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Translating the Gāyatrī-Mantra

Dominik A. Haas

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Translating the Gāyatrī-Mantra

Abstract

No single standard translation of the mantra known as Sāvitrī, Gāyatrī, or Gāyatrī-Mantra (Ṛgveda III 62.10) has ever become widely accepted. Many authors seem to have felt that a famous mantra such as this one must have, or allow for, several interpretations and translations – a position that is not without justification, especially when it comes to mantras. Yet, translators of the Gāyatrī-Mantra have rarely taken into consideration that language changes over time, and that this has an impact on how the mantra is to be translated. The aim of this paper is to remedy this situation. It provides grammatical, morphological, etymological, lexical, and semantic analyses of the textual content of the mantra against the background of the linguistic changes that took place during the transition from early to late Old Indo-Aryan. In other words, this paper explores how the mantra would be understood by users of Vedic and Sanskrit. To this end, each textual component of the Gāyatrī-Mantra is analyzed in dedicated sections. An appendix also provides a collection of more than seventy scholarly translations into European languages.

Keywords: Vedic, Sanskrit, language change, Sāvitrī, Ṛgveda 3.62.10

Introduction*

The verse Ṛgveda III 62.10, widely known as Sāvitrī, Gāyatrī, or Gāyatrī-Mantra (GM), is among the best-known mantras in the world.¹ Since the mid-first millennium BCE, it has been used in the so-called Upanayana ritual as the primary initiation mantra of Brahminical Hinduism. As such, it plays an important role in defining the social status of initiates as “twice-born” (*dvija*). Recitation of the GM is also an essential component of the Sandhyā or “Juncture” ritual, a composite ritual performed daily in the morning and in the evening (sometimes also at noon). As a consequence of the popularization by Vivekananda and Hindu reform movements such as the Arya Samaj, the mantra has also become part of some cultural currents outside South Asia. Numerous spiritual manuals and websites in various languages are devoted to explaining what the mantra means and how it is to be used. It is printed on clothes, set to music, and chanted and sung in yoga studios and at festivals.

In view of this popularity, it is not surprising that no single standard translation of the GM has ever become widely accepted. In fact, when it comes to the GM, many writers seem to have felt that a famous mantra such as this one must have, or allow for, several interpretations and translations, and that their own rendition may therefore easily be included among them (the list of more than seventy translations given in the appendix below illustrates this well). When it comes to mantras especially, this position is indeed not without justification. Texts in general can only be understood with a view to their context. In the case of mantras, however, the context changes with the text in which they are reused and, much more frequently, with the liturgical or ritual situation. A mantra must almost inevitably be translatable in different ways, depending on the context.

On the other hand, it is obvious that many “translators” of the GM (including numerous scholars) actually had no command of Sanskrit, let alone Vedic, and would have shied away from any other Ṛgvedic verse. One can hardly

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¹ See generally Kajihara 2019, Jurewicz 2021, Brereton 2022, and Haas 2022 (the present paper is mainly based on chapter one of this dissertation).

avoid the impression that many translations are not based on a divergent reading of the original text, but simply vary the wording of other translations. The respective textual, liturgical, or ritual context is very rarely taken into consideration, and almost never used to justify the creation of a new translation. Moreover, the historical aspect – the fact that the semantics and grammar of a language change over time – is hardly ever accounted