) and illustrates Hopper & Traugott’s principles of decategorialization and persistence. Typologically, the Hindi evidence contributes to the well-documented tendency for posture or existence verbs (‘stay, remain, sit, stand’) to develop into progressive markers.

This study clarifies the synchronic role of *rah-* as an affixal progressive morpheme and revises our understanding of Hindi TAM morphology. It also raises broader implications for the analysis of Indo-Aryan aspect systems, for the theory of complex predicates, and for typological models of grammaticalization.

1 Introduction

This paper re-evaluates the morphological status of *rah-* in Hindi, arguing that it functions as a progressive aspect morpheme (affix) rather than an auxiliary or light verb. While *rah- h-* is often treated as an auxiliary sequence in the descriptive tradition, I contend that it is better analyzed as a constructional combination of the progressive marker *rah-* with the tense auxiliary *honā* ‘be’, where *rah-* itself is affixal in distribution

and behavior.¹ Diachronically, *rah-* derives from the lexical verb *rahnā* ‘stay, remain’, but in present-day Hindi it has shed verbal and auxiliary properties and grammaticalized toward bound TAM morphology.

Empirically, I revisit four diagnostics that separate *rah-* from bonafide auxiliaries and from vector verbs in compound predicates. (i) Habitual co-occurrence: auxiliaries (including vector and modal V2s) may appear with the habitual morpheme *-t-*, but *rah-* does not. (ii) Negation syntax: modal auxiliaries freely combine with negation, while *rah-* cannot surface in comparable negated environments. (iii) Negative imperatives: standard auxiliary placement allows a negator between V1 and Aux, but such placement is unavailable with *rah-*. (iv) Morphological opposition: *rah-* stands in a systematic morphological opposition to the habitual *-t-*, each pairing with the same V1 to realize distinct aspectual values.

On a grammaticalization account, these facts indicate that *rah-* has undergone decategorialization (loss of verbal/auxiliary properties) and tightened morphotactic bonding to the host verb (affix-like status), aligning with the classic main verb → auxiliary → TAM affix trajectory.

Structure of the paper. Section 2 reviews the auxiliary/light verb/vector landscape in Hindi and motivates a set of baseline expectations from the literature (especially Butt 2010; Hook 1973). Section 3 presents four diagnostics and shows that *rah-* fails to behave like a V2 or auxiliary while forming a morphological opposition with *-t-*. Section 4 develops a grammaticalization analysis, relating the Hindi facts to broader TAM pathways. Section 5 refutes the “Perfective *rahā*” Hypothesis. Section 6 concludes.

2 Auxiliaries and Vector Verbs in Hindi

In the descriptive tradition of Hindi grammar, auxiliaries are classified into three types. Tense auxiliaries such as *honā* ‘be’ realize present and past tense distinctions (1a–b). Modal auxiliaries such as *saknā* ‘can’, *chuknā* ‘finish, be completed’, and *pānā* ‘manage to’ contribute meanings of ability, completion, or possibility (1c).

(1) a.	main	roj	vidyālay	jā-t-ā	<u>hūn</u> .
	1SG.NOM	daily	school	go-HAB-M.SG	be.PRES.1SG
	‘I go to school every day.’				
b.	main	roj	vidyālay	jā-t-ā	<u>thā</u>
	1SG.NOM	daily	school	go-HAB-M.SG	be.PST.M.SG
	‘I used to go to school every day.’				
c.	main	Russian	bol	sak-t-ā	hūn
	1SG.NOM	Russian	speak	can-HAB-M.SG	be.PRES.1SG
	‘I can speak Russian.’				

¹ Previous studies have attempted to classify *rah-* as an auxiliary. Kellogg described *rah-* in the periphrastic form *rah- h-* as an example of an auxiliary (cited in Olphen 1975:296), and Deo (2006:6, 176) likewise discusses *rah-* as a category of auxiliaries.

A third group, vector verbs, includes *lenā* ‘take, receive’, *denā* ‘give’, *jānā* ‘go’, *ānā* ‘come’, *baithnā* ‘sit’, *paṛnā* ‘fall’, *uṭhnā* ‘rise’, among others. These combine with a main verb to nuance aspectual or pragmatic interpretation, as in (2a~b).

