

Preterite Formations in Niya Prakrit and Khotanese: A Case of Substratum Interference

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One of the most striking features of the particular variety of North-Western Prakrit that is attested in the administrative documents from Niya ('Niya Prakrit') is its innovative preterite formation. Other varieties of Middle Indo-Aryan initially retain some of the Old Indo-Aryan finite preterite formations. Otherwise they attest to the rise of a periphrastic construction that is characterised by oblique case marking of the agent of transitive verbs. Niya Prakrit, by contrast, shows virtually no trace of the inherited preterites and uses a new inflected paradigm that is employed for intransitive and transitive verbs alike.

As noted by BURROW (1937), the new preterite most probably originated with intransitive verbs (*gachami* 'I go', participle *gada* < **gatas* → pret. *gademi* < **gatas asmi* 'I have gone'). It was then analogically extended to transitive verbs, based on the structural similarity of the contracted forms with the present not only of intransitive, but also of transitive verbs (*karemi* 'I do', participle *kiḍa* < **kṛtas*, innovative pret. X; X = *kiḍemi*).

Burrow's description of the process that led to the formation of the new inflected preterite is convincing, however, he does not attempt to account for the factor triggering this process. Since Niya Prakrit developed in the multilingual environment of the Tarim Basin and in relative isolation from mainstream North-Western Prakrit as written and spoken in Gandhāra, it is attractive to assume that this innovation is the result of language contact.

We make a case that, among the multiple languages that North-Western Prakrit came in contact with in the Tarim Basin, the most likely candidate for the source of this interference is Khotanese. In doing so, we proceed from earlier hints at such a connection (VON HINÜBER 2001: 107–109, WEBER 1997 and WRIGHT 1998: 236), but unlike the scholars mentioned, we substantiate this claim by offering a coherent scenario of Prakrit-Khotanese language contact based on THOMASON & KAUFMAN's (1988) model of substratum interference.

Like Niya Prakrit, Khotanese employs an active finite preterite, which is, by all accounts, diachronically more deeply rooted and thus likely to be historically primary to its Niya Prakrit counterpart. Moreover, its accusative alignment contrasts with the expressions of past tense in other Middle Iranian languages spoken in the relevant geographical area during the relevant time period, particularly Bactrian.

The assumed syntactic interference comes along with certain phonological peculiarities of Niya Prakrit that are likewise paralleled by Khotanese; coupled with the virtual absence of Khotanese loanwords in the Niya documents, our case appears to be a standard example of substratum interference contact as formulated by THOMASON & KAUFMAN. Drawing on HØISÆTER's (2017) theory about the spread of Prakrit to Niya via Khotan, we further argue that, a scenario involving Khotanese as a substratum language of Niya Prakrit may also be well accounted for from a historical and sociolinguistic perspective.

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