

## Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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**Between morphology and semantics. Determining the meaning of adverbial compounds (*avyayībhāva*) in the Sanskrit grammatical tradition.<sup>1</sup>****1. Introduction**

The Sanskrit grammatical tradition is known to have created an elaborate system of language description as early as the 4th century BCE when Pāṇini composed his famous treatise the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. Pāṇini's work must have been a result of extensive studies on language conducted by grammarians, phoneticians and etymologists before him; yet he is considered to have been the one who codified Sanskrit for centuries to follow. One of the concepts that found its way to western linguistics was Pāṇini's classification of compounds. There are four main types of compounding structures distinguished in Sanskrit: *tatpuruṣa* (determinative), *bahuvrīhi* (exocentric), *dvandva* (copulative) and *avyayībhāva* (adverbial). The English equivalents of Sanskrit names are provisional because Pāṇini's criteria for said classification were varied; some were morphological, some syntactic or formal and semantic. They do, however, explain their function to an extent. The former two types of Sanskrit compounds are inherited and quite common in Indo-European languages, similarly to *dvandva* formations. The *avyayībhāva* compounds, on the other hand, are a typically Sanskrit concept; they are quite versatile internally as a group and pose significant challenges in their interpretation. One of the issues that arise while analysing adverbial compounds in Sanskrit is the semantic role that an indeclinable (*avyaya*) plays in the final meaning of a created formation, which will be discussed in the light of the notion of expressiveness (*vācakatva*) and suggestiveness (*dyotakatva*) taken up in the early linguistic debate in India. This article aims to show the interpretations found in the earliest Sanskrit grammatical literature, in the works of Pāṇini and Patañjali, on the semantics of *avyayībhāva* compounds. It will demonstrate differences in the approach to their analysis and it will address the shift in the interpretation of compounds that occurred at the earliest stage of the development of the Sanskrit school of grammar, which, ultimately, heavily influenced semantic analysis in the

<sup>1</sup> This article is partially based on the presentation delivered at the International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences 16 held between 26–30 August 2024 in Tbilisi, Georgia. The talk was delivered in the panel: Compositionality, over- or under- summativity? Parts & wholes in Language and Languages.

following centuries. The study aims to clarify how the meaning of adverbial compounds is understood; how individual parts contribute to the final outcome and whether the whole is greater or smaller than its parts. In this way, the debate on *avyayībhāva* compounds echoes Gestalt principles of part–whole relationships, showing how early Sanskrit grammar anticipated questions that remain central to linguistic and philosophical inquiry today.

## 2. What are indeclinables?

Indeclinables are defined by Pāṇini in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* by enlisting them; they form an extremely versatile category, by no means uniform, which seems to have served a mostly formal purpose. Despite them being so varied, they do share certain characteristics which enabled Pāṇini to group them together. On the one hand, we can distinguish simple *avyayas*, which are defined in A. 1.1.37 *svarādinipātām avyayam* | (“[The technical term] *avyaya* denotes members of the class headed by *sva* (‘sun’) as well as particles”); the *nipātas* mentioned in these rules are further enlisted<sup>2</sup> and divided into subgroups, such as prepositions (*karmapravacanīya*), preverbs (*upasarga*) or other indeclinables related to an action (*gati*).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there are complex *avyayas*, namely adverbial compounds (A. 1.1.41 *avyayībhāvaśca* | (“[The technical term *avyaya*] also denotes adverbial compounds”). As Pāṇini’s commentator Patañjali in the *Mahābhāṣya* (c. 150 BCE) on A. 2.1.5 *avyayībhāvaḥ*, opening the section of such compounds, explains:

*anavyayam avyayam bhavati iti avyayībhāvaḥ* | “An *avyayībhāva* is something not being an indeclinable which becomes an indeclinable.”  
(VMBh\_I: 378.17-18)

What *avyayas*, whether simple or complex, are characterised by is that they either have a fixed ending (usually accusative or instrumental) or have the ending entirely deleted, which often allows them to be treated as adverbs or adverbial phrases in a sentence. Consequently, adverbial compounds should contain an *avyaya*, but that is not to say that any compound containing an indeclinable is by definition adverbial; they can also fall into other compound types.

