

Adjectival typology in four ancient Indo-European languages

Scholars usually agree that the part of speech (PoS) system of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) is similar to that in Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and Hittite and, in each case, it is based on three major classes: nouns, verbs and adjectives or schematically [N, A, V] (implicitly, Nussbaum 2022). Still, adjectives show the same endings as nouns, comparative morphology is lacking in Hittite, Tocharian, Armenian and Albanian, and most PIE adjectives show the “recent” inflection in **-e/o-*. Thus, many scholars argued that the adjective is a recent category (Wackernagel 2009: 466, Lehmann 1974: 208, Comrie 1997: 101): that is, PIE or, at least, pre-PIE could be a language “without adjectives” or “with only two major lexical classes”, nouns and verbs (i.e. [N, V]). However, this idea was further developed into two opposite directions: some scholars claimed that quality concepts were merged with nouns in PIE and, thus, PIE was a language with “noun-like adjectives” or a language of type [(NA) V] (Balles 2006, 2009); others claimed that quality concepts were merged with verbs in PIE and, thus, PIE was a language with “verb-like adjectives” or a language of type [N (AV)] (Alfieri 2016, 2021; Bozzone 2016). In the former scenario, the adjective class arose from appositional nouns added to the feminine motion: i.e. **[noun]-ieh₂/ih₂-Agr*, where Agr means “agreement” (Brugmann 1888: 420; Fritz & Meier-Brügger 2020: 225); in the latter, it arose from derived nouns built on verbal roots of (nearly) quality meaning added to the feminine motion: i.e. **[verb-NM]-ieh₂/ih₂-Agr*, where NM means “nominalizer”. The talk aims to show that, if a functional-typological definition of the adjective is accepted, the latter view is more plausible than to the former.

The starting point for this research is Croft’s definition of PoS (2001: 67ff.). In his view, the “adjective” is not a language-specific, formal class, but a zone of cognitive space defined in terms of semantics and syntax. In practice, the “adjective” is defined as the most typical Quality Modifier construction that is found in any language. This definition is applied to 4 ancient IE languages, namely Rig-Vedic Sanskrit, Homeric Greek, Classical Latin and Hittite. Thus, a sample of texts is gathered for each language – 51 hymns of the *Rig-Veda*, the first book of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odissey*, Sallust’s *De coniuratione Catilinae*, and an anthology of Hittite texts –, all the Quality Modifiers in each text are collected (between 800 and 1000 in each language) and their internal structure is analysed. The results are the following (the data on RV Sanskrit and Homeric Greek come from Alfieri 2016, 2021, Alfieri & Gasbarra 2021, while the data on Latin and Hittite are presented here for the first time).

Basically, the same six construction types code the ADJECTIVE slot in each language, namely (RV Sanskrit is quoted as an example for all IE languages): 1) the simple adjective or [adjective]-Agr, i.e. Skt. *kṛṣṇá-* ‘black’; 2) the deverbal adjective or [verb-NM]-Agr, i.e. Skt. *tap-ú-* ‘hot’, *mah-ánt-* ‘big’ < *tap-* ‘become/make hot’, *mah-* ‘be/make big’; 3) the denominative adjective or [noun-ADJ]-Agr, i.e. Skt. *pítṛ-īya-* ‘paternal’ < *pítár-* ‘father’, where ADJ means “adjectivalizer”; 4) the prepositional adjective or [preposition-ADJ]-Agr, i.e. Skt. *paramá-* ‘most distant’ < *párā* ‘away’; 5) the prefixed adjective that is, a nominal stem attached to a prefix or PRE-[...]-Agr, i.e. Skt. *su-víra-* ‘having good heroes’ < *víra-* ‘hero’; 6) the compound adjective or [...]_N-[...]_N-Agr, i.e. Skt. *híraṇya-pāñi-* ‘golden-palmed’. However, the frequency of each construction type is far different from a language to another (Tab. 1):

	RV Skt.	Hom. Gk.	Hittite	Latin
[adjective]-Agr	7.6%	48.1%	65.7%	80.4%
[verb-NM]-Agr	45.9%	12.9%	25.7%	6.0%
[noun-ADJ]-Agr	10.4%	10.5%	0.8%	6.5%
[preposition]-Agr	2.1%	0.3%	7.9%	0.5%
Pre-[...]-Agr	14.4%	12.1%	0%	6.5%
[...] _N -[...] _N -Agr	19.9%	15.6%	0%	0%

Tab. 1 shows that the most frequent Quality Modifier construction is [adjective]-Agr in Latin, Homeric Greek and Hittite, which are *specialized* languages of type [N, A, V] in Hengeveld's terms (1992), while it is [verb-NM]-Agr in RV Sanskrit, which is a *rigid* language with verb-like adjectives in Hengeveld's terms and falls into type [N (AV)]. The easiest way to interpret the difference between RV Sanskrit and the remaining IE languages is to claim that PIE was a language "without" adjectives or a language of type [N (AV)], in which quality concepts were coded "verbally" and the most typical "adjective" was *[verb-NM]-Agr; this PoS system is preserved in RV Sanskrit bar minor changes, while a previously neglected typological change of type [N (AV)] → [N, A, V] came about in the prehistory of Greek, Latin and Hittite, although the change occurred independently and with a different timing in each branch of the IE family.

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