

Transitive Nominals in Old Avestan

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The Old Avestan texts are notoriously difficult to interpret and to translate. Given the problems of interpretation at every level, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, etc., any firm synchronic rules that can be established concerning the Old Avestan language have the potential to aid considerably the interpretation of the texts.

However the establishment of such ‘firm rules’ is often sidelined by the desire for a coherent translation. One example of this is in the relatively broad set of nouns and adjectives to which transitivity has or has not been attributed by one or another translator. It is clear that some nominals can and regularly do govern objects; it is less clear how far this process extended in Old Avestan and what were its limits. In recent translations, understandably enough, the interpretation of a particular noun or adjective as transitive or not is often driven more by the exigencies of translating the passage in which it occurs than by a systematic approach to transitivity in the nominal system.

A clear understanding of the factors licensing and limiting nominal transitivity in Old Avestan is all the more important in so far as nominal transitivity has long been a problematic phenomenon in formal linguistics, such that in several influential theories the very possibility has been effectively excluded (e.g. Chomsky, 1970, 1981, 1986; Bresnan, 2001).

In this paper I approach the question of transitive nominals systematically, bringing together the various forms claimed as transitive in some of the most important and recent translations (Bartholomae, 1905; Humbach, 1959; Insler, 1975; Narten, 1986; Kellens and Pirart, 1988–1991; Humbach, 1991; Hintze, 2007; Humbach and Faiss, 2010; West, 2010) to provide a coherent account of the extent of this phenomenon in Old Avestan. I show that at least three factors tend to cooccur with the clearest examples and categories of transitive nominals.

The first factor is morphological association with the verbal system. This can be of two kinds: systematic, as with the adjectives in **-sa-* to desiderative stems, and superlatives in *-išta-*; or sporadic and analogical, as appears to be the case with the rare instances of transitive oblique case nouns in *-ti-* (based on infinitives).

The second factor is syntactic: the vast majority of transitive nominals in Old Avestan function as the main predication in their clause. The formal linguistic analysis of this fact aside, from a descriptive perspective the relatively ‘verbal’ syntactic context of primary predication could be understood to aid the licensing of the likewise relatively ‘verbal’ feature of transitivity.

A third factor is comparative support from Indo-Aryan, suggesting common inheritance. This is the least clear factor, since it may be relevant for only one or two categories, and even there parallel development cannot be ruled out (cf. Tucker, 2009, on transitivity of superlatives).

These factors can be seen to converge in the cases of the most consistently and unambiguously transitive nominal categories. For example the desiderative adjectives in **-sa-* are all unambiguously transitive; the category shows clear morphological associations with the verbal system, all of the

forms attested are or can be analysed as predicated, and there is comparative Indo-Aryan support for transitive nominals derived from desiderative stems.

Other categories are more problematic; they are, for example, only sporadically transitive, and show no clear morphological, syntactic or other patterning that would help explain the distribution. In these cases we may be justified in preferring those interpretations that do not require the forms concerned to be transitive.

Comparative evidence of a different order provides an alternative explanation for two or three particularly problematic transitive nominals. I argue that evidence from verbal and nominal constructions in Old Persian, Indo-Aryan, Germanic, Greek, Latin and Hittite suggests that besides its structural use indicating the object of a verb or noun and its thematic use in expressing ‘goal’, the accusative case had a further thematic function, that of marking experiencers. Accusative experiencers with nominals found in various old Indo-European languages can, then, be analysed not as ‘objects’ governed by transitive nominals, but as ordinary adjuncts, parallel to the accusative of goal. For Old Avestan, this can explain the transitivity of *sādra-* at 45.7, *duuaēθā* at 32.16 and 48.9, and *maēni-* at 44.19.

This paper aims to show that we not only should but can be precise in formulating rules regarding the licensing of transitivity in the Old Avestan nominal system. By recognizing the distinction between accusative complements and accusative adjuncts in different nominal categories, we can approach the task of translating the Old Avestan texts with greater confidence, the ambiguities of translation constrained by a more accurate understanding of the syntactic rules of the language.

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