

The Perfect in Iranian Languages

The Old Iranian tense system reflects more or less the one which is reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European (which is rather circular, because the PIE system is partly reconstructed on the basis of the Iranian evidence). The Iranian perfect is represented by a reduplicated perfect stem with a unique set of verbal endings (e.g. 3sg. *tataša* of √*taš* ‘to create’). Originally, it was indifferent to diathesis and showed no tense marking. It is commonly interpreted as a resultative with present relevance, which sets the result in relation to the logical subject.

It is already at the Old Iranian stage that the inherited perfect goes out of use. In Old Persian there is but one example in optative mood (*čaxriyā* ‘who would have done’). The use of the aorist is also reduced and it mostly survived in fixed phrases. Instead, an analytic construction replaced the inherited perfect and the aorist. This analytic construction consists of the verbal adjective in *-ta-* and the copula (e.g. *kartam asti* lit. ‘it is done’, henceforth PP-construction). There is evidence in the Old Persian tense system that the PP-construction took the place of the inherited perfect first and then spread to cover aorist functions. I assume that the PP-construction began as a resultative construction that was categorised as a resultative perfect, which sets the result in relation to the logical object. Hence the perfect system would have been symmetrical with the inherited perfect as a perfect with subject reference and the PP-construction as one with object reference, cf. the following table.

The verbal paradigm of Avestan ¹				
time	aspect		perfect with	
	imperfective	perfective	subject reference	object reference
now	indicative present <i>kərənaoiti</i>	–	perfect <i>tatašā</i>	PP-construction <i>dəratəm ahi</i>
past	injunctive present <i>kərənaoŋ</i>	aorist <i>čōrəŋ</i>	pluperfect <i>urūraost</i>	PP-construction <i>dāta as</i>

In Old Persian, the functions of the disappearing aorist were jointly covered by the imperfect and the PP-construction (the only remaining perfect). Thereby, the perfect acquired aspectual functions. The Middle Persian inscriptions suggest that Persian went through a stage of having a pure aspect system (imperfective vs. perfective), which later adopted tense marking again. Thus the Old Iranian PP-construction (the Old Persian perfect) developed into a perfective. This perfective became the base for past tense forms in Persian (and most other Iranian languages) and its stem is commonly referred to as the ‘past stem’. However, the aspectual functions of the old perfect can still be detected in several New Iranian languages (e.g., in form: Hawrami, in use: Persian).

After the Persian perfect became a perfective, a new perfect appeared in Middle Persian. A combination of the perfect(ive) participle and the auxiliary ‘to stay’, which was grammaticalised as the standard expression of a resultative perfect in Middle Persian (e.g. *āmad ēstam* ‘I have come’, pluperfect *āmad ēstādam*). Apart from a few New Iranian languages, this construction disappeared without a trace (e.g. Kuzargi/Fārs Province, perfect *andesam* ‘I have come’, pluperfect *andesadam*). Instead, Early New Persian makes use of the so-called ‘perfectum secundum’, a combination of the old perfect(ive) participle and the existential verb (e.g. *kard astam* ‘I have done’), which like the Middle Persian perfect is only randomly attested today (e.g. Māsarmi *andesam* ‘I have come’, pluperfect *anda boḍam*). In New Iranian, we usually find a new perfect participle (i.e. the perfect(ive) participle + adjectival suffix) together with the enclitic copula (e.g. *āmadag=am* > *āmاده=am*, pluperfect *āmadag=būd-am* >

¹ Cited forms are attested as follows: *kərənaoiti* e.g. in Y 10.13, *kərənaoŋ* in Y 9.4, *čōrəŋ* in Y 44.7, *tatašā* in Y 29.6, *urūraost* in Y 51.12, *dəratəm ahi* in Vd 21.5, *dāta as* in VdPZ 2.20.

āmāde=būd-am). In Modern Persian, the copula of the perfect developed into a verbal suffix that marks person (i.e. *āmāde=am* > *āmāde-am*). One can observe the tendency of amalgamation of the perfective past and the perfect, only differentiated by accent (*āma'dam* vs. *āmādām* < *āmāde'am*). Some languages have lost the distinction of perfect and past perfective completely (e.g. Sangesari).

There seems to be a general drift in Iranian languages to form perfects from resultative constructions (e.g., Avestan verbal adjective in *-ta-* + copula, Middle Persian verbal adjective in *-ag-* + copula) and to substitute preterites or perfectives with perfects. Both phenomena could be explained by a general tendency to emphasise completedness with past tense forms and to consider stative expressions suitable as substitutes for the perfect (via the resultative construction), cf. the figure on the following page.

Iranian languages represent an ideal sample for diachronic studies. There are sufficient corpora for all three stages and, in the Middle and New Iranian stage, the number of different languages allow for comparative studies. Their closeness to Indian languages constitutes an intriguing side aspect for language comparison. Common development in all Iranian languages and parallel development in Indo-Aryan languages together suggest that the trigger for the above-mentioned changes was already in place in the Proto-Aryan verbal system.

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The development of the verbal system in Persian
(OP: Old Persian, MP: (later) Middle Persian, NP: New Persian)

