Another Perturbation in Rigvedic Word Order: Penultimate ná

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I. Non-appearance in final position

A. Both ná ‘like’ and ná ‘not’ (with former a development of the latter) seemed barred from final position in verse line or clause.

B. Since ná ‘like’ is usually postpositive, it therefore appears to have “flipped”

* X ná # → ná X #

II. Structure of the standard RVic simile

A. Simile is the preeminent poetic figure in Vedic (and later Skt.); in RV marked by ná or iva.

B. History -- nothing like it in Old Iranian; “Homeric” simile structurally distinct

   But Hittite postposition iwar (cognate with iva?) possibly comparable – however structurally distinct:
   iwar -- postposition governing the genitive
   iva (/ná)– also postpositive, but case of the simile matches case of what it’s compared to.

C. iva 1023x in RV (Lubotsky)
   ná 2103x in RV (Lubotsky, unsorted); approx. 1300 simile-marking (Jamison 1982: “Case Disharmony in Rgvedic Similes,” IIJ 24: 251–71)

D. Distribution of simile-marking ná and iva entirely parallel

   One-word similes: X iva / ná

   I.8.7 # samudrá iva pínvate
   It swells like the sea.

   I.30.3 # samudrá ná vyáco dadhe
   He acquires an expanse like the sea.

   Two-word similes: usually X iva / ná X'

   same case (coreferential Xs)

   I.43.5 ... śukrá iva súryah #
   like the blazing sun

   VI.4.3 ... súryo ná śukráh #
   like the blazing sun
different cases

VIII.6.35 # *samudrāṁ iva sindhavah*
(The hymns increased Indra,) like rivers the sea.

VI.36.3 # *samudrām nā sindhavah ...*
(The songs enter Indra,) like rivers the sea.

Two-word similes: X X' iva / nā

V.56.5 # *gāvāṁ sārgam iva ...*
like a gush of cows

IV.52.5 # *gāvāṁ sārgā nā ...* [cf. IV.51.8 # *gāvāṁ nā sārgāḥ ...*
like gushes of cows with standard internal position of the particle]

Two-word similes -- discontinuous: X iva / nā ... X'

I.116.15 (caritram hi) *vēr ivāchedi parnām* [≡iva-āchedi]
(Because her foot) was cut off like the wing of a bird.

V.51.7 # *nimnāṁ nā yanti sindhavah ...*
(The soma drinks) go like rivers to the deep.

III. Can simile marker preceded the target? Yes – e.g., Bergaigne 1886; no! Oldenberg 1907
A. Yes, under very restricted conditions: only nā when it would be final – me (/ Geldner)
B. nā and iva diverge: iva regularly appears in final position (approx. 100x).

One-word similes: X iva #

I.130.5 ... *rāthāṁ iva #*
(You release the rivers to flow/run) like chariots.

I.92.4 ... *nṛtūr iva #*
(She strews ornaments on herself) like a dancing girl.

Two-word similes: X X' iva # -- even when iva could be penultimate!

VIII.26.13 # *ādhivastrā vadhūr iva #*
Like a bride in her wedding dress

X.89.7 ... *svādhitir vāneva* [=vānā-iva] #
(He smote Vṛtra) like an axe the trees.
C. But ná instead takes position before the simile if it would be final – approx. 25 exx.

IX.97.57 #padé rebhanti kaváyo ná grídhrah #
On the track (of soma) the poets squawk like birds of prey. (Cf. I.118.4.)
X.89.7 # rurója púro áradan ná síndhun #
He shattered the fortresses; he dug (them) out like rivers.
IX.14.5 [=107.26] # gāh kṛavānó ná nirnjam #
(Soma) making the cows [=milk] like a garment.

IV. ná (both usages) barred from final position – of 2103 occurrences of ná only 7 potential counter-examples:

A. Two (X.49.10, 105.3): Lubotsky’s pāda division is wrong; one (X.111.7): too obscure to interpret, plus v. late hymn. So this leaves four.

B. Two real exx., with extenuating circumstances

ná ‘like’

VII.68.8 # yáv aghnyám ápinyatam apó ná, staryām cid ...
You two who swelled the fertile cow like waters—also the barren cow ...
→ Simile internal to the constituent being compared: aghnyám ... staryām cid

ná ‘not’

IV.13.5 [=14.5] ánāyato ánibaddhaḥ kathāyām, nyānī uttānō ‘va padyate ná
Not held firm, not tied down — how does this one [=sun] not fall down, head over heels?
→ Chiasmic figure #án ... án ... ná # Plus negative Q.

C. Two examples of “misplaced” ná signalling disordered thought

X.95.3 avīre krātau vi dadvityan ná
Purūravas raving – passage much disputed; see online comm.

X.129.7 yádi vā dadhé yádi vā ná [X X]
if it was produced or if not ...
→ Metrical, syntactic, and word-positional disturbances signal radical doubt about creation
V. Why?

A. I tried – and repeatedly failed – to start with *ná in final position and flip it. I could not motivate it – hence the change schematized in I.B above is actually false

\[ \text{*X ná #} \rightarrow \text{ná X #} \]

B. Instead, inspired by Brent’s paper of nearly 50 years ago -- “On the Metrics and Origin of Rig-Vedic ná ‘like, as’,” IIJ 20 [1978]: 171–93 – I now think that the anomalous prefinal position of ná ‘like’ is a syntactic archaism: penultimate ná resisted flipping to final position:

\[ \text{ná X #} \rightarrow \text{*X ná #}. \]

C. Two questionns:

1. If this is the original position of ná ‘like’, then why does it show up postpositive in similes elsewhere?
2. What accounts for this supposedly original position?

D. Answer to #1 is easy: after ná was re-interpreted as a simile marker, it mimicked the behavior of *iva, which, as a genuine enclitic, naturally slots itself into 2nd position – this happened with similes in other parts of the verse line, but not in penultimate position. (See multiple exx. in II above, with simile opening the verse line.)

E. Answer to #2 – provided by Brent, tracking the relative positions of ná ‘not’ and ná ‘like’ by metrical slots: usually position in the line is sufficient to disambiguate the two functions.

But the two overlap in syllable 5 of dimeter and syllable 9 in trimeter meter – translated into word-positional terms: *directly before the last word of the pāda.*

... ná WORD #
“not”
“like”

Brent suggests that this position is the locus of the re-analysis of ‘not’ to ‘like’ – starting from coordinate negative constructions like

VI.24.7 ná yām járanti šarádo ná māśāḥ
Whom neither the years nor the months age. ⇒ “likewise (not) the months ...”

It makes sense that the overlap slot is the place to look for the reinterpretation of function.

It also makes sense that, even when ná ‘like’ had hived off from ná ‘not’ and started taking postpositive position in similes in imitation of *iva, it would maintain its penultimate position in the verse line where the functional reinterpretation first happened.