ANANTARATNAPRABHAVA
STUDI IN ONORE DI GIULIANO BOCCALI

a cura di Alice Crisanti, Cinzia Pieruccini,
Chiara Policardi, Paola M. Rossi

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A Curious Semantic *Hapax* in the *Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra*: The Priest *Hotṛ* as the Chariot of the Gods (*devaratha*) in a Courageous Metaphor

Pietro Chierichetti

Introduction

The crucial role and vital importance of the chariot throughout Indian history can never be stressed enough. As a matter of fact, when we envision the history of India (and Vedic India as well) chariots constantly figure as absolute protagonists.

> On the Indian continent, famous for its cherishing long unbroken traditions, the chariot figured prominently throughout its early history, and even in present day India, reminiscences of the ancient Vedic battle-chariot have been preserved.[1]

Without entering into an intense and detailed debate about Vedic culture and the origins of civilization in India, we can affirm here that the chariot is one of the most symbolic elements throughout Indian history.[2] It is well known that the migration of Indo-European tribes from the steppes onto the Indo plains during the early history of India was directly linked to the use of the battle-chariot as a new and terrible weapon.[3]

The chariot was used for early military campaigns during the later period of the Bronze Age and in the early Iron Age.[4] Moreover, in the early second millennium BC the chariot drawn by horses represented a terrible and indispensable instrument that was employed to cover large distances and to conquer new territories across a wide area of Asia. It was clearly a means to convey warriors and its velocity used to determine a great impact on the enemies.

By observing the terracotta figurines of the Harappan culture it has been confidently concluded that this civilization also knew the chariot, even if a close investi-

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1. Sparreboom 1985, 6.
2. Just to mention a few examples: in the Hindū temples there are buildings named *ratha* because they have the shape of a chariot. We can remember here the Konark temple in Orissa, whose decorations of enormous wheels make it look like a chariot. The *ratha-yatra* is an impressive Hindū festival (the most famous is in Puri, Orissa).
3. Bryant 2002, 342.
4. Anthony 2007, 462.

gation of these artifacts revealed that the chariot was drawn by bulls or oxen – and was not used for military actions.[5]

The chariot assumes such a profound importance in the ritualistic literature of the Śrautasūtras because of its crucial role for the military aristocracies of Vedic world.[6] Hence, it is not surprising that Prof. Sparreboom dedicated one of the most interesting and forceful studies in the field of Indology to the chariot itself. Sparreboom presented a complete description of the chariot as found within Vedic literature as one of his aims was to specify how the chariot appeared in some rituals which were characterised by the use of this vehicle. Some of these rituals included: *vājapeya*,[7] *aśvamedha*[8] and *rājasūya*[9] (to mention only the most important solemn ones within Vedic culture).[10]

The continuous presence of the chariot in rituals produced a curious phenomenon: the chariot became the image of the ritual itself – both as the vehicle transporting human gifts to the gods and as the means through which men could reach heaven.

The presence of metaphors describing the chariot in Vedic texts and ritualistic literature raises a certain amount of interest. According to Sparreboom, this metaphor could become a significant tool which could be used to investigate the nature of the Vedic rites.[11] If the equation *ratha/yajña* is considered to be the most essential, we can find several metaphorical uses of the term *ratha* in Vedic texts.

It is also interesting to emphasise that in Hindū iconography gods sometimes travel on chariots and are frequently represented on flying wheeled vehicles.[12] For instance, Sūrya drives a chariot drawn by seven horses while Kubera leads a chariot drawn by geese, but we could also cite numerous other examples.[13]

This brief investigation will examine a specific and singular case, in which we notice a curious and unique use of this metaphorical approach, a *hapax* one might say. This is the only passage in which we can find this metaphor and this comparison. The assumption here is that a semantic *hapax* can be an important key in helping us understand the rhetorical point of view of a determinate civilization since

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5. Sparreboom 1985, 28.

6. Parpola 2009, 150-154.

7. The name of a sacrifice, which is famous for a ritual chariot race.

8. The ancient ritual of the horse (ṚV 1.162; 1.163): cf. Chierichetti 2011.

9. Literally 'birth of king': rite of royal consecration.

10. Sparreboom 1985, 28-70.

11. Sparreboom 1985, 77.

12. Schleberger 1986, 199.

13. For example, Sarasvatī, Indra, Uṣas and the Aśvins. For some interesting chariots in the *Ṛgveda*: 1.38; 1.161; 1.19; 3.53; 10.85; 6.61. Chariots are also present in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* epic poems: for example, the demon Rāvaṇa drives a chariot in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Arjuna fights on a chariot driven by Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*.

we actually believe that this expression is typical of Vedic culture. Moreover, from a rhetorical point of view, it represents a means to investigating the use of language in ritualistic literature.