(2) a. main-e president-ko khat likh diyā
 1SG-ERG president-DAT letter write give.PFV.M.SG
 ‘I (simply/decisively) wrote a letter to the president.’ (Hook 1973:18)

b. nadya-ne khat likh li-ya.
 Nadya-ERG letter write take-PFV.M.SG
 ‘Nadya wrote a letter (completely).’ (Butt 2010:4)

Hook (1973:17) defines such compound verbs as a structure where V1 is the lexical root and V2 an inflected secondary element (explicator, auxiliary, or operator). Crucially, no other grammatical component may intervene between V1 and V2 which highlights the strong bond between V1 and V2. Butt (2010:3~6) emphasizes that vector verbs in Hindi/Urdu are part of monoclausal complex predicates, reshaping event structure (completion, benefaction, suddenness, etc.), yet remain distinct from auxiliaries.

Scholars disagree on how many auxiliaries exist in Hindi. Estimates range from 11 (Guru 1977) to 47 (Nespital 1997), but there is general consensus on a core set, including *jānā* ‘go’, *lenā* ‘take’, *denā* ‘give’, *paṛnā* ‘fall/befall’, *uṭhnā* ‘rise/get up’, *baithnā* ‘sit’, and *ānā* ‘come’ (cited in Bhat 2001:2).² *Rahnā* is notably absent from these inventories, indicating its marginal status in the auxiliary system. Debasri (2008:120) likewise provides a comprehensive list of V2s that occur in [V1 + V2] constructions, yet *rahnā* does not appear there either.

In summary, the hierarchy of binding strength in the Hindi auxiliary system can be schematized as [tense auxiliaries < modal auxiliaries < vector verbs]. Vector verbs exhibit the closest integration with V1, but as the following section will show, *rah-* demonstrates an even tighter morphological bond, setting it apart from auxiliaries altogether.

3 Morpho-syntactic Properties of Progressive *rah-*

As shown in Section 2, the Hindi auxiliary system comprises tense auxiliaries (*honā* ‘be’), modal auxiliaries (*saknā* ‘can’, *pānā* ‘manage to’, *chuknā* ‘finish, be completed’), and vector verbs (*lenā* ‘take’, *denā* ‘give’, *jānā* ‘go’, etc.). The progressive morpheme *rah-* has often been grouped into this system, but its morpho-syntactic behavior diverges sharply from these categories. In this section, I examine four core diagnostics: (i) compatibility with the habitual morpheme *-t-*, (ii) behavior under negation, (iii) placement in negative imperatives, and (iv) morphological opposition with habitual *-t-* and show that *rah-* behaves unlike auxiliaries or vector verbs.

² Other inventories include Kachru (1966), Bahl (1967), McGregor (1977), Hook (1974).

3.1 Restriction on Combination with the Habitual Morpheme

The habitual morpheme *-t-* is a central exponent of imperfective aspect in Hindi/Urdu (Masica 1991:327~328; Deo 2006:129). Auxiliaries, whether modal (*saknā* ‘can’) or vector (*jānā* ‘go’), freely combine with *-t-* to yield habitual interpretations. *Rahnā*, however, cannot.

- (3) a. Rām bhūl jā-t-ā hai
 Ram.NOM forget go- HAB-M.SG be.PRES.3SG
 ‘Ram tends to forget / forgets (habitually).’
- b. *Rām bhūl rah-t-ā hai
 Ram.NOM forget stay- HAB-M.SG be. PRES.3SG
 (intended: ‘Ram keeps forgetting’)

The ungrammaticality of (3b) contrasts with the regular auxiliary in (3a). As Olphen (1975:296) notes, even if forms like *jā rahtā hai* surface, they lack genuine progressive interpretation and are semantically anomalous. This restriction signals that *rah-* no longer behaves like a regular auxiliary verb, but rather as a bound aspectual marker incompatible with *-t-*. Below are the additional examples that reinforce this point.

