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ON GENERAL AND ABSTRACT TERMS IN
ARCHAIC THOUGHT – ON THE BASIS OF THE
RIGVEDIC TERM *ÁM̐HAS*

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"The actual fragments of the Presocratic thinkers are preserved as quotations in subsequent ancient authors, from Plato in the fourth century B.C. to Simplicius in the sixth century A.D"- reads the introductory note to *The Presocratic philosophers* (Kirk, Raven, Schofield 1999: 21). Researchers of the oldest thought of Hindu philosophy are thus in a much better situation. The thought is present in a huge corpus of works collectively referred to as the Veda, and has survived into modern times. The oldest text of Vedic literature, the *Rigveda*, composed by an Indo-European people the Aryans, is dated to circa the eighth century B.C. and comprises 1028 hymns. Other texts, which include the remaining three Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads, are spacious compositions, both in verse and prose, and all of them attest the Old Hindu love of wisdom. They serve as a foundation for classical Hindu philosophy which originated in the first half of the first millennium B.C. All thinkers engaged in this philosophy credited the Veda and declared that their conceptions were only a commentary to its oldest heritage even if their conceptions were in fact distant from the Veda. This heritage is important not only because it outlines many subsequent metaphysical, epistemic or axiological theories, and some of their notions. Its importance lies also in the fact that it attests the earliest rational efforts of human thought to describe the world in general and abstract terms, and even if such descriptions have been changing over time, they have made classical

investigations possible. It is my conviction that examining the oldest Hindu philosophizing is beyond the scope of interest of Indology: it can be regarded as an attempt to reconstruct the beginnings of general and abstract thinking and the source of this ability in humans. This article deals with the Sanskrit term *áṁhas*. In dictionaries its meaning is generally captured by 'anxiety, trouble'.¹ It was commonly employed in the oldest Hindu texts, then it was disappearing (Gonda 1957, Renou 1939). Analyses of its use in the Rigveda facilitate the observation that the meaning mentioned by lexicographers is only one of the meanings and by no means the most important one. As it will be shown, *áṁhas* is a general and abstract term, and the Rigvedic material suffices to trace the development of the semantic field of the term. My analysis is based on the assumptions of cognitive linguistics according to which our conceptual system is motivated by experience, both physical and cultural. The meaning of a word is a coherent and organized way of thinking about the referent and is ultimately constructed in context both co-text (directly linguistic context) and situational context.² Cognitive linguistics assumes that human beings understand abstract terms in the categories of the terms familiar to their everyday experience.³ Terms whose categories capture other terms are called source domains, while the captured terms are target domains. The more difficult it is to represent the source domain of a term, the more abstract the term is. In this paper I would like to show how this abstraction can be reached by thought, thus departing from the experience motivating it. The pursuit of generality will play a crucial role here as it allows us to capture common features of different experiences in one term. Cognitive linguists debate about issues of polysemy, monosemy and homonymy (Allwood 2003, Janssen 2003), search for the criteria for polysemic expressions (Evans, Tyler 2001, Evans 2004), and consider relationships between polysemy and generality (e.g. Geeraerts 1993, Tuggy 1993, Zlatev 2003). Since this paper is mostly concerned with the issue of the beginning of philosophical thought understood as the ability to abstract and generalize, it will discuss the generality and abstraction of the term *áṁhas* and the polysemy of its linguistic expression. It is worth mentioning that an analysis of the term's meaning was conducted a half-century ago by Gonda (1957), who provided rich comparative material. He noted the general character of the term and its foundation in experience. This

¹Mayrhofer 1956. This is also the first meaning in Grassmann 1873, followed by 'Enge' (narrowness) and 'Kluft' (cleft).

²Tokarski 1990, Langacker 2003.

³Lakoff, Johnson 1980, Radden, Dirven 2006.

paper focuses on reconstructing the experience relevant from the point of view of the semantics of the term *ámhas* and - as has already been signalled - the ways leading to abstraction and generality. As it will be shown, the term *ámhas* does not have an equivalent in English, thus it will remain in its original form.