The section on adverbial compounds comprises the rules between A. 2.1.5-21 in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and it seems that for Pāṇini this group of compounds was not

<sup>2</sup> A. 1.4.56 *prāg īsvarāt nipātaḥ* | (“[The technical term] *nipāta* (‘particle’) denotes elements specified in the subsequent rules [in the section beginning here] preceding [the rule] A. 1.4.97.”); A. 1.4.57 *cādayo ’sattve* | (“[The technical term *nipāta*] denotes members of the group beginning with *ca* (‘and’) when they do not signify things.”). These are the main rules introducing *nipātas* and determining their one semantic condition – they cannot be used to denote objects; the reason and interpretation of *asattva* in the text of the rule is beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>3</sup> The translations are far from ideal but they will give you an idea of the individual indeclinables’ function. As a side note, it is also a great example of how grammatical categories are not universal in different linguistic descriptions, even when analysing languages belonging to the same family.

really productive, but rather formed a closed set, which he enlists and analyses (Radicchi 1988: vol. 2: 56). It can be divided into two main groups: obligatory compounds and optional. It is often the case with various formations in Sanskrit, including compounds, that they are not compulsory; in other words, they can alternate with an underlying phrase (*vigraha*). Compounds introduced by rules A. 2.1.5-10, which form the first group, do not alternate, they have to be formed; their glosses do not correspond to the individual members of such compounds. On the other hand, compounds described by the following rules A. 2.1.11-21 are used interchangeably with an inflected structure. The majority of cases described by Pāṇini follow the standard *avyaya* + noun/pronoun/participle structure, where an indeclinable appears in the initial position (see *upasarjana* in 3); the only exception being rules A. 2.19-10, according to which an *avyaya* follows a noun. To make matters more complicated, there are a number of compounds containing indeclinables which are not indeclinable themselves and which fall under other categories, such as *tatpuruṣa*. What it tells us is that adverbial compounds are not a unified category and the only feature they have in common is morphological treatment. Their underlying semantics, on the other hand, seems to be quite complex especially in the view of Patañjali's standpoint on indeclinables being a semantic head for *avyayībhāva* (see 3.1 below). This picture is further muddled by entering the notion of expressiveness (*vācakatva*) and suggestiveness (*dyotakatva*) into the equation; the idea presented for the first time in Yāska's *Nirukta* (5th century BCE), according to which some types of words are inherently possessive of meaning (nouns and verbs) while others are merely suggestive (particles and preverbs/prepositions, which belong to indeclinables). This two-fold division formed the foundation for centuries-long debate on denotation. Even though Pāṇini must have been aware of Yāska's work, he operated in another linguistic domain; he did not discuss meaningfulness in such a way. And neither did Patañjali really, although he ventured much more into the domain of semantics and the three approaches get combined in the following tradition. Yāska acknowledges the complex semantical nature of both preposition<sup>4</sup> and particles<sup>5</sup> by pointing out how their semantic value depends on the role they play. This early description indicates that particles (*nīpātā*) do possess meaning while the case of preverbs (*upasarga*) is not so clear. Now, when we look at the contem-

<sup>4</sup> *na nirbaddhā upasargā arthān nirābur iti śākaṭāyanaḥ | nāmākhyātāyos tu karmopasaṃyogadyotakā bhavanti | uccāvacaḥ padārthā bhavanti gārgyāḥ | tad ya eṣu padārthaḥ prābur ime taṃ nāmākhyātāyos arthavikaraṇam |* ("Unconnected prepositions", says Śākaṭāyana, 'have no meaning, but only express a subordinate sense of nouns and verbs.' "They have various meanings", says Gārgya, 'hence whatever their meaning may be, they express that meaning (which brings about) modification in the sense of the noun and the verb.") (Tr. L. Sarup). Nir. vol II:29.14-16.

<sup>5</sup> *atha nīpātā uccāvaceṣvartheṣu nīpatanti | apyupamārthe | api karmopasaṃgrhārthe | api padapūraṇāḥ |* ("Now the particles occur in various senses, both in a comparative sense, in a conjunctive sense, and as expletives.") (Tr. L. Sarup). Nir. vol. II:30.3-4.

poraneous approach of Pāṇini and his section on adverbial compounds, we will notice that a semantic component in their analysis plays a vital role. Regardless of whether an indeclinable being a part of a compound is more generally a *nipāta* or, more specifically, an *upasarga*, they all appear in enlisted meanings, as we shall see below.