- (4) a. Monu Korean bol sak-t-ā hai
 Monu.NOM Korean speak can-HAB-M.SG be. PRES.3SG
 ‘Monu can speak Korean.’
- b. *Monu Korean bol rah-t-ā hai
 Monu.NOM Korean speak stay-HAB-M.SG be.PRES.3SG
 (intended: ‘Monu speaks Korean habitually’)

These data demonstrate that *rah-* cannot occupy the same morphosyntactic slot as auxiliaries vis-à-vis *-t-*. This emphasizes that incompatibility with habitual morphology is a diagnostic of grammaticalization toward bound TAM morphology.

3.2 Behavior under Negation

Modal auxiliaries combine freely with negation (Hook 1974:85), but *rah-* cannot appear in parallel contexts.

- (5) a. main khat likh nahīn sak-ā
 1SG.NOM letter write NEG can-PFV.M.SG
 ‘I was not able to write a letter.’ (Hook 1974:85)
- b. *main khat likh nahīn rah-ā
 1SG.NOM letter write NEG PROG-M.SG

(intended: ‘I was not writing a letter’)

In contrast, compound verbs with vector auxiliaries combine with negation only in restricted ways (Hook 1974:98~100, 201). Yet *rah-* constructions freely license sentential negation, provided the negator precedes the entire [V1 + *rah-* h-] complex. This indicates that *rah-* is not “negation-friendly” in the auxiliary slot, but instead patterns like an affix within the verbal complex.

- (6) a. *mai-ne usko paise nahin de diye
1-ERG 3SG.DAT money NEG give give.PFV.M.PL
(intended: ‘I did not give him money.’) (Hook 1974:100)
- b. main use paise nahin de rah-ā
1SG.NOM 3SG.DAT money NEG give PROG-M.SG
‘I am not giving him money.’

3.3 Negative Imperatives

Negative imperatives provide a classic diagnostic of auxiliary status. With ordinary auxiliaries, negation can intervene between V1 and V2. With *rah-*, this is impossible:

- (7) a. bhūl mat/na jānā
forget NEG go-INF
‘Don’t forget!’
- b. *bhūl mat/na rahnā
forget NEG stay-INF
(intended: ‘Don’t keep forgetting’)

The unacceptability of (7b) shows that *rah-* cannot occupy the auxiliary slot accessible to negation. By contrast, imperatives with vector verbs like *denā* ‘give’ or *lenā* ‘take’ accept negation, as shown in the examples (8a-b) below. The inability of *rah-* to host negation directly reflects the well-documented grammaticalization tendency whereby forms lose syntactic autonomy and become more tightly bound to the verb (Hopper & Traugott 2003:6-7; Norde 2020).

- (8) a. mār mat/na denā.
kill NEG give-INF
‘Don’t kill!’
- b. khā mat/na lenā.
eat NEG take-INF
‘Don’t eat!’

3.4 Morphological Opposition with the Habitual

A further piece of evidence is the paradigmatic opposition between habitual *-t-* and progressive *rah-*. Both attach to the same lexical verb, yielding distinct aspectual meanings:

Verb	Habitual (<i>-t-</i>)	Progressive (<i>rah-</i>)	Gloss
<i>jā-</i> ‘go’	<i>jātā hai</i>	<i>jā rahā hai</i>	‘goes / is going’
<i>khel-</i> ‘play’	<i>kheltā hai</i>	<i>khel rahā hai</i>	‘plays / is playing’
<i>pī-</i> ‘drink’	<i>pītā hai</i>	<i>pī rahā hai</i>	‘drinks / is drinking’

Table 1: Habitual vs. Progressive opposition in Hindi

This opposition illustrates that *rah-* has been reanalyzed as an inflectional competitor of *-t-*. The modern Hindi aspectual system is thus organized around morphological contrasts, in which aspectual values are realized by tightly bound markers rather than by free auxiliaries.

4 *Rah-* and Complex Predicate: From Light Verb to Affix

Within the South Asian complex predicate system, light verbs (often called vector verbs) play a well-defined role. According to Butt (2010:3–6), light verbs exhibit three core properties: (i) they are independently inflected verbs, (ii) they modify the event structure of the main verb (V1) by contributing meanings such as completion, benefaction, suddenness, or inception, and (iii) they form monoclausal predicates together with V1. These diagnostics distinguish light verbs from auxiliaries and from purely lexical verbs.