The ancient Vedic ritual was comprised of two parts, ritual acts and oral recitations, both of which constituted the ritual complex.[14] Within Vedic culture, ritual and language are extremely connected to one another,[15] effectively they both worked following the same mechanism and as a matter of fact can be considered twins. In many respects, we can follow the same approach to investigate both the language and the ritual, which our argument defines as a specific "product". In the Brahmanical society in first millennium BC India both language and ritual work in a similar manner and they constitute a single eminent product. Now, with some brief research, we intend to add a few more elements in order to offer further understanding of the specific attitude that the Brahmanical élites had toward their culture.[16]

The Case Study

Many references to the chariot can be found in the ritual tradition of Vedic people for it was also an essential element of daily life, and assumed a central role in their solemn rituals. *Ratha* represents a very diffused term in Vedic literature to introduce the chariot:[17] the *ratha* was in fact a light, two-wheeled vehicle with spoked wheels which was normally drawn by horses and used for warfare, hunting, as well as for some rituals. The Havirdhāna chariots in the *aśvamedha* ritual are where the priests put down the Soma,[18] while a chariot race is the most important moment of the *vājāpeya* rite.[19]

On the other hand, the term *devaratha* is less diffused, it literally means the 'chariot of the gods' and is a more specific term used mainly in ritualistic contexts. Vedic people imagined their gods travelling on chariots like humans and, when celebrating a sacrifice, they imagined the altar as a cart transporting their desires to heaven. Therefore, *devaratha* is connected to the most important activity in Vedic times – the sacrifice, and it is used to indicate the sacrifice itself. Here, the *yajña* (the sacrifice) is compared to a chariot carrying the ritual offerings to the gods.[20] There-

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14. Renou 1942; Staal 1990, 29; Pollock 1998; Patton 2005, 59.
15. Renou 1942, 105 ff.
16. Aklujkar 1996, 72.
17. Raulwing 2000; Bryant 2001, 175.
18. Dange 2000, 211. Cf. KŚS 1.3.36 and ĀPŚS 11.7.8.
19. Ranade 2006, 279.
20. Sparreboom 1985, 75-82. It is interesting to note that in the *agnicayana*, the Fire Altar is

fore, the chariot of the gods becomes the vehicle through which men transport their gifts and desires so that the gods may receive and grant them.[21]

As is known, Śrautasūtras are not part of the *śruti* but they are traditional texts used as handbooks to perform solemn rituals. They represent an oral *corpus* containing the most precious science found in ancient India, the science of ritual.[22] These formulas were intended for a specific priest who would be instructed in the recitation or performance of some specific act, therefore, each Śrautasūtra represents a specific handbook for a certain priest and (generally) provides the instructions for this priest only.[23]

The *Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra* is one of the two Śrautasūtras of the *Ṛgveda* and is a manual for the priest *hotṛ*. It can be said that he was the most important priest involved in the Vedic ritual because he had to recite the *mantra*s from the *Ṛgveda*.[24]

In *Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra* 6.5.3. we find a curious example of Vedic poetic creativity: here in fact the term *devaratha* (generally used to metaphorically "paint" the chariot of the gods) defines the priest *hotṛ*, who was in charge of the recitation of the Vedic *mantra*s. In this section, the composer of the *sūtra*s (*sūtrakāra*) is dealing with the topic of the *atirātra*. This Somic sacrifice was performed "overnight" because of the number of the *stotra*s and the *śastra*s.[25]

After the recitation for the Aśvins, the *hotṛ* first had to consume the offering for the *ājya* – an oblation of melted or clarified butter, after which he had to touch the water. He was to sip the water in order to purify his tongue before entering into contact with the offering. However, this *sūtra* suggests a curious innovation.