I

The *Rigveda* is full of verses in which the poets plead the gods to protect them against *ámhas*, without reference to particular situations.⁴ In such contexts it seems difficult to establish the meaning of *ámhas* unambiguously. However, the verses in which *ámhas* is accompanied by other phenomena regarded as undesirable are of help. The poets make a plea for difficulties (*duritá*) and discomfort (*árāti*)⁵ as well as physical diseases: illnesses (*ámīva*)⁶ and suffering (*tápas*)⁷ to be lessened together with *ámhas*. When *ámhas* disappears, also fear disappears.⁸ Pleas for relieving *ámhas* co-occur with pleas for wealth.⁹ Occasionally, it may seem that the presence of *ámhas* brings death as its lack brings life.¹⁰ Also, it is likely that the word *ámhas* refers to mental state as it can be driven away by thought, and its defeat overcomes insanity (*prádr̥pti*) and thoughtlessness (*ámāti*).¹¹ The above contexts imply that *ámhas* is a rather general and abstract term. It refers to an undesirable state accompanying difficulties, illnesses, suffering, poverty, evoking fear and bringing the threat of death, states both physical and mental.

II

The word *ámhas* belongs to a group of nouns and adjectives referring to 'narrowness, tightness', 'narrow, tight' (*ámhatí*, *ámhu*, *ámhurá*, *ámhūr̥ṇá*)¹² and this sense is present in its semantic field. The Rigvedic poets were aware of this and employed the verb *uruṣya-*, originating from the adjective *urú-*

⁴RV 1.18.5, 1.136.5, 5.31.13, 5.51.13, 6.16.30 = 7.15.15, 6.16.31, 6.67.8, 7.15.3, 7.71.5, 7.104.23 = 10.53.5, 8.18.6, 8.19.6, 8.31.2, 9.56.4, 10.36.2, 10.132.7 (quoted after Lubotsky 1997).

⁵Both words are ambiguous: *duritá*, (literally: 'that what is difficult to go through'), means 'difficulties, misery, poverty, harm', *árāti* - 'discomfort, misery, disease, distress'. *duritá*: RV 2.23.5, 10.39.11, 10.126.1, 7.82.7. *árāti*: RV 2.23.5.

⁶RV 2.33.2, 8.18.10.

⁷RV 7.82.7.

⁸RV 10.39.11.

⁹RV 4.2.9, 4.20.9.

¹⁰RV 3.59.2, 4.12.6=10.126.8, 6.48.8 (quoted after Lubotsky 1997).

¹¹RV 4.11.6, 5.45.11, 6.3.2.

¹²Gonda 1957, Mayrhofer 1956. Those words are etymologically related to Polish "wąski" 'narrow'.

'extensive', literally meaning 'to broaden, give space':¹³

He gives space [so that we could escape] from *ánhas*, protects from poverty, even from closure (*ánhóh*) opens the space, wonderful!¹⁴ (2.26.4.cd)

Such descriptions create opposition between that what is tight, narrow and limited, and what is extensive and spacious. I am convinced that it is exactly this notion of physical tightness that is the foundation of conceptualization of the presented above state of discomfort, both bodily and cognitive, and the state of a death threat. The metaphoric thinking reconstructed in such a way represents the general and abstract state (target domain) in more concrete categories of physical tightness, which is a notion referring to everyday experience shared by all human beings (source domain). Thus, the word *ánhas* has the target and the source domains of the metaphor in its semantic field.

III

It is worth noting that the notion of tightness is general and abstract. It is a result of searching for the common features of various experiences. It is possible to reconstruct the notion on the basis of some verses of *Rigveda*. They describe the Rigvedic man without the possibility to move. Now, I shall analyze the verses that recall such experiences in the context of the pleas for removing *ánhas*.

IIIa

The first experience bearing a threat of physical closure was the journey in which the way was either lost or seemed too difficult. The term for the wrong way, *durgá*, is evoked in the verse below, in which the poet asks the gods for rescuing from *ánhas*:

Let the merciful Vasus rescue us from *ánhas* like a chariot from the difficult way!¹⁵ (1.106.1)

¹³Gonda 1969, p. 107-108. The word is translated as "to free" and "to rescue": Mayrhofer 1956 - "befreit, erlöst, rettet/ frees, delivers, rescues".

¹⁴Cf. RV 1.58.9, 1.91.15, 4.55.5, 7.1.15. Scholars point to the fact that the idea of a tight place referring to *ánhas* is present in 6.11.6, where a plea for jumping over it is made, as if it were something closed; Grassman 1873 suggests translating the word *vṛjána* as "gorge, cleft"; Yelizarenkova 1995: "okruženije", Renou 1964: "encerclement (de l'ennemi)", supplemented by a commentary that what he understands by it is "emprisonnement", Geldner 1951 opts for ring ("Gürtel") explaining in a commentary that he understands it as "Umschlingung". In this context, the word *ánhú* is even more frequent: RV 1.63.7, 1.107.1, 5.65.4, 8.67.7.

¹⁵RV 1.42.1, 7.60.6. Cf. RV 1.180.5 together with Gonda's (1957, p. 39).

Although the way may be lost in every journey through the unknown, the verses of *Rigveda* echo a memorized experience of crossing the mountains on the way to the Indian subcontinent.¹⁶ In the verse quoted below, *ámhas* is modified by the adjective "massive" (*vīdú*), which frequently refers to a mountain-obstacle in *Rigveda*:

Push away, destroy the massive *ámhas*, kill the powerfully rising demon!¹⁷ (4.3.14cd)

The experience of becoming lost in the narrow mountain valleys is also present in the verse below; instead of *ámhas* the poet used its cognate *ámhūranā*:

O gods, we came to this tight field, the land, though spacious, has become too small! O Brhaspati, o Indra, reveal the right path to the singer who is searching for cows and has met such [difficulties]! (6.47.20)

"Tight field" evokes the image of sparse narrow strips of soil, characteristic of a high mountain landscape, available for cultivation and grazing. The description of a narrowing land may refer to an entrance of a narrow mountain gorge or cleft, in which the exit is hidden.¹⁸

Contrary, the verse below illustrates finding the way which leads to an open space and enables movement. The state of closure is rendered by means of *ámhū*, which is a cognate of *ámhas*:

Mitra conquers the passage even from tightness (*ámhóh*)! to a spacious place. (5.65.4ab)

The above examples clearly echo the experience of inability to move freely, caused either by the difficulty of the route or its lack altogether. The experience of journey through the mountain paths and gorges unknown to the Aryans is easily observable in most of the descriptions. Thus, they can be regarded as motivating a general idea of physical closure in the term *ámhas*.¹⁹

¹⁶On the journey of the Aryans see: Kieniewicz 1980, Yelizarenkova 1989, Mallory 1989, p. 223 and ff.

¹⁷RV 1.6.5, 1.71.2, 1.127.3, 3.31.5, 8.45.41, 8.88.3, 10.45.6, 10.89.6.

¹⁸*agavyūtí kṣétra* literally means 'non-grazing land', as the gvedic notion of grazing land carries the notion of space.

¹⁹Gonda 1957, p. 35 discusses the verse in relation to the Aryan expansion, without reference to mountains.

IIIb

The second experience limiting the unconstrained movement was war. It is necessary to highlight that the verses describing war and containing the word *ámhas*, do not mention the inability to move. However, some Rigvedic descriptions present embattled warriors, surrounded by enemies, in a cleft stick.

It is especially worth noting the descriptions of a dramatic envelopment of the Aryan troops under king Sudas by attacking enemies, the envelopment in which the king got off lightly.²⁰ These descriptions lack the word *ámhas*, but they are constructed in such a way as to represent the impression of a claustrophobic and life-threatening state. Also, the enemies are presented as those who prevent the Aryans from passing and make it impossible for them to move.²¹ Thus, it seems reasonable that the poets describing the fight against enemies and evoking the notion of *ámhas* wanted to highlight the impression of closure caused by the presence of hostile forces. In the verse below, their enemies' hatred, which should be defeated, is mentioned together with *ámhas*:

Set off to happiness, to the good place of heavenly warriors,
let's overcome hatred, anhasy and [that what] is difficult to go
through! (6. 2.11)²²

The verse below brings to mind a specific place, that is the drainage basin of the Indus River, here called the confluence of seven rivers (Yelizarenkova 1995), where the Aryans faced a double threat they were attacked by their enemies and a bear. The following passage allows us to hypothesise that the use of the word *ámhas* is motivated by the impression of an inability to escape:

[You,] who has rescued from the bear, from anhasy, from the
enemy in [the confluence of] seven rivers, [You who] bent the
Dasa's weapon down, o greatly valiant! (8.24.27)

Thus, the envelopment by hostile forces can be regarded as yet another experience that motivates understanding, the state of discomfort in terms of physical closure.

²⁰On the so-called battle of ten kings see: Kieniewicz 1980, p. 37.

²¹On the so-called battle of ten kings see: Kieniewicz 1980, p. 37.

²²On repelling anhas and enemies or their hatred: *drúh* (RV 10.25.8). *dvís*: (RV 6.2.4, 10.24.3, 10.164.4), *dvéśas* (RV 2.33.2, 6.44.16), *durmatí* (RV 4.11.6).

IIIc

The third experience causing the impression of physical closure in the Rigvedic man is night. In the times of the *Rigveda*, the only source of light were bonfires and torches, and night made it impossible to move around. Similarly to the descriptions of the fights with enemies, the descriptions of night echoing the notion of *ámhas* do not use the term. However, the Rigvedic depiction of morning highlights the relationship between the dawn and the possibility to move, e.g. paths appear together with the daylight.²³ In some verses, *ámhas* can be interpreted as referring to the darkness of night. According to the following examples, the poets ask fire to protect them from *ámhas* and to burn the enemies. However, we may presume that it is also implied that *ámhas* is destroyed by fire when enemies are destroyed by it:

God-Fire, preserve us from *ámhas*, from the one that brings harm
consume [it] with the hottest [flames], o ever-young! (7.15.13)

Preserve us with the shining sign, the elevated, from *ámhas*, burn
every demon, make us stand high up so that we could live for
journey, find us a gift among gods! (1.36.14)²⁴

The darkness of night is also dispersed by the morning light of the sun, which destroys *ámhas*:

Today, o gods, at sunrise, elevate us from *ámhas*, the state of contamination! (1.115.6)²⁵

It is my conviction that, by the use of the term *ámhas*, the poets render the experience of night as the inability to move. Similarly, in the *Rigveda* 6.3.1, the light opposing *ámhas* is modified by spacious (*urú*), since light not only enables vision but also gives space for motion.

IV

There are three situations preventing the Rigvedic man from moving: becoming lost on the way, being enveloped by the enemies, being confined by night. The impossibility to move was understood in terms of physical closure, rendered in general by the term *ámhas*. It is the first step in generalization and abstraction, for it allows to capture the common feature of such different experiences. The term *ámhas* becomes the source domain for a general and abstract understanding of the state of life-threatening and mental discomfort.

²³E.g. RV 5.80.2-3, 7.75.1.

²⁴*Ámhas* opposes the light of fire in RV 3.15.3, 6.2.11, 7.1.15, cf. 6.48.8.

²⁵*Ámhas* also opposes the light of the sun in RV 4.53.6.

It is still worth highlighting that the discussed experiences not only motivate the general notion of closure but also influence the understanding of the notion of discomfort. Firstly, the discussed experiences give rise to the idea of life-threat, since each of the experiences if prolonged would cause death. Secondly, all the experiences being the impossibility to move are the lack of freedom. And the idea of the lack of freedom is present in the term *áôhas* as the Ágvedic poets use the verb *muc* - ('to free')²⁶ in their continuous pleas for freedom from *áôhas*.

The two experiences, war and night, additionally influenced the conceptualization of the state of discomfort, which results in a further broadening of the semantic field of *ámhas*, as I shall argue.

IVa

The experience of war expands the meaning of *ámhas* to the idea of moral evil. After all, it is a common psychological mechanism to ascribe morally reprehensible or even demonic features to enemies.²⁷ This idea is present in the verses, in which *ámhas* is attributed to the sinner, and removing *ámhas* is connected with destroying godless people and demons.²⁸ Experiencing the necessity of protection against the violence of the enemy and other dangerous creatures motivates the understanding of discomfort as the state which forces a human being to find a secure shelter.²⁹ This is further developed in the idea of looking for protection against *ámhas* in strongholds in the below verse, *ámhas* is parallel to the darkness of night:

With a hundred of strongholds, o the youngest [Fire], protect
the one, who kindles you, from *ámhas*. (6.48.8)

Another verse develops the idea of finding protection against *ánhas* in strongholds, and strongholds enable freedom from *ámhas*:

O Fire, o descendant of Strength, o great friend, grant today a
secure shelter to the singers, through iron strongholds rescue the
singer from *ámhas*! (1.58.8)

The use of "iron stronghold" (*āyasī pūr*) does not refer to a genuine stronghold, but reflects a complex Rigvedic notion of a glittering stronghold full of the good bringing freedom which, on the other hand, is associated with

²⁶RV 1.42.1, 4.12.6 = 10.126.8, 1.117.3, 1.118.8, 2.34.15, 2.28.6, 10.97.15, 8.24.27.

²⁷Cf. Benedyktowicz 2000.

²⁸RV 4.29.9, 4.3.14, 9.104.6.

²⁹RV 1.93.8, 4.53.6, 10.66.5.

fire and the sun. *ámhas*, opposing the stronghold understood in such a way, is not only darkness but also an abstract state of captivity. Moreover, it seems that the description activates the Ágvedic cosmology, according to which the universe is light, life, cognition and freedom, while the surrounding chaos darkness, death, ignorance and captivity. This very dichotomy is expressed in the juxtaposition of "iron stronghold" - "*ámhas*".

IVb

The experience of morning participates in the meaning of lack of knowledge. For, according to the Rigvedic understanding of night, the night is a state of not only physical but also mental stillness. It makes cognition impossible since everything is covered by darkness.³⁰ In the verse below, the day light, described as "heavenly" (*svárvat*), opposes *ámhas*:

May Aditi preserve us from all *ámhas* may we obtain the secure
heavenly light! (10.36.3)

The expression "all *ámhas*" betrays a more general understanding of the term as an expression of the state characteristic of night. The word *ámhas* can be understood here not only as the darkness of night, but also as unawareness.

Conclusions The Rigvedic poets created an abstract and general term for an undesirable state connoted with danger, illnesses, misery, suffering, unawareness, evil, captivity and death. The state includes the physical, psychological and mental states as well as elements of the surrounding world and even spheres lying beyond the world.

The state is understood in terms of physical closure. The notion of physical closure is a generalized and abstract notion expressing impossibility to move, experienced in three situations: during a journey, when the way has been lost, during a war, when developed by the enemies, and at night, when everything is covered by darkness. These three experiences motivate not only the notion of closure, but also the state understood in terms of closure.

The transition from concrete experiences to the notion of closure is the first degree of abstraction and generalization, the degree which is not yet departed from the concrete. The second degree is when the target domain functions as an abstract and general term independently.

These conceptual operations are reflected in language. The semantic field of *ámhas* reflects the discussed metaphoric conceptualization. On the

³⁰Jurewicz 2010, p 109 ff.

one hand, the word encapsulates the idea of closure (the source domain), on the other the abstract and general target domain, i.e. the state of discomfort. Marginally, there are the ideas originating in the consecutive experiences in the conceptualizations of both domains.

The uses of the noun *ámhas* show different aspects of its broad semantic field: some verses highlight difficulties and troubles, others a bad physical or mental state, and yet others that what brings fear and death threats. Some contexts distinctly echo the meanings originating in experience: enemy, mountain, darkness and chaos. It is not to say that one primary meaning precludes the remaining ones, narrowing the understanding of *ámhas* to a particular concrete phenomenon. The ambiguity of the term, being an indication of the linguistic generality of the term *ámhas*, results in that all of the semantic aspects contribute a specific background to the meaning present in a particular context, significantly influencing its understanding.

At the same time, as has been mentioned at the beginning, some verses lack not only the idea of traumatic experiences, but also the idea of physical closure. Then, the word *ámhas* acquires a completely abstract sense of an undesirable state.

I believe that the appropriate Polish equivalent for *ámhas* is the term "niewola" (captivity). The notion covers the idea of physical closure and lack of motion. Also, it can be extended to physical and psychological diseases, ignorance, and also evil and death. Finally, it can be an abstract construct, in separation from any concrete. The use of the above mentioned verb *muc-* ("to free") to denote removing anhas allows us to discover the idea of lack of freedom expressed by this Sanskrit term.

It is worth adding that although the term *ámhas* disappeared in later Sanskrit, the idea of captivity as the most undesirable state, understood as a physical, psychological, mental and even metaphysical state significantly influenced the moral thought of Hindu philosophers. Freedom (*mukti*) from the limitations of temporality which bring ignorance, suffering and death was the aim of theoretical investigations as well as practical activities in the discipline of yoga. This thought-continuum acknowledges the fundamental significance of the Rigveda for the subsequent Hindu philosophising.

To conclude, I would like to add that the Latin word *angustus*, etymologically related to *ámhas*, shows a similar metaphorical motivation for its semantic field.³¹ As an adjective it means "narrow, tight" (with reference to both space and time); "scant, slight" (as a measure of things, with reference

³¹Mayrhofer 1956. I would like to thank my Father, prof. Jan Doroszewski, for directing my attention to this issue.

to mind and behaviour); finally "doubtful, unpleasant" (with reference to situation). As a noun it denotes a "dangerous predicament", "stait" in the sense of closure, and "compact battle line" (Plezia 1959). A cognitive analysis of the meanings of *angustus* is beyond the scope of this paper, yet even the dictionary definition suffices to reconstruct the idea of closure which motivates various metaphorical meanings focusing around the same ideas as the ones present in the semantic field of *ámhas*. At the same time, it is apparent that the Latin tradition develops specific extensions illustrated by e.g. the use of *angustus* with reference to time. The conceptual similarity between *angustus* and *ámhas* is a further evidence for the existence of the Indo-European thought community, whose traces can be found in languages distant in space and time.³²

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³²See e.g. Nagy 1974, Watkins 1995.

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