When tested against these diagnostics, *rah-* fails to qualify as a light verb. First, it does not inflect independently in the way that canonical light verbs do: forms such as *rah-ā* are agreement forms attached to a verbal complex rather than participial forms that retain verbal properties. Second, *rah-* does not introduce additional event-structural nuances such as completion (*-lenā* ‘take’), benefaction (*-denā* ‘give’), or inception (*-parṇā* ‘fall’). Instead, its sole contribution is the progressive reading. Third, *rah-* does not participate in the monoclausal [V1+V2] complex predicate structure, since its distributional behavior diverges sharply from other V2s. As shown in the diagnostics above (3.1–3.4), *rah-* cannot co-occur with the habitual marker *-t-*, it resists negation when placed directly after V1, and it fails to appear in negative imperatives where ordinary V2s do. In other words, it no longer behaves like a verb.

Taken together, these properties suggest that *rah-* has moved beyond the domain of complex predicates into the domain of bound aspectual morphology. Its role is not to form a syntactic predicate with V1, but rather to serve as a progressive aspect morpheme tightly integrated into the TAM system of Hindi. In this respect, *rah-* exemplifies what Lehmann (1985:7) characterizes as a canonical grammaticalization cline: main verb → auxiliary → TAM affix. *Rah-* originated as the lexical verb *rahnā* ‘stay, remain’; it later

functioned in auxiliary-like uses as an aspectual verb; and in present-day Hindi it has grammaticalized further into a bound progressive marker.

This trajectory is also consistent with Hopper and Traugott's (2003:106–109) principles of grammaticalization. The development of *rah-* illustrates decategorialization, in that it has lost morphosyntactic features typical of verbs (e.g. ability to inflect independently, compatibility with negation and habitual markers). At the same time, it also illustrates persistence, as traces of its original lexical meaning 'stay/remain' still survive in certain restricted contexts and in the semantic intuition that progressive aspect involves a sense of "continuation" or "remaining in an action."

5 Refuting the "Perfective *rahā*" Hypothesis

One persistent source of confusion in the analysis of Hindi aspect is the status of *rahā* in progressive constructions. Because *rahā* superficially resembles the perfective participial form, some descriptions have taken the progressive marker to be "*rahā*" rather than *rah-*. This interpretation incorrectly implies that progressive forms incorporate the perfective marker, leading to the paradox that progressive constructions (9) contain a perfective morpheme. This analysis is untenable, since perfective and progressive are aspectually incompatible.

- (9) Rām khānā khā rah-ā hai
 Ram food eat PROG-M.SG be.PRES.3SG
 'Ram is eating food'

Masica (1991:329) notes that forms of *rah-* occur only in shapes that are "formally homonymous with (but have lost the value of) the Perfective." In other words, the *-ā* ending in *rahā* is formally identical to the masculine singular ending seen in perfective participles (*khelā* 'played', *khāyā* 'ate'), but it does not function as a perfective morpheme in progressive contexts. Instead, it is simply the regular masculine singular agreement suffix. This homonymy explains the surface similarity but should not be taken as evidence that progressive *rah-* encodes perfective aspect.

Olphen (1975:287) provides further support for this distinction by identifying the true perfective marker of Hindi as *-y-*, in contrast to the habitual *-t-* and the durative *rah-*. The glide *-y-* appears when the verb stem ends in a vowel (e.g. *khā-* → *khāyā* 'ate'), while consonant-final stems take *-ā* directly (e.g. *khel-* → *khelā* 'played'). Thus, *-ā* in *rahā* is not a perfective morpheme but an agreement ending parallel to the gender/number alternations *rahī* (F.SG) and *rahe* (M.PL).

Following Deo (2006:176), the progressive construction has traditionally been described as consisting of a gerundival main verb followed by the auxiliary *rah-* in its perfective form and a tense auxiliary (*V-ger* + *rah-perf* + *Tns*). While this description correctly captures the morphological shape of the construction, the analysis presented here argues that *rah-* no longer functions as an auxiliary. The distributional diagnostics in 3.1–3.4 demonstrate that *rah-* has undergone grammaticalization into a progressive affix. Thus, forms like *khā rahā hai* 'is eating' are better analyzed not as containing a perfective

auxiliary *rahā*, but as a gerundival stem plus the affixal progressive morpheme *rah-*, followed by a tense auxiliary. The apparent perfective suffix *-ā* is only an agreement marker, not an aspectual exponent.