The *sūtra* reads: *prāśya ājya śeṣam apa upaspṛśa ācāmed vijñāyate devaratho vā eṣa yad hotā na akṣamadbhiḥ karavāṇi iti*. This has been translated as follows: 'it is known that, having partaken/consumed the rest of the butter (oblation), he should not sip touching the water; the *hotṛ*, the cart of the gods, says: «I should not clean [i.e. purify][26] the axle of the cart with the water»'. This *sūtra* is striking for its extremely metaphoric meaning and we should consider what Gārgya

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shaped like a bird. In the symbolic language of the Vedic priests, this bird has to draw the chariot of the sacrifice and the offerings to the gods to heaven. This definition is attributed to Agni in KauB 5.10.30-33: *atha yat svairagnibhir yajamānaṃ saṃskurvanti devaratho vā agnayaḥ devaratha eva enaṃ tat samāropayanti. sa etena devarathena svargaṁl lokameti* 'And so they introduce the sacrificer with his fires. The chariot of the gods or the fires. And they stop that chariot of the gods He with that chariot of the gods goes to his world'.

21. Bodewitz 1990, 74. *Rathantara* is another term to indicate this chariot of the gods.

22. Staal 1986, 21.

23. Renou 1963, 180 ff.

24. In the solemn rituals there were four priests: *hotṛ, adhvaryu, udgātṛ* and *brahmán*: Fuchs 1996, 19.

25. Bhattacharyya–Chatterji–Radhakrishnan 1962, 241. Cf. Wasson 1971, 169.

26. For this use of the verbal root *kṛ* see Monier-Williams 1872, 301 (col. 3).

Nārāyaṇa says in his comment, *sa eṣā śrutiḥ devarathaḥ iti ādiḥ hotā devānāṃ rathaḥ tasya vaktaṃ cakraṃ jihvā akṣaḥ*, i.e. 'the *śruti* [affirms] that he is the cart of the gods. The *hotṛ* [is] the cart of the gods. His mouth [is] the wheel, his tongue [is] the axle…'. He then adds, *mama devarathabhūtasya hotuḥ akṣabhūtāṃ jihvām ājyena svaktāṃ na adbhiḥ prakṣālayāmi iti śruteḥ arthaḥ*, i.e. 'I do not purify with the waters the tongue smeared with the butter (oblation) being it the axle, and me being the cart of the gods. This is the meaning of the *śruti*'. In this *sūtra* the priest *hotṛ* is compared to both the cart and the chariot, he is the cart of the gods.[27] In the commentary, Gārgya Nārāyaṇa specifies that there are some comparisons between a chariot and the *hotṛ* – his mouth is the wheel and his tongue is the axle of the chariot. This appears a complex metaphor which the commentator felt obliged to explain, probably because it was not immediately understood by the ritual operators.

This definition is absolutely a *hapax* since it does not occur anywhere else in Vedic literature and we could also affirm that it was impossible to find a similar metaphor in Sanskrit literature as well. It is also a curious *hapax* because it is the only case where the term *devaratha* is used to define a person. Such a curious semantic *hapax* (referring to a priest) demonstrates the originality employed by ritualists to explain some of the ritual's mechanisms. At the same time, it shows their application of the Vedic poetics rhetoric heritage. Here, we argue that the priests considered Vedic poetry and Vedic rituals as sorts of strings that they could manage with a wide margin of originality – so long as they respected the axioms, rules, and the poetic principles of the *śruti*.[28]

We should also point out that it would be rather problematic to understand the meaning of the *sūtra* without considering its commentary. In this case, the understanding of the *sūtra* relies on information beyond the ritual string itself provided by the text. Ranade translates, 'having partaken the remains of the clarified butter (oblation) he should touch the water. He should not sip the water, since it is given to know that this one, the *hotṛ*, who is indeed the chariot of the gods, would not in any case be smeared with water'. Leaving out the obvious differences in the transla-

27. Probably a symbolic chariot: see Sparreboom 1985, 22 ff., 125; Bodewitz 1990, 247; Heesterman 1993, 67. Cf. AB 2.37.1.

28. The "string" in Linguistics and Mathematics is a series of data to reprocess and to re-combine: we have several autonomous elements that acquire meaning in the composition of a string. What needs to be stressed is that we can use and re-use it and even break and build it again. As we have pointed out in a previous work (Chierichetti 2012) we understand as "ritual string" a series of acts in a ritual practice or description. The nature of this string is dynamic and mobile: it can change in its single elements because its nature is determined by the "string", by the composition of several elements in a determined manner, not by a single part. See also Wilke 2010. This concept of string is diffusely explained in our 2012 work (25-73): «La stringa rituale: una teoria delle varianti ritualistiche attraverso l'analisi del sacrificio indiano» (in Italian).

tions, we can observe the proper meaning of the *sūtra*. Ranade translates *vijñāyate* by marking it as something already known.

