A good deal of scholarly attention has been given to Rgvedic poetic practice, and in particular to Vedic similes. Not only do we have the excellent studies of Bergaigne (see esp. ‘La syntaxe des comparaisons védiques’, in Mél. Renier (1886) 75–101), among others, devoted to these problems alone, but most of our Western commentators, notably Oldenberg, Geldner, and Renou, can be unusually sensitive to similes and other poetic devices in their more general works on the RV. Indeed, we have become so accustomed to recognizing the striking and often bizarre turns of phrase that the Vedic bard was capable of producing in his search for novelty that we may come to believe that the poet was capable — syntactically and semantically — of anything. Accordingly, this paper has a dual purpose: to point out a particular poetic device in the RV that has not, to my knowledge, been identified as such before, and then to suggest that the use of this device is highly constrained syntactically, and is not, as is generally thought, just another example of the vast freedom of the poet, whimsically and infrequently employed.

Though the basic structure of the Rgvedic simile is well-known and straightforward, it is perhaps best to review it, for contrast with the extended use of it to be discussed. Explicit similes are marked most frequently by nā (approx. 1300x) (homonymous and probably ultimately identical with nā ‘not’, but generally occurring in different metrical positions; cf. B. Vine, IIJ 20 (1978)); somewhat less frequently by vā (approx. 1000x); a good deal less frequently by yathā (~yathā) (approx. 75x). With all these particles, the two noun phrases, that which is compared and that to which it is compared, are ordinarily in the same case; in other words, whatever grammatical function the target noun fills in the matrix sentence is also marked on the noun(s) or pronoun(s) in the simile. This is true even when a strict reading of the result might seem semantically inappropriate, e.g. in the type of II.33.11ab stuhi . . . yājñam nṛgāṁ nā bhūmām . . . . Here a full rendering in English would most likely be ‘praise the youth (who is) fearful like a wild beast’ or ‘. . . (who is) like a fearful wild beast’, not *‘Praise the youth (as if praising) a fearful wild beast’. This phenomenon, that the noun in the simile bears the same case marking as the target noun, even if it is not to be construed in the same way with the verb in the matrix clause, is rather misleadingly called ‘attraction’ by Pischel (Ved. Stud. I (1889) 91ff.). The distinction in translation in his own language apparently caused him to posit an ideal type in Vedic with simile in the
nominative case, which in all circumstances was 'attracted' into the case of the target noun in the matrix clause. There is no justification for this assumption: Vedic simply makes no syntactic difference between the two types.³

This is probably related to the feature of central importance about Rgvedic similes: they are not clausal, but always nominal.⁴ The three particles merely indicate that the nouns or pronouns they mark have semantic counterparts in the matrix clause. This relation can be of one of two types. As in the example above, the two nouns can be compared in semantic independence of the rest of the clause. Or, the noun(s) in the simile can be as appropriately construed with the verb as the target noun(s) - in fact, the comparison may be suggested by the meaning of the verb. Cf., e.g., I.33.2ab úpéd ahám dhanadáṃ ápratítaṃ, júṣṭām ná śyenó vásatíma patāmi 'I fly up to the unopposable giver of goods, like a falcon to its dear nest'. My impression is that this latter type is more common than the semantically independent type.

Double comparisons, with two nouns in different functions compared to two other nouns in these same functions (e.g. subject/object; subject/instrument; object/goal), are common in this type, and even triple comparisons occur. Cf. I.33.2 just quoted, as well as the following:

Double

Nom./acc.: III.41.5 mātāyāḥ . . . rihánti . . . avindraṃ vatsām nā mātāraḥ

'The thoughts lick Indra, like mothers a calf.'

Acc./instr.: IV.20.6cd ádarta . . . udnā īva kōsam vāsunā nyāṣtam

'He broke open (Vala) filled with goods, like a cup with water.'

Nom./abl.: VII.59.1 2cd urvānukām īva bāndhanān mṛtyor mukṣītya . . .

'Like a cucumber from its stem, may I be released from death.'

Acc./instr.: II.14.10ab . . . pāyasodhār yāthā gāh sōmebhīḥ . . . prnata . . . indraṃ

'Fill Indra with soma like the udder of a cow with milk.'

Triple

Nom./acc./instr.: IV.38.10ab ádadhikrāḥ śivasā pāncea krṣṭīh, sūrya īva jvōtiśāpās
tatāna

'Dadhikrā stretched over the five peoples with his strength, like Sūrya over the waters with his light.'

Nom./acc./abl.: X.68.5ab āpa jvōtiśā tāmo antārikṣād, udnāḥ śīpālam īva váta
da jāt

'With his light he drove the darkness from the atmosphere, like the wind the śīpāla plant from the water.'