In sum, the progressive marker in Hindi is *rah-*, not *rahā*. Recognizing this distinction avoids conflating progressive with perfective morphology, and clarifies the role of agreement markers versus aspectual exponents in the TAM system.

6 Conclusion

This paper has re-evaluated the morphological status of *rah-* in Hindi and argued that it should no longer be treated as an auxiliary or vector verb but as a bound progressive morpheme within the TAM system. Through four diagnostics habitual co-occurrence, negation behavior, negative imperatives, and morphological opposition with habitual *-t-*, I demonstrated that *rah-* diverges significantly from the distributional profile of auxiliaries and vector verbs. Unlike canonical light verbs, *rah-* does not inflect independently, does not contribute additional event-structural meaning, and cannot freely combine with habitual or negative markers. Instead, its behavior reflects affix-like morphotactic bonding to the lexical verb.

A further contribution of this study has been to clarify the internal structure of progressive forms such as *khā rahā hai* ‘is eating’. Because *rahā* is morphologically identical to the perfective participial ending, many earlier accounts have mistakenly treated progressive *rahā* as containing a perfective morpheme. This interpretation incorrectly implies that progressive constructions (e.g., *Rām khānā khā rahā hai* ‘Ram is eating food’) contain a perfective marker. Such an analysis is untenable, since perfective and progressive are aspectually incompatible. By distinguishing the true perfective marker *-(y)ā* from the agreement suffix *-ā*, and by identifying *rah-* itself as the progressive morpheme, this study refutes the “perfective *rahā*” hypothesis and resolves a long-standing descriptive ambiguity.

Situating these findings in the broader framework of complex predicate theory shows that *rah-* fails the central tests for light verbs and thus belongs outside the auxiliary system. Its development aligns closely with established grammaticalization pathways: from lexical verb (*rahnā* ‘stay, remain’), to auxiliary-like aspectual verb, to inflectional marker of progressive aspect. The trajectory exemplifies both decategorialization (loss of verbal properties) and persistence (residual traces of the original lexical meaning ‘stay/remain’), in line with Hopper and Traugott’s principles of grammaticalization. From a typological perspective, the Hindi facts reinforce a well-documented universal tendency for verbs of posture or existence (‘stay, remain, sit, stand’) to evolve into progressive aspect markers.

The findings carry several implications. For descriptive and pedagogical grammars of Hindi, recognizing *rah-* as a progressive morpheme rather than an auxiliary may help explain distributional restrictions that often puzzle learners. For corpus linguistics and annotation, the analysis suggests that *rah-* should be tagged and parsed as a bound aspect marker, not as part of the auxiliary inventory. For comparative and typological research, the case of *rah-* adds to a growing body of evidence that progressive aspect frequently

develops from verbs of posture or existence, thereby enriching databases of grammaticalization pathways. Finally, for theoretical models of complex predicates, Hindi challenges us to refine the boundary between auxiliaries, light verbs, and affixes, showing that transitional categories may crystallize into inflectional morphology more rapidly than previously assumed.

At the same time, this paper represents only a basic study of the progressive marker *rah-*. Future research can extend these findings by examining larger corpora, exploring dialectal and regional variation within Hindi and related Indo-Aryan languages, and tracing in more detail the diachronic shift from lexical *rahnā* to progressive affix. Such work will not only deepen our understanding of Hindi aspect, but also contribute to broader typological and theoretical debates on the nature of grammaticalization and the categorization of TAM morphology.

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Appendix A. Transcription Conventions

This paper adopts the Hunterian transliteration system (the official romanization of Hindi used by the Government of India) rather than IPA transcription. Consonants are represented using standard Roman letters and digraphs in accordance with Hunterian conventions (e.g., ch, chh, j, jh, th, dh, sh). Aspirated consonants are indicated orthographically with <h>, rather than with the IPA superscript ^h. Retroflex and dental consonants are not distinguished in the transliteration, following standard Hunterian practice. Long vowels are marked with macrons (ā, ī, ū).

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