As Chakrabarti has already attested, the verb *vijñāyate* is passive with a clear meaning.[29] *Vijñāyate* is the passive form from the Sanskrit root *vi+jñā* and, when used properly, has the meaning of 'it is known' – or – 'it is recognised'. In the Śrautasūtras, it can be understood as a general reference to something that is already well-known by the audience. Therefore, what exactly is already known? By reading the *sūtra,* we can say that we know that the *hotṛ* should not drink the water because his tongue has been purified by the waste of the butter oblation. The reason for this is that the *hotṛ* is a *devaratha* – a cart of the gods. It is not possible therefore to anoint a chariot axle with water, but only with butter (or something unctuous). The comparison here is enlightening. His tongue (*jihvā*) is the axle of the chariot and it is impossible to wet this with water because the axle has to be mobile. From another point of view, we also have to consider that this is also the reason behind the act: the *hotṛ* has to eat the *ājya* since his tongue is the axle of the chariot and for this reason it must be oiled.

The *sūtrakāra* indicates that there is widespread understanding about this behaviour: the tradition establishes that the *hotṛ* should not sip water and that he has to use butter or something unctuous to purify his tongue.

It is very interesting to examine the Vedic literature since there is no other *locus* where the term *devaratha* is introduced to metaphorically define people, and the priest *hotṛ* is never defined as a chariot. So why was this act so well known? Where does the *sūtrakāra* take this prescription from? In actual fact, the metaphor is the only explanation and the only reason for performing this act. This therefore leads to the question as to whether it provides a strong enough motivation.

It could be interesting to observe the presence of the term *devaratha* in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*, the authority the *Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra* has been referenced to. In AB 2.37.1-3, the term *devaratha* was used to indicate the rite (*yajña*):

> *devaratho vā eṣa yad yajñas tasya itāv antarau raśmī yad ājya prauge tad yad ājyena pavamānam anuśaṃsati praügeṇa ājyaṃ, devarathasya eva tad antarau raśmī viharaty alobhāya tām anukṛtim manuṣyarathasya eva āntarau raśmī viharanty alobhāya na asya devaratho lubhyati na manuṣya ratho ya evaṃ veda.*

> The sacrifice is a chariot of the gods: the *ājya* and the *prauga śastra* are its inner reins; in that with the *ājya* he follows in recitation the *pavamāna*, with the *prauga* the *ājya*, really he separates the inner reins of the chariot to prevent confusion; in

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29. Chakrabarti 1980a, 54.

imitation thereof, they separate the inner reins of the chariot of men to prevent confusion. His chariot, whether of gods or men, does not become confused who knows thus.

It is important to examine the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* because, in some passages of the *Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra*, the *Aitareya* is mentioned as the source of a different opinion or prescription.[30] The relationship between the Śrautasūtra of the *Āśvalāyana* and the Brāhmaṇa of the *Aitareya* is not as clear and some scholars have presumed that some other sources of the *Āśvalāyana* rules do exist.[31] However, this is the only occurrence of this term in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*: furthermore, in this case, the term *devaratha* clearly indicates the sacrifice, not the priest. Moreover, no reference of this exists in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*.

If we also consider the ritualistic literature *corpus*, we cannot find any references to this, and the metaphor remains untraceable in any of the texts. This is the only case where the priest is compared to a chariot, and this is the only case where the commentator proposes a developed analysis and a detailed explanation of the metaphor. It seems that the metaphor is a known fact which can be traced in the *śruti*, as the verb *vijñāyate* would seem to indicate.

Now, it could also be interesting to observe the rite described by the *sūtra* in detail, because it is one of the most important within the Vedic and Hindū religions. Sipping water (*ācamana*) is a diffused practice in several rituals,[32] and in particular, it seems to be a rite of purification.[33] In the modern Hindū religion, touching and sipping water is a way of purifying oneself:[34] the *ācamana* practice is also carried out during Hindū weddings.[35] In the *sūtra* we are investigating, *Āśvalāyana* states that the *hotṛ* must not perform this *ācamana* rite, and that this custom is known. Unfortunately, we cannot find any indication of this in the texts. Was this prescription typical only of the *Āśvalāyana* school? That is to say, was it only in some areas of Āryāvarta, the land of Vedic tradition (and in some of the clans we call Vedic Indians), that the *hotṛ* purified himself with the *ājya* and not with water? It is also possible that the *hotṛ* had to purify his tongue with the butter of the offerings because he had to recite the *mantra* and only for this procedure. Here, water did not guarantee the necessary purification.

