

Reversing Compound Verbs in Hindi: What it means for the semantics and the pragmatics

Shubham Kumar Srivastava

Sarada Bandana Biswas*

University of Delhi

*Corresponding author email: sarada.biswas@gmail.com

Languages exhibit multiple ways of expressing an action, or rather the verb to be more precise. In addition to inflectional verbs, phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, etc., South Asian languages pervasively use complex predicates to express action. A complex predicate is defined as a complex argument structure (having two or more semantic heads contribute to the arguments) that functions as a simple predicate, that is, as having a single predicate (a nuclear PRED) and a single subject (Butt, 1993).

In Hindi, a compound verb is defined as a complex predicate consisting of a ‘light’ or ‘vector’ verb that carries the inflection and indicates tense, aspect and mood, but has very few hues of meaning; and a ‘polar’ or ‘primary’ verb that carries most of the semantics of the predicate and determines its valency. CV=V1(polar)+V2(vector). Following from Hook (1974), this paper looks at instances where compound verbs can be ‘reversed’, i.e., structurally, the polar verb takes place of the vector verb and the vector verb appears in place of the polar verb, RCV=V2(vector)+V1(polar). Analysing this phenomenon at a structural level leads to the assumption that the syntax and semantics of the CV also act like they have been ‘reversed’, and the RCV serves in pretty much the same way as the CV, just with reversed functions. This, in fact, is not true. This paper studies the phenomenon of reversed compound verbs in terms of structure, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

Semantically, in a CV, V1 dominates the meaning (it would be incorrect to say V2 does not contribute to the meaning at all, it does change the hue of the meaning but it is semantically bleached). When an RCV is formed, the meaning seems to remain the same; V1 does not lose its primacy in determining the meaning of the complex predicate even though it is now in the vector position. V2 is still able to only bring about a change in the hue of the meaning, even though it is now polar.

Interesting observations have been noted in this study in terms of valency of the argument structure. Studies so far state that in a CV, the transitivity of V2 decides the transitivity of the CV. Thus, if the CV has an intransitive V2, it cannot occur with ergative case marked subject, even if V1 is transitive or di-transitive. This paper concludes that in fact, V2 alone does not decide valency of the argument structure; the transitivity of V2 defines the maximum number of arguments that the compound verb can support and the transitivity of V1 defines the minimum number of arguments that the construction must have in order to be grammatical.

This paper also draws a few conclusions about the pragmatics involved in the formation of RCVs. CVs can be either volitional (S=A) or non-volitional (S=O). However, the moment a CV is reversed, pragmatically, the action becomes volitional or deliberate. The element of an action being performed involuntarily or accidentally is taken out and the context becomes deliberate.

These observations have been discussed in the examples below:

l(a) ram ne ravəṇ ko pəttʰər ma:r dīya
Ram.Erg.3MS Ravan.Dat.3MS stone.Ins hit/kill give.Perf.3MS
“Ram hit Ravan with a stone.”

Sentence (1) makes use of the compound verb *ma:r dīya* to mean that Ram hit Ravan with a stone. The meaning comes from V1(*ma:rna*) while V2 (*dena*) being di-transitive sanctions the three arguments: *ram*, *ravəṇ* and *pəttʰər*. One notes that while the di-transitive V2 sanctions all three arguments, the sentence will remain perfectly grammatical if one was to omit the D.O. *pəttʰər*. One also observes that it is not clear if Ram was intending to hit Ravan with the stone, or whether he hit him by accident, say while throwing the stone at a cat. *ma:r dīya* simply means to hit.

Now look at the same sentence while using the RCV:

1(b) ram ne ravəŋ ko pəttʰər de mara
 Ram.Erg.3MS Ravan.Dat.3MS stone.Ins give hit/kill
 “Ram hit Ravan with a stone.”

This sentence uses the RCV *de mara* to indicate the same content, i.e. Ram hit Ravan with a stone. However in this case, the instrument, *pəttʰər*, is no longer optional. One cannot say, for example:

1(c) * ram ne ravəŋ ko de mara

1(c) immediately begs the question ‘*kya de mara?*’ which means, ‘hit with what?’. Without this argument, sentence 1(c) is ungrammatical. This is because V1 (which used to be V2) is di transitive and determines the *minimum* number of arguments required to make this sentence grammatical, which in this case is three.

Use of the RCV in 1(b) also removes the possibility of Ram having hit Ravan with the stone accidentally. The RCV concludes that this action was performed voluntarily, with deliberation. The use of this kind of pragmatic tactics becomes more evident in question/answer type situations. For example:

2(a) bačče ko madhomakk^{hi} ne kyū kata?
 Boy.Dat.3MS bee.Erg.3FS why bite.Perf
 “Why did the bee bite the boy?”

This question can be answered in one of these two ways:

2(b) ōsne čʰətte pe gend mar di
 He.Erg.3MS hive.Loc ball.3FS.Acc hit/kill give.Perf.3FS
 “He hit the hive with a stone.”

or with the RCV,

2(c) ōsne čʰətte pe gend de mari
 He.Erg.3MS hive.Loc ball.3FS.Acc give hit/kill.Perf.3FS
 “He hit the hive with a stone.”

How one answers 2(a) will decide the speaker’s attitude towards the patient (or in this case the victim) and the hearer’s reaction to the situation. If one answers with 2(b), one observes some degree of sympathy the speaker has for the boy. The boy may have been just playing with the ball and accidentally hit the hive. If, however, one answers with 2(c), the boy’s getting bitten seems almost just, because the boy hit the hive with the ball with deliberation and of his own volition (this degree of deliberation in case of RCVs is distinct from causative type constructions in Hindi). The paper thus argues that reversing Hindi compound verbs can have significant valency-related and pragmatic effects.

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