This is an important and impressive book. It represents the most thorough and theoretically sophisticated examination of the function of the perennially problematic tense-aspect stems of the early Vedic verb—the present system, the aorist system, and the perfect system—yet produced, and as a revision of a recent dissertation (University of Oslo 2008) it is all the more impressive. It presents a much richer account of aspect than is found in traditional treatments of the topic in Vedic and Indo-European studies and at the same time one that is methodologically far more rigorous. Its picture of the interaction between lexical aktionsart, phrasal telicity, and morphosyntactic aspect is particularly subtle and illuminating.

As the author explains at the outset (p. 1), he approaches the Vedic data with two complementary sets of tools—formally oriented theoretical semantics and linguistic typology—and his goal is “to arrive at a semantically coherent analysis of the Early Vedic inflectional categories and at a more precise understanding of how semantics interact with morphosyntax in this language.” To a great extent he succeeds in this very ambitious task, or rather, applying systematic and rigorously applied criteria to the Vedic data he generates a series of interlocking, internally consistent, and explicit hypotheses about the function of these data that can be evaluated by the reader. The arguments that lead to the hypotheses are intricate and informed by an impressive grasp of the complex theoretical machinery he employs.

As with all such forays into Vedic grammar the data are of course the problem—determining the function of Vedic grammatical categories requires determining the meaning of passage after opaque passage, and those meanings to some extent circularly depend upon the investigator’s assumptions about the function of the grammatical categories they contain. And no two readers are likely to agree regularly about the meanings of the many disputed passages. Thus, I find myself in the embarrassing position of declaring that I am in agreement with many (though not all—for some major exceptions see below) of his general conclusions, though often unconvinced by his treatment of particular passages and sometimes by his assessment of particular grammatical subcategories.

The book begins with a brief introduction (pp. 1–27), primarily devoted to summarizing the work of previous scholars on the topic. There follows a substantial chapter (“Situations, Times, Worlds and Contexts,” pp. 29–96) laying
out the theoretical underpinnings of the investigation, divided into two sections: “The semantics of time and modality” and “Aspects, situations and contexts,” the latter of which defines at length the aspectual categories he will test for in the Vedic data. This theoretical chapter is remarkably lucid and illuminating, even for readers (like me) without sufficient experience with formal semantics. The formalisms never substitute for or overwhelm the explanatory prose, and the author displays no impatience with readers like me and the need to make the discussion accessible to us.

The remainder of the book brings the shimmering clarity of this theoretical apparatus down into the muck and murkiness of the Rig Veda, and it is no surprise that the former gets a bit battered and smudged by this prolonged confrontation. Chapter two is a preliminary to the main event, covering the “Aktionsart and Morphosyntax” of Rigvedic verb roots and stems (pp. 97–162). The remaining three major chapters (before the Conclusion, pp. 425–448) treat the present system (pp. 163–261), the aorist system (pp. 263–341), and the perfect system (pp. 343–423) respectively and at more or less equal length. Within these three chapters he treats the subcategories of each system in order: the indicative (in the present and perfect systems comprising two tenses, but only one in the aorist), the non-indicative modal categories (subjunctive, optative, imperative, injunctive [note its inclusion among the moods]), and finally the participle. The focus is, first, to determine the aspectual function of the stem-type (present, aorist, perfect) and how this overarching aspectual function interacts with particular types of lexical aktionsart and telic vs. non-telic predicates, and, second, to investigate whether the aspectual functions of all the modal subcategories and the participle are consistent within the larger system (present, aorist, or perfect), are “intra-paradigmatically coherent” (p. 163). (For problems with this quest for coherence, see below.)

Before discussing these meaty chapters in more detail, I will register some complaints about the display and treatment of the Vedic data. Dahl follows the linguistic convention of a tripartite mode of citing examples: the Vedic text itself, a word-by-word lexical and grammatical gloss, and a translation. To my mind, the glossing is unnecessary and distracting; anyone who marches through to the end of 450 pages on Vedic grammatical categories can probably handle the Vedic—though perhaps my view is too parochial. But it is also irrelevant, for the way in which the material is displayed makes it almost unusable for anyone, Vedicist or not. The three strata are not separated by white space or distinguished by typography, and the page is generally too narrow to allow a full pāda to occupy a single line, so almost every example involves multiple dribblings onto subsequent lines, jumbling text and gloss together, obscuring the metrical structure (which provides crucial evidence about Rigvedic syntax