Meanwhile, we can hypothesise that this custom is an "original" creation of *Āśvalāyana* and his clan when they had to perform the ritual. One suggestion does

30. AŚS 1.3.12; 3.6.3
31. Chakrabarti 1978; Chakrabarti 1980b, 195.
32. Gonda 1980, 334.
33. Patton 2005, 165.
34. Ghurye 1932, 8; Piano 1996, 254.
35. Pandey 1976, 372.

not necessarily exclude the other. What we usually call "tradition" is a more complex concept than we might think.

Conclusion

In her masterpiece *Bringing the Gods to Mind*, Laurie Patton clarifies how the metaphor in the Vedic culture works: «I argue that all of these Vedic themes show a particular kind of transformation as one traces their *viniyoga*, or application in ritual commentary. Each involves a "ritual disassociation", whereby images and actions are harnessed to each other in metonymic association in the earlier period and then become de-linked as the Vedic period progresses».[36]

The use of images in Vedic literature had a longstanding and commonplace tradition: the Vedic hymns feature a great deal of visions which were passed down to the ritualistic works, and eventually, to Hindū literature.

In the example we have analysed above, the use of metaphorical language is extremely broad: here, the same term can be used as the base of many metaphors. We cannot determine if this *hapax* is simply a literary metaphor – or – whether it is a sign of the creativity of the ritualists in accordance with Annette Wilke's opinion: «rituals are creative constructions, and often also highly artistic constructions. Even a "ritual grammar" must somehow account for that».[37]

Undoubtedly, the *sūtrakāra* shows that he is free in using the language. We may say that this *hapax* occurs in the aforementioned instance only because of the absence of the texts that have been lost. It could also be possible that they are present in some manuscripts yet to be edited, but this assertion is nothing more than an "honest" statement. Therefore, we have to consider that this "free" use of the term *devaratha* should be considered within the wider topic of the ritual the *sūtra* covers. The *sūtrakāra* affirms that this custom had been established from the *śruti*, and we cannot trace this evidence in any of the texts in our possession. Therefore, we can assert that the *sūtrakāra* uses a new metaphor to prove an unusual behaviour, and that he presents it as a traditional element. In the same passage, with the same expression, the author of the *sūtra* shows how the ritual matters work. He ascribed an element to the *śruti* that has yet to be traced in the Vedic literature, and, in order to prove this, he creates a new and fascinating metaphor.

If the metaphor is one of the core elements in the Vedic literature, it could lead us to think that the metaphor – or some metaphorical use of the language and the literary tradition – is one of the ways to link an opinion to the *Tradition*. The

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36. Patton 2005, 9.
37. Wilke 2010, 257.

sūtrakāra is on the same wavelength as the *śruti* because he uses the sacred language in the same way. This ability proves that he has the same "vision" as the Vedic poets, both in language and in ritual.

This mechanism could be at the origin of all Hindū culture. We can explain this final reasoning by drawing a parallel with Madhav Deshpande's idea about the development of the Sanskrit language.

«Each new generation of these linguistic élites may provide previously unknown facts about eternal language. Thus the grammar of this eternal language is in theory, quite paradoxically, not eternal. It has to be a continually changing entity».[38]

If the grammar of the eternal language is in theory because the linguistic élites decided what was correct and what was not, we can also suppose that (in the ritualistic field), the priests, enlightened by their holy knowledge, can "create" a ritual. Furthermore, they can also sanction a new form or new variants of a ritual procedure and this creation of the tradition is, in some way, confirmed and proven by the metaphorical linguistic invention. The priest who uses the language at his will can "discover" a hidden part of the tradition regarding a ritual that has, so far, been unknown.

As a consecrated man, he owes free access to the real *Tradition.* His vision of the *śruti* can go beyond the texts. Indeed, they are quite simply the vision of the *ṛṣi* registered at the beginning of time. However, the *śruti* is an eternal concept which the holy man can access every time. The metaphorical use of the language is the proof of this capacity.

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38. Deshpande 1993, 72.

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