

A pragmatic analysis of the R̥gvedic injunctive

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This paper uses formal pragmatics to show that, despite prior claims (Kiparsky 2005, 1968), discourse context is only one of a variety of factors conditioning the occurrence of “injunctive” verb forms (i.e., finite verbs unspecified for tense or mood) in R̥gvedic Sanskrit. A major problem with prior accounts is that they predict that injunctives should not occur hymn initially, since this would not provide sufficient context for their temporal and modal meaning to be anaphorically determined. Yet over 70 hymns begin with injunctives. Though context cannot account for such “out-of-the-blue” uses of the injunctive, I show how other considerations, such as text type and assumed common ground, can be reliably used to determine the time reference of the verb. For instance, Agni (the ritual fire) is known to be ‘born’ at every ritual installation. So, when the injunctive of the verb $\sqrt{j\bar{a}n}$ ‘give birth, be born’ is applied to Agni at the beginning of a hymn, it tends to have present reference or generic meaning. When applied to Indra, however, who was born only once, the time reference of the same injunctive is consistently past.

In addition, competition with other forms in the verb system is found to trigger special uses of the injunctive, such as performative, generic, and directive interpretations. When the injunctive is used in a context in which some other, more specific form *could* have been (but was not) used, the hearer reasons that, if the speaker had intended a more specific meaning, they would have used a more specific form. As a result, the injunctive is assigned one of its distinctive (non-indicative) interpretations. In contexts where no competing forms could apply, however, the injunctive receives its interpretation anaphorically, from the discourse. Finally, I show how the R̥gvedic poets deliberately exploit the vague temporal and modal reference of the injunctive to refer simultaneously to events that lie in the mythic past, the ritual present, and the eternal reality of the gods. Such usage crucially relies on the regular cooperative strategies laid out so far, in order to subvert them for poetic ends. This analysis not only provides a unified account of how the injunctive is used in the R̥gveda, but also sheds light on how forms unspecified for tense and mood features operate within their verb systems more generally, and how interlocutors’ use of pragmatic reasoning strategies to resolve potential ambiguity actually yields distinct interpretations for forms not overtly specified for those meanings.

By applying a framework known in neo-Gricean pragmatics as a “Horn strategy” (after Horn 1984) to tense, aspect, and modality (following Grønn 2007; cf. Blutner 2000), I explain the functional distribution of the injunctive in competition with various other verb forms specified for tense and mood. Crucially, my analysis relies on formal contrasts within the entire verb system. Horn strategies formalize the intuition that when a speaker uses a particular form, it is always *instead of* some other form that could have been used. For example, a hearer, upon hearing the aorist injunctive *prá vócam* (to \sqrt{vac} ‘proclaim’), will reason that the speaker is employing a less marked form to convey some special meaning for which the more marked form (aorist indicative *prá ávocam*) is ill suited. In this case, the injunctive receives the performative interpretation ‘I (hereby) proclaim’ (RV I.32.1) rather than the preterital ‘I have proclaimed’ that the indicative has (RV IV.45.7). This partial blocking process is represented as a 2×2 game between the speaker’s preference for “short, unmarked forms” (vertical arrows) and hearer’s preference for “stereotypical, unmarked meanings” (horizontal arrows) (Grønn 2007) in TABLE 1.

TABLE 1	1. [NON-PAST]		2. [PAST]
a. <i>prá vócam</i>	✓	←	✗
	↑		↑
b. <i>prá ávocam</i>	✗	←	✓

In this table, the speaker prefers the minimally marked form, such that the injunctive wins out (✓) over the indicative, which is no longer viable (✗) in the unmarked meaning (column 1). Meanwhile, the

hearer prefers the underspecified meaning for this unmarked form, such that the meaning [PAST] is ruled out (✗) for the injunctive *prá vócam* in row a. The injunctive is thus the optimal candidate, while the more marked form is “weakly optimal” in the form-to-meaning mapping: Despite being preferred by neither speaker nor hearer, the indicative *prá ávocam* is the most appropriate form given meaning 2 ([PAST]). Hence, the mappings ⟨a, 1⟩, ⟨b, 2⟩.

In Ṛgvedic Sanskrit, in contrast to the (augmented) past indicative, the injunctive is pragmatically driven toward a preference for non-past meanings. But in contrast to the present indicative, the injunctive also has preterital uses. Due to these conflicting pragmatic pressures, the injunctive can be used to convey a wide range of temporal (and modal) meanings that individual indicative forms cannot express. When one and the same verb is attested in the injunctive and the past indicative, the injunctive commonly shows a performative function and occurs in the first verse of the hymn, while the corresponding indicative has a preterital function and occurs later in the hymn. Under this analysis, not only are injunctives predicted to occur hymn-initially, but the motivation for their occurrence in this position and the interpretations they receive are also accounted for.

Another non-past use of the injunctive can be seen to contrast with past-referring indicatives in (1). The injunctive *út gāt* in the first verse of this hymn establishes what typically happens (the Sun rises) as a model for what should happen today. The injunctive thus receives a generic interpretation. By contrast, the indicatives in verse 10 of the same hymn mark today’s sunrise as accomplished. The augment *a-* is prefixed to exclude the generic interpretation and restrict the verb to just its preterital meaning.

(1) GENERIC INJUNCTIVE VS. PRETERITAL INDICATIVE

*út sūvar gād*_[INJ.]...

*ā sūriyo aruhac*_[IND.] *chukráṃ árṇo áyukta*_[IND.] *yád dharíto vītáprṣṭhāḥ* (RV V.45.1c, 10ab).

‘The (ideal) Sun **comes up**_[INJ.]...

The Sun (of today) **has mounted**_[IND.] the gleaming flood, now that he **has yoked**_[IND.] his golden, straight-backed (horses)’.

By applying this sort of reasoning to the text, I unravel the intricate nuances of the injunctive and explain how its various meanings can be derived, even when the discourse alone does not provide sufficient context for meaning to be determined anaphorically. I distill these interpretive strategies down to three overarching factors governing the use of the injunctive: The first is pragmatic contrast (shown by Horn strategies), the second is anaphoric determination (elaborating on Kiparsky’s (2005) conclusions), and the third is poetic wordplay (deliberate vagueness as regards time reference on the part of the Ṛgvedic poets). The third of these naturally depends on the first two in order to operate.

References

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