

**From intransitive to transitive-causatives:
Content accusative extension and the rise of labile verbs
(Evidence from Indo-Iranian and beyond)**

The present paper focuses on a diachronic phenomenon common for Old Indo-Aryan (Vedic Sanskrit) as well as a number of other ancient Indo-European languages that attest intransitive constructions with accusative noun phrases, traditionally called in Indo-European scholarship ‘content accusative constructions’. That is, a number of fundamentally intransitive verbs may be constructed either (i) with etymological accusatives, as in the case of Vedic *puṣṭīm puṣyati* lit. ‘s/he prospers prosperity’ (i.e. ‘s/he prospers’), or (ii) with non-etymological content accusatives (Inhaltsakkusativ), referring to some aspects, parameters or scope of prosperity, as in *śrávas puṣyati* ‘s/he prospers (in) glory’ (i.e. ‘s/he is glorious’).

I will argue that some constructions of this type can readily be reanalyzed as transitive-causative constructions with direct objects, according to the scenario instantiated by examples such as:

bhūma víśvam puṣyati (Rgveda)

earth:NOM everything:ACC prospers

‘The earth prospers in everything [which exists on it].’ (content accusative constructions) →

‘The earth makes everything [which exists on it] prosper.’ (transitive-causative construction)

The original content accusative noun (in our example, *víśvam* ‘everything’) is reassessed in this case as referring to the causee of the process, which results in a crucial change in the valency pattern and syntactic features of the base verb. In particular, the emergence of a transitive-causative pattern implies the rise of the labile syntax for verbs such as *puṣyati* ‘prospers, makes prosper’. Specifically, next to the prevailing well-attested intransitive constructions of the type *The king prospers*, the verb *puṣyati* occurs a few times in transitive-causative constructions of the type *The earth makes everything prosper*. All such attestations are found in early Vedic (in the language of the Rgveda, the most ancient Vedic text), but becomes impossible in the later language.

This diachronic process is common for many languages with content accusative patterns, such as Ancient Greek or Vedic Sanskrit. In Greek, this phenomenon may contribute to the expansion of the labile syntactic type. However, even in Vedic, where we observe general decline of the labile type, such developments may result in sporadic emergence of new labile verbs.

The status of this process within the system of diachronic features of the language is arguably dependent on several fundamental changes in the type of encoding of transitivity opposition in the history of Indo-European languages (see e.g. Comrie 2006).

References

Comrie, Bernard. 2006. Transitivity pairs, markedness, and diachronic stability. *Linguistics* 44.2: 303–318.