### 3. Formation of compounds

The classification of compounds adopted by Pāṇini is based on a number of various criteria, which include formal constraints, syntactic or morphological conditions as well as semantic requirements. There are, however, a number of principles that apply to all the compounding structures alike and determine the relationship between the elements. Therefore, what the creation of a Sanskrit compound involves is a) *sāmarthya* (syntactic and semantic coordination); b) *upasarjana* (a subordinate element) and c) *pradhāna* (a principal element). We can also see these relations in English examples, such as<sup>6</sup>:

blackboard < black (an attribute, subordinate element, modifier; Sanskrit *upasarjana*) + board (a head, principal element; Sanskrit *pradhāna*).

These words stand in an appositional relation; they refer to the same element and the first member of a compound modifies the latter; thus we observe syntactic and semantic coordination here (*sāmarthya*).

Let us concentrate on the latter two as their interpretation changes dramatically over time. For Pāṇini, the relationship between two<sup>7</sup> members of a compound, *upasarjana* and *pradhāna* is formal and morphosyntactic. The predominance (*prādhānya*) of one item over another is determined by morphological constraints, not by the significance of individual elements as will be emphasised in subsequent tradition. Pāṇini defines a subordinate member of a compound in the following manner:

A. 1.2.43 *prathamānirdiṣṭam samāsa upasarjanam* | (“An *upasarjana* denotes items appearing in the nominative in the rules serving to generate a compound.”).

This is a purely formal requirement which helps us to interpret grammatical rules and indicates the order of constituents in a compound. It is further specified that an *upasarjana* precedes other constituents (A. 2.2.30 *upasarjanam purvam* | “An *upasarjana* occurs as the prior member [in a compound]”)<sup>8</sup>; the second member

<sup>6</sup> I have attempted to provide the English equivalents of these compounds for the reader to better understand the specificity of Sanskrit examples; in some cases it is not possible, however.

<sup>7</sup> There might be, of course, more elements constituting a compound in Sanskrit, but they are generally not overcomplex according to the Sanskrit grammatical tradition.

<sup>8</sup> There are exceptions to this rule, especially in the case of *dvandva* and *bahuvrihi* compounds (see Cardona 1997: 222-223).

of a compound being the predominant one (*pradhāna*). When we take a look at the rules (*sūtras*) concerning the formation of adverbial compounds, we will see that an indeclinable (*avyaya*) is introduced in the nominative, which makes it automatically a subordinate element. One of the first rules introducing *avyayibhāva* formations is the following:

A. 2.1.6 *avyayaṃ vibhakti-samīpa-samṛddhi-vyṛddhi-arthābhāvātyayāsamprati-śabdaprādurbhāva-pāścād-yathānupūrvya-yaugapadya-sādṛśya-sampattisākalyānta-vacaneṣu* | (“An indeclinable (*avyaya*) [combines with a semantically and syntactically connected nominal *pada* to form an *avyayibhāva* compound] if it is used to connote: (1) what is denoted by a nominal (sUP) triplet (*vibhakti* 1.4.104), (2) proximity (*samīpa*), (3) prosperity (*samṛddhi*), (4) adversity (*vyṛddhi*), (5) absence of an object (*arthābhāva*), (6) a passing (away) (*atyaya*), (7) now is not the proper time (*asamprati*), (8) the appearance of a sound (*śabdaprādurbhāva*), (9) posteriority (*pāścāt*) (10) the sense of [*yāthā*], (11) sequence (*ānupūrvya*), (12) simultaneity (*yaugapadya*), (13) similarity (*sādṛśya*), (14) fulfilment (*sampatti*), (15) completeness (*sākalya*) and (16) end or terminus (*antavacana*)”).

We can clearly see here that the first word – *avyaya* – a neuter noun, appears in the nominative, which tells us what the order of compound constituents and their relation is going to be. The function of *upasarjana* is far more complex in the Pāṇinian system than what can be discussed in the present article, but it is definitely a morphosyntactic tool, not a semantic one (see Mocci 2023 and Pontillo 2003).

### 3.1 Patañjali's shift (2nd century BCE)

When we move two centuries ahead, however, and look how the same compound relations are interpreted by Pāṇini's commentator Patañjali in the *Mahābhāṣya*, we will see a definite shift of approach. Instead of acknowledging the varied formal, morphological and syntactic constraints of the process of compounding, Patañjali concentrates on, or more precisely introduces, the notion of semantic headedness, which ultimately became the benchmark for the following grammarians in their interpretation of Pāṇini's system. Under the rule A. 2.1.6 quoted above he says:

*iha kaścit samāsaḥ pūrvapadārthapradhānaḥ, kaścid uttarapadārthapradhānaḥ, kaścid anyapadārthapradhānaḥ, kaścid ubhayapadārthapradhānaḥ* |  
*pūrvapadārthapradhāno 'vyayibhāvah, uttarapadārthapradhānas tatpuruṣaḥ,*  
*anyapadārthapradhāno bahuvrīhiḥ, ubhayapadārthapradhāno dvandvaḥ* |  
 (VMBh\_I: 378.25-379.3)

“Here, some compound has the first word meaning as predominant, some the second word meaning as predominant, some a different word

meaning as predominant [and] both words' meaning as predominant. [A compound] whose first word meaning is predominant is an *avyayībhāva*, whose second word meaning is predominant is a *tatpuruṣa*, whose different word meaning is predominant is a *bahuvrīhi* [and whose] both words' meanings are predominant is a *dvandva*.”

What we notice in Patañjali's description is the emphasis of the meaning of a word (*padārtha*) that determines the meaning of the entire formation. He analyses Sanskrit compounds from the point of view of the semantic relation between their constituents, rather than formal requirements set by Pāṇini. While in many cases of various compounding types both morphosyntactic and semantic heads seem to overlap, this is more complex for adverbial compounds, mostly due to highly versatile category that *avyayas* form and, additionally, because there are examples of *avyayībhāva* compounds in which an indeclinable is placed in the latter position. So, what for Pāṇini was an *upasarjana* in an adverbial compound becomes a semantic *pradhāna* for Patañjali. Quite clearly, the notion of a head works differently for both grammarians. The fact, however, that Patañjali decides to emphasise semantic predominance in compounds, thus restricting Pāṇini's complex web of criteria in their classification, does not mean that semantic conditions eluded Pāṇini or that they did not play any role in the formation of adverbial compounds. In fact, when we take a look at how the rules in the section on *avyayībhāva* are composed, we shall see meticulously analysed semantic richness of indeclinables.

#### 4. Semantic conditions for adverbial compounds

Let us examine some examples to determine what the meaning of an adverbial compound ultimately consists of by analysing all the subgroups of the *avyayībhāva* section mentioned in par. 2.

##### 4.1 Obligatory (*nitya*) compounds

The first group of adverbial compounds (A. 2.1.5-10) are obligatory, which means they do not alternate with a sequence of *padas* that form them (Cardona 1997: 210). When we go back to the already mentioned rule A. 2.1.6, we shall see the list of meanings in which an *avyaya* is permitted to be used in order for compounding to take place. The term *vacana* at the end of the rule seems to have been problematic for commentators as we find Patañjali's clarification:

*atha vā na ime samāsārthā nirdiśyante | kim tarhi | avyayārthā nirdiśyante ime | eteṣv artheṣu yad avyayaṃ vartate tat subantena samasyate iti |* (VMBh\_I: 379.3-5)

“Alternatively, these are not stated as the meanings of a compound. How then? These are stated as the meanings of an indeclinable. When an

indeclinable appears in [one of] these meanings, it is compounded with [a stem] ending in a case ending.”

Let us take a look at selected examples:

(1) The meaning of *atyaya* (surpassing, over, away) – *nirhimam* < *nir* + *himam* (acc.sg. n.) = ‘the time when winter ended’; *atitāni* (past, that have passed) *himāni* (cold seasons); cp. Eng. bygone.

(2) The meaning of *arthābhāva* (absence of an object) – *nirmakṣikam* < *nir* + *makṣikam* (acc.sg. n.) = ‘free from flies’, i.e. free from troublesome people; *abhāvo* (lack of, non-existence) *makṣikāṇām* (of flies); cp. Eng. smoke-free or Germ. rauchfrei.

What we can see in these examples is that although, at a first glance, their meaning is composed of the constituents of a compound, because of the *avyaya* meaning being specified in the rule, there is an additional component needed to comprehend, and analyse, them correctly. (1) *nirhimam* does not just mean \*‘cold seasons that have ended’, but it refers to the **time** when that happens. Similarly, (2) *nirmakṣikam* does not just mean ‘absence of flies’, but implies peace and solitude.

