

Hindi-Urdu's Cobra Construction

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ABSTRACT: As an SOV language with a fair degree of freedom in its word order Hindi-Urdu may not strike linguists as deeply reliant on patterned aberration as a means to express specific attitudes of an extralinguistic nature. The present squib (ébauche) explores the inversion of subject and verb, the venitive preverb आ *ā-* <COME>, and use of the preterite in reports of events provoking shock or surprise. END

Key words: word order, preverb, Figure, Experiencer, venitive, mirative, causal chain, simulacra, preterite

In mining the internet for data illuminating the distribution of OV's (oriented verbs) featuring the preverbs आ *ā-* <COME> versus जा *jā-* <GO>, I encountered a specific pattern with *ā-* serving as preverb to predicates referring to events occasioning shock or surprise, a pattern illustrated ostensibly in (1)-(4)¹:

- (1) पेड़ के नीचे खात पर लेटी महिला के पीठ में अचानक आ बैठा कोबरा

per-ke.nīche khāt-par leṭī mahilā.ke pīṭh-mē ačānak ā baīṭhā kobrā
tree-under cot-on lying woman's back-in suddenly <COME> sat cobra
'A cobra suddenly landed on the back of a woman lying on a cot under a tree.'
[lalluram.com/tag/छत्तीसगढ़-समाचार/page/4343/?amp=1]

- (2) अचानक आ धमका तेंदुआ, डर गया चालक, खाई में गिरी कार

ačānak ā dhamkā tenduā, ḍar-gayā čālak, khāi mē girī kār
suddenly <COME> burst,forth leopard fear-WENT driver ditch-in fell car
'A leopard suddenly appeared, spooking the driver, the car fell into a ditch.'
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8-uEVqOV8o]

- (3) छत पर कॉफी पी रही थी महिला, अचानक आ टकराया उत्कापिंड का टुकड़ा

čhat-par kophī pī.rahī thī mahilā, ačānak ā ṭakrāyā ulkāpiṇḍ.kā ṭukaṛā
roof-on coffee drinking was woman suddenly <COME> collided meteor's piece
'A woman was drinking coffee on the terrace when a piece of meteorite suddenly struck her.'
[aajtak.in/trending/story/meteorite-hit-woman ... -said-i-felt-jolt-in-ribs-tstm-1740668-2023-07-21]

- (4) पत्नी अपने प्रेमी के साथ बंद कमरे में थी, अचानक आ पहुंचा पति, आशिक ने लगाई 5वीं मंजिल से छलांग

patnī apne premī-ke.sāth band kamre-mē thī, ačānak ā pahūčā pati, āshik-ne lagāi pāčvī manzil-se čhalāṅ
wife her lover-with closed room-in was suddenly <COME> arrived husband lover-ERG fifth floor-from leaps
'Wife is with her lover in a closed room. Husband suddenly shows up. Lover jumps from the 5th floor.'
[hindi.news18.com/news/jaipur/lover-mohsin-jumped-from-5th-floor ... died ... -rjsr-3900441.html]

These examples (and hundreds of similar ones) share three distinctive traits:

1. The orienting preverb is आ *ā-* <COME>, (not जा *jā-* <GO>).
2. The subject (aka, Figure) comes after its verb, (not as it usually does before its verb.)
3. The verb appears in the preterite tense (never the present, the perfect, the future, etc.).

These three features are used together to depict events causing shock or surprise in some participant, either an implicit or explicit Experiencer (1)-(3) or a guilty party [the adulterous couple in (4)].

¹ The reader may wonder about the status of अचानक in these examples. While अचानक may be seen as sharpening the connotation of shock and surprise, it is not an obligatory component of cobra constructions. Rather including it in prompts makes trawling for examples of cobra constructions more efficient. (i) is an example that lacks अचानक:

(i) नदी से निकल हाईवे पर आ धमका मगरमच्छ, लोगों में मचा हड़कंप,

nadī-se nikal hāīve-par ā dhamkā magarmaččh, logō-mē mačā haṛkamp
river-from emerge highway-on <COME> landed crocodile people-among arose panic

'A crocodile came out of the river and appeared on the highway, making people panic.' [ETVBharatUttarakhand]

Trait 1. Assuming the Figure and event reported in a cobra construction *come* into the Experiencer's awareness as a package, the venitive preverb आ *ā-* <COME> is a more appropriate directional auxiliary than the andative जा *jā-* <GO>². "Motion toward the deictic center can present the event first and introduce the Figure later as 'new information,' whereas motion away requires the Figure to be established earlier, in a more topic-like position." Miki Nishioka, pers. comm.) In general, thinking or speaking of the departure of a Figure presupposes its existence as a topic in speech or as a mental entity in cerebration.

Trait 2. Word order. In cobra constructions the Figure is not presupposed, not present in the mind of the Experiencer. Consequently he or she experiences the shocking event at the same time as (or before?) recognizing the identity of the Figure. Seen from a Functional Sentence Perspective there is no distinction to be made between theme (topic) and rheme (comment). From the point of view of information flow the Figure and its predicate are at one and the same "zero level". These are not verbatim transcripts of mirative utterances. Although not mirative *in sensu stricto*, this lack of presence in the mind of the Experiencer, his or her "unprepared mind" (in the terminology of mirativity [see Bashir (1993) and prior authors]) is inferred by the Narrator and reflected in the placing of the NP denoting the subject (the Figure) after its predicate. We may see the expression of the event before the expression of the Figure not as reflecting a conjectured sequence of stages of awareness (a problem for neuroscience) but as a partial simulacrum of mirative utterances used by narrators (usually bloggers or reporters) for stylistic purposes³.

Trait 3. Exclusive use of the preterite tense. This is perhaps the most interesting or at any rate the least noticed of the three traits that constitute cobra constructions. The use of the preterite tense can be seen as a consequence of a "causal chain". The causal chain is an approach to analysis in which an utterance (and the actions or events that it represents) is seen as a chain of stages which speakers are free to render in full or in part. Actions or events are seen as chains of sub-events bookended by an "Origin" and a "Termination". Speakers may choose to express such chains of cause and effect in full or may limit themselves to a representation in speech of a Termination or resultant state (Bashir 1993). Clearly the events expressed in a cobra construction have a very short causal chain, one in which the Origin and the Termination are one and the same, a "summary tense" that does not specify duration or relation to other events (Montaut 2001). Hence, neither the present perfect, the past perfect, the present habitual, the progressive, the conditional, the future or the subjunctive are candidates for use in a cobra construction, leaving the simple unmodified past (or "preterite") as the least inappropriate choice.

A gaping hole in this account is the absence of an explanation as to why cobra constructions always represent fearsome and potentially harmful or at least undesirable events.

References

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²Among a hundred or so examples extracted from the on-line data pool I encountered a single counter-example:

(ii) प्रेमी संग कमरे में बंद थी पत्नी, अचानक जा पहुँचा पति, वहीं बहा दी खून की नदी

premī-saṅ kamre-mē band thī patnī, ačānak jā pahūčā pati, vahī bahā dī khūn.kī nadī
lover-with room-in closed was wife suddenly <GO> arrived husband there flow^{TR} GAVE blood's river
'Wife is in a closed room with her lover; husband suddenly shows up; unleashes a river of blood.'

[facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1029026042658903&id=100066545510152]

³ In stylistic studies this practice is known as "free indirect discourse" or "ōrātiō oblīqua".