A Paradigm Gap in Urdu

Farah Adeeba (UMass Amherst & University of Engineering and Technology, Pakistan) and Rajesh Bhatt (UMass Amherst)

We present the existence of a gap in the combinatorial possibilities of a verb and aspect in Urdu. In general, in Urdu all verbs combine with the full range of aspectual/tense options i.e. given an unfamiliar verb, an Urdu speaker can use it in the perfective, the imperfective, the subjunctive, the future and so on. Given this, it comes as a surprise that the *-ya: kar* `-Pfv do' construction cannot combine with the perfective.

1. Vo pehrõ ro-ya: kar-ta: tha:
   Dem hours cry-Pfv do-Impfv.MSg be.Pst.Msg
   `He used to cry for hours.;

2. *Vo pehrõ ro-ya: kiya:
    Dem hours cry-Pfv do.Pfv.MSg
   Intended: `He cried for hours.'

One might speculate that there is something semantically illformed about 2 - perhaps the durative/habitual semantics of the *-ya: kar* construction conflict with the semantics of the perfective. But we can set aside this possibility as the *-ya: kar* construction appeared in the perfective freely in 19th century Urdu literature. Consider 3, a close variant of 2.

3. Vo raat bhar ro-ya: ki: [from Umrao Jaan Ada, by Mir Hadi `Ruswa', published 1899]
   Dem night `all' cry-Pfv do.Pfv.f
   `She cried/kept crying all night'

We show that in the 19th century, this construction appeared in the perfective with a very wide range of verbs and did not seem to be limited or frozen in any way. However such constructions are judged as sharply ungrammatical by contemporary speakers of Urdu and Hindi. McGregor's excellent Hindi grammar, published in 1972, reports instances of the *-ya: kar* construction in the perfective but notes that they are rare (page 137). In the 50 years since, the combination has gone from rare to non-existent. However the constructions remains alive and well in other tenses. A further reason for not entertaining a semantic incompatibility argument for the ungrammaticality of 2 in the contemporary language is that the semantically close *-ta: rah-* `-Impfv stay-' construction freely combines with the perfective.

4. Vo ra:t bhat ro-ti: rah-i:
   Dem night `all' cry-Impfv.F stay-Pfv.F
   `She kept crying all night.'

We pursue instead a syntactic motivation for the change. There are two surprising aspects of the *-ya: kar* construction. The first is that the embedded verb does not agree; it stays invariant.

If it agreed with the subject, we would expect *ro-yi:*, but instead we get *ro-ya:*. This is in contrast to 4, where agreement with the subject is obligatory. The second is that the subject of this construction always appeared in the nominative, even when the embedded verb was transitive, the matrix verb is (or is at least homophonous with) transitive kar `do', and the aspect is perfective. 5 with a nominative subject vo was acceptable but 6 with an ergative subject was not.

5. Akeli: paR-i: vo kuch soc-a: ki:
    alone.F lie-Pfv.f Dem something think-Pfv do.Pfv.F
    `Lying alone, she kept thinking something.'

6. *Akeli: paR-i: us=ne kuch soc-a: kiya:
    alone.F lie-Pfv.f Dem=Erg something think-Pfv do.Pf
    `Lying alone, she kept thinking something.'

We speculate that the nominative case marking associated with the *-ya: kar* construction conflicts with a strong generalization that holds in Urdu, namely that the verb kar `do' in the perfective takes an ergative subject. Speakers attempting to generate this construction in the perfective faced a confound: higher level knowledge about the construction predicted a nominative subject but strongly predictive local patterns within the language predict an ergative subject. Following the logic in Ileri & Demirok (2022), we propose that speakers just started avoiding these constructions. This turns out to be easy to do as the meaning of the *-ya: kar* construction in the perfective is actually a subset of the plain perfective. Thus the meaning of 3 can be conveyed with the plain perfective in 7.

7. Vo raat bhar ro-yii
    Dem night `all' cry-Pfv.F
    `She cried all night.'

4 is another option. As a result, avoiding the *-ya: kar* construction in the perfective does not create any kind of expressivity gap.

Open questions: 1. How did this construction exist in the first place? Why did the case marking confound not block this construction in the perfective from the get go? Perhaps, the frequency of the construction was high enough to overcome the influence of the confound and a gradual decline in its frequency allowed the effect of the confound to surface. 2. What is the status of the gap in contemporary grammar? Speakers might be expected to generalize to all aspectual combinations but here it seems that speakers are relying on positive evidence to determine whether the construction can appear in a particular aspect.