A very interesting case is also the following:

(3) The meaning of a *vibhakti* (case ending): *adhistri* < *adhi* + *strī* = ‘with reference to women’; *strīṣu* (in, towards women, loc. sg.) *adhikṛtya* (having focused on); cp. English compounds with self-, such as self-centred.

What is particular about this example is the *vibhakti* condition, the case ending which, according to the later commentators, actually refers not to a case ending per se but to a *kāraka* – syntactic-semantic relation between a verb and its arguments in a sentence. Here, we can see that the relation in question is *adbikaraṇa* (locus), usually realised by the locative case. This is not, however, a simple case of *adhi* expressing a locus or reference, but rather a sign of a deeper syntactic-semantic relation underlying the formation of a compound.

#### 4.2 Reversed-order compounds

Rules A. 2.1.9 *suppratīnā mātrārthe* | (“[A *pada*] ending in a case ending combines with *prati* [to form an *avyayībhāva* compound] when it (i.e. *prati*) denotes ‘a little bit’”) and A. 2.1.10 *akṣaśalākāsamkhyāḥ pariṇā* | (“[A *pada* ending in a case ending and containing] *akṣa* (‘dice’), *śalākā* (‘ivory stick’) or a number combines with *pari* [to form an *avyayībhāva* compound]”) introduce forms where an indeclinable is placed second. The reason for that is that an *avyaya* is not specified in the nominative in the wording of the rule; it is in the instrumental case, which does not allow it to be a subordinate element (*upasarjana*). Semantically, however,

it does seem to take precedence, which makes it difficult in Patañjali's interpretation. An example for A. 2.1.9 can be the following compound:

(4) *odanapṛati* < *odanam* ('rice', acc. sg.) + *pṛati* ('a little bit') = 'a little bit of rice' and it, interestingly, means just what the sum of its parts. The *avyaya pṛati* can be used in other contexts as well, often as a preverb with a different meaning (see Sulich-Cowley 2017), which is why the need for specification in the rule. In other cases, compounding does not take place.<sup>9</sup>

The same cannot be said about examples for rule A. 2.1.10, where the meaning of compounds can be understood solely contextually.

(5) *akṣapari* < *akṣeṇa* ('dice', instr. sg.) + *pāri* = 'missed by one die'

(6) *śalākāpāri* < *śalākayā* ('ivory stick' instr. sg.) + *pāri* = 'missed by one ivory stick'

Cp. English compounds with the word 'short', e.g. We are one person short for the team.

Now, nothing in the wording of these compounds indicates losing, winning or missing until we put in the proper context. It is specified in the *Mahābhāṣya* that they are used in the context of gambling (*kitavavyavahāra*); in other semantic cases compounding does not take place. We can clearly see that an additional semantic requirement is needed to either form a compound or decode it when it has formed.

### 4.3 Alternating compounds

The remaining rules introduce compounds that alternate with a nominal, underlying, phrase. Unlike in the preceding examples, here we can use either a compounded or uncompounded syntactic expression in the same meaning; paraphrases are not necessary. Rule A. 2.1.12 *apaparibahirañcavaḥ pañcamyā* | ("[A *pada* ending in a case ending and containing] *apa* ('excluding'), *pāri* ('around'), *bahis* ('outside') or ending in [the suffix] *añcu* [optionally combine with a semantically and syntactically connected nominal *pada*] ending in the fifth case ending (i.e. ablative) [to form an *avyayībhāva* compound]") introduces the combination of various *avyayas* and a nominal stem in the ablative; it does not specify any meanings though. How do we know what the intended meaning is supposed to be?

(7) *paritrigartam* < *pāri* + *trigartebhyaḥ* (abl. pl.) = 'around / with the exclusion of Trigarta' as in *pāri trigartebhyaḥ* / *apāritrigartam vṛṣṭaḥ* = It rained around / with the exclusion of Trigarta.

<sup>9</sup> For example, take the expression *vṛkṣam pṛati gacchati* ('He/she goes towards a tree') where a compound is not permitted because *pṛati* is not used in the meaning of 'a little bit'.

(8) *bahirgrāmam* < *bahir* + *grāmāt* (abl. sg.) = ‘outside the village’ as in *bahirgrāmam / bahir grāmāt tiṣṭhati* = He/She is standing outside the village.

Cp. English compounds with ‘out’: outside, outbound or out and about; and expressions with ‘round’: round-the-clock.

The meanings of these *avyayas* are not specified here because Pāṇini has already done it elsewhere. The *avyayas* *apa* and *pari* are mentioned in A. 1.4.88 *apapari varjane* | (“[The term *karmapravacanīya*] denoted [the particles] *apa* and *pari* when they are used in the sense of exclusion (*varjana*)”), where they also get classified as a subtype of *avyaya*, more specifically *nipāta*, called *karmapravacanīya*, namely governing prepositions. This classification further requires them to be joined with a noun in the ablative case by A. 2.3.10 *pañcamy apāṅparibhiḥ*. We can see then how various linguistic aspects are interdependent in Pāṇini’s description. The particles *apa* and *pari* can be combined into an adverbial compound only in a specific meaning based on their formal categorisation, and this further determines how they govern the accompanying noun.

In some other cases in this group of adverbial compounds, what is specified is the semantic output, not input. Take A. 2.1.19 *saṃkhyā vaṃśyena* | (“[A *pada* which denotes] a number [optionally] combines with [a semantically and syntactically connected nominal *pada*] denoting ‘a member of a lineage’ [to form an *avyayībhāva* compound]”), for example. A form derived by this rule could be this:

(9) *trimuni* < *trayaḥ* + *munayaḥ* (nom. pl.) as in *trimuni vyākaraṇasya vaṃśyāḥ* ‘there are three sages in the lineage of grammar’, namely Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patañjali.

Now, the meaning of lineage is not detectable in the mere combination of *tri* and *muni*; it could refer to just a trio of sages. We do know, however, that this particular expression is always used in the context of Sanskrit grammar to denote the earliest three grammarians whose works have survived and who lay the foundation to later linguistic and philosophical development. This specific meaning can only be deduced from the context in which such forms are used or taught.

#### 4.4 An odd one out

Rule A. 2.1.17 *tiṣṭhadguprabhṛtīni ca* | (“[Stems] *tiṣṭhadgu* etc. are also [termed *avyayībhāva*]”) compiles interesting examples; this is an ad hoc rule introducing forms that are not derived, but just enlisted, due to their complexity. The list (*gaṇa*) contains forms which, at first sight, might not be considered adverbial because some of the them do not even contain any indeclinables. We can also observe that their meaning extends beyond the meanings of individual parts. Unlike previous examples, those meanings are not specified by Pāṇini; it is Pāṇini’s

commentator Kātyāyana and Patañjali following him who clear the meaning up for us, based on the context in which those forms are used.

The first example is composed of a present participle and a noun; there is no *avyaya* in it; so the meaning we would understand is this:

(10) *tiṣṭhadgu* < *tiṣṭhat* (standing) + *gu* (cow) = \*a standing cow.

As Patañjali tells us, however, this example and the following should be interpreted with reference to time and their referent should be another word (*anyapāda*): *tiṣṭhadgu* = ‘the time when cows stand for milking’.

Similarly, (11) *vahadgu* < *vahat* (carrying) + *gu* (cow/bull) = \*a carrying/yoked bull actually means ‘the time when bulls are yoked’.<sup>10</sup>

These examples are not exhaustive but they are an attempt to show the variety of structures, including from the semantic perspective, of adverbial compounds. Many of them are impossible to interpret unless proper context (output) is provided or meanings of indeclinables (input) specified; they cannot be considered a mere sum of elements.

## 5. Meaningfulness of nominal stems

As shown above, both Pāṇini and Patañjali investigate adverbial compounds from formal, morphosyntactic as well as semantic perspective. While Pāṇini’s compounding system is morphosyntactic, he does acknowledge the semantic layer and specifies meaning requirements of *avyayas* in adverbial compounds. Patañjali, on the other hand, takes the semantic analysis a step further and makes it a focal point in his examination of compounds by introducing the notion of semantic headedness. Do they, however, employ at any point the notions of expressiveness and suggestiveness of indeclinables discussed by Yāska? In the Sanskrit theory of language, a compound is a nominal stem (*prātipadika*), which is by definition possessive of meaning (*arthavat*). Pāṇini defines the term *prātipadika* as follows: A. 1.2.45 *arthavad adhātur apratyayaḥ prātipadikam* | (“A *prātipadika* denotes a meaningful expression other than a verbal root or an affix.”), and by the following A. 1.2.46 *kṛttaddhitasamāśaś ca* | (“[The technical term *prātipadika*] also denotes [stems ending in] primary (*kṛt*) or secondary (*taddhita*) suffixes as well as compounds.”). So we can see that adverbial compounds will be by definition possessive of meaning. We also know that compounds are built from elements called *pada*, which are units with nominal or verbal ending added to nominal (*prātipadika*) or verbal (*dhātu*) roots. It stands to reason therefore that all the elements building compounds should be, again,

<sup>10</sup> The list is not very long and the first half comprises terms related to agriculture.

by definition, meaningful (*arthavat*); and that would also include *avyayas*. For Patañjali, however, that was not that clear. Under the rule A. 1.2.45<sup>11</sup> we find a *vārttika* (short comment) reading: *nipātasya anarthakasya prātipadikatvam* | “[It should be stated that] the term *prātipadika* [also] refers to particles which are meaningless”. These echoes of concepts found in Yāska’s Nirukta deeming particles devoid of meaning (*anarthaka*) seem to indicate that the early period of Sanskrit linguistic tradition was undecided, or even contradictory as to the semantic role of indeclinables in formations they build; or perhaps not very consistent with using the term *artha* (meaning) or *vacana* (expression). Should they indeed be meaningless, how can they then not only form a meaningful unit that a compound definitely is, but, more importantly, significantly contribute to the semantic outcome, which can be also seen in the usage of said formations? The question requires a far more thorough textual analysis, but preliminary study indicates that early grammarians in India might have just taken various approaches or tackled adverbial compounds, and indeclinables in general, from different angles. For Pāṇini, the distinction between expressiveness (*vācakatva*) and suggestiveness (*dyotakatva*) of parts of speech was not of crucial importance; by selecting the meaning in which an *avyaya* is used he decodes the usage, extrapolates it from context and places it in a formal framework. Imposing semantic interpretation on Pāṇini’s original classification, which was done by Patañjali, took this analysis into a whole new domain and created some new problems, while at the same time laying foundation for philosophical considerations on denotation in the following centuries.<sup>12</sup> Ideas presented by Yāska that prepositions/preverbs might serve to modify the meaning of accompanying nouns and verbs, do shed some different light on the adverbial compound internal dynamic, suggesting that all the possible meanings are potentially in a noun and are simply refined in the process of compounding; the concept that was explored in the following centuries.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis of the *avyayībhāva* section in Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and Patañjali’s interpretation in the *Mahābhāṣya* indicates that the ultimate meaning of a compound is more complex than the individual meanings of its members. A first layer of meaning can be observed as determined based on Pāṇini’s specification of the input meaning of an indeclinable required for compounding to take place as well as further semantic specification after the process of compounding has taken

<sup>11</sup> This statement is found in a number of other passages, in the comments on rules A. 1.3.1 and A. 1.4.93.

<sup>12</sup> Issues regarding negative compounds, which contain an indeclinable negative particle but which are not classified as adverbial are discussed in detail in Sulich-Cowley 2018, 2020 and 2022.

place. This second semantic layer is most likely context-based, as can be deduced from the examination of early commentaries. In cases where the initial member of a compound does not itself belong to the class of *avyaya* and yet still the formation is classified as an *avyayībhāva*, consequently indeclinable, we observe that these form a group of adverbs of time or place and their adverbial nature is determined solely by context.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the semantics of *avyayībhāva* compounds cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts, but must be understood as the outcome of layered processes in which formal rules interact with contextual interpretation—an insight that resonates with Gestalt-oriented perspectives on the relation between parts and whole. The Gestalt holistic perspective on the communication process and the emphasis on the whole as playing the determining role can be seen in the approach of Sanskrit grammarians to semantics. The proper meaning of an expression can only be determined as a whole; individual meanings serve auxiliary purpose facilitating the cognitive and analytical process.

### Summary

The present article discusses the semantic structure of adverbial compounds (*avyayībhāva*) in Sanskrit as presented in the earliest grammatical sources. On the one hand, it shows the shift in their description from the formal approach presented by Pāṇini to a semantic one found in his commentator's – Patañjali's work. On the other hand, it tries to determine whether adverbial compounds are semantically a mere combination of their parts or perhaps other factors, such as context, play a role in their semantics.

**Key words:** adverbial compounds, *avyayībhāva*, Sanskrit grammar, indeclinables

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