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BRĀHMĀṆA SYLLABLE COUNTING, VEDIC TVĀC ‘SKIN’, AND THE SANSKRIT EXPRESSION FOR THE CANONICAL CREATURE*

A characteristic feature of Vedic prose is the assignment of syllable counts to words and phrases. Often the phrases cited are clear quotations from the ritual, sometimes metrical, as when, e.g., the quoted pādas viṣte rāyā īṣudyastī and dyumnaṁ vṛṣita puyāse (≡ RV V.50.1) are called āstākṣarāni ‘8-syllabled’ at TS VI.1.2.6, MS III.6.5, KS XXIII.2. More often they are non-metrical: ritual interjections, as in SB XII.3.3.3-4:

... tāsām vā etāsām pañcānām vyāহṛṭināṁ saptādaśakṣārāṁ ō śravayeti cāturakṣaram āstū śravasatī iti cāturakṣaram yāṣṭī dvyākṣaram yē yājāmaḥ iti pañcākṣaram l// dvyākṣaro vāsatkāraḥ.

Of these 5 utterances there are 17 syllables. ‘O śravaya’ is 4 syllables; ‘astu śravasat’ is 4 syllables; ‘yaja’ is 2 syllables; ‘ye yajāmaḥ’ 5 syllables. And the vāsat-call is 2 syllables.

In other circumstances single words are cited independently, as in the following examples:

MS III.2.4 tryākṣaro vai pūrṇaḥ
'Man' has 3 syllables. (Cf. AB III.46, Ai.Ār. I.3.4, JB I.141, PB II.10.2, 17.2, XX. 14.8)

SB VI.7.1.24 tād vā ukhēti dvē aksāre // ... só eva kumbhī sā sthāti tāt gāt.  
Now 'pan' (ukhē) is 2 syllables. ... And that (pan) is (also) a 'pot' (kumbhī) and a 'cauldron' (sthaṭ). That is 6 (Syllables).

In most cases, as in all examples so far cited, the Vedic and Classical pronunciations of the words and phrases would be identical, and the assigned syllable count accurately reflects this pronunciation.

In other cases, however, the syllable numbers do not accord with Classical pronunciation, and seem to reflect early Vedic rules for hiatus, elision, and distraction of Cy and Cv clusters — rules for which we, of course, have ample independent evidence in metrical texts, especially the RV. Compare, for example, AB III.12:

uktham vācindrāya devebhya ity āha śastvaikādaśakṣaram  
Having recited, he says (in) 11 syllables 'The hymn has been spoken to Indra (and) to the gods',

which requires both hiatus in vāc índrāya and distraction of the y cluster in devebhuyāḥ. Similarly, SB XIV. 8.15.3 (≡ BĀU V.14.3) prāṇō ‘pāṇō vyūnā īti/

āṣṭāv akṣarāṇī “Pra-breath, apa-breath, vi-breath” is 8 syllables, where apānō and viyānāḥ must be pronounced. ŚB XI.1.6.3, 5:

śā bhūʾ ēti vyāharat . . . bhūva ēti . . . svār ēti
tāni vā etāni / pāncākṣārāṇī

He said ‘bhūḥ’ . . . ‘bhuvah’ . . . ‘svah’. . . . These very (words) have 5 syllables. (Cf. also ŚB II.1.4.14, XIV.8.6.4 (= BAU V.5.3–4).)

which requires distraction of the initial v cluster in svār.

In the quoted examples and in most like them, the required pronunciation is directly attested in other Vedic texts: we cannot doubt the ultimate reality of disyllabic svār or the like. The questions such forms do pose, however, is how ‘real’ they are for the composers of the texts in which they are found: were svār and devebhīyāḥ living forms at the time of the ŚB and AB, or are they archaizing? This question has rarely been addressed, though the existence of this ‘metalinguistic’ evidence has been known in the West for well over a century; it is first mentioned by A. Kuhn in 1858. The few scholars who have approached this problem, even obliquely, have differing opinions, but the tendency has been to accept the Brāhmaṇic testimony as indicative of contemporary pronunciation. I think the evidence bears reexamination, and that careful attention to the context in which the syllable-counts occur will lead us to be skeptical about the reality of these pronunciations in the Brāhmaṇa period.

Besides Kuhn, Whitney, Wackernagel, and Oldenberg have noted the syllable counts. Of these, Whitney (Gr. §113b) and Wackernagel (AIG I §181b) simply list words and the syllable numbers assigned to them, without regard for context. (Whitney lists 6 words; Wackernagel 7; the lists do not completely overlap.)

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<th>disyllabic</th>
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<tr>
<td>tvac</td>
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<td>rājanya</td>
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<td>dyaus</td>
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<tr>
<th>Wackernagel:</th>
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<tr>
<td>tuvāk</td>
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<td>sakhiyām</td>
<td>rājaniya-</td>
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<tr>
<td>sūvar</td>
<td></td>
<td>sattiyām</td>
<td>devebhīyās</td>
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<td>diyāus</td>
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I interpret both these scholars as accepting the forms as real Brāhmaṇic forms; Whitney simply because he cites them without dispute. But Wackernagel explicitly states that the syllable counts are evidence for the distracted pronunciations persisting in the Brāhmaṇas: “Noch in der Brāhmaṇaperiode kommt silbische Messung von k1.y v vor . . ., wie sich . . . aus ausdrücklichen Zeugnissen über die Silbenzahl einzelner Wörter erkennen lässt.” By simply listing the words, Whitney and Wackernagel miss an important clue to the status of the forms: more than half of the words on the combined lists do not occur independently in prose (as, e.g., pūrṣa does in the citations above), but are found within ritual formulae; they are not freely used in discourse but are fixed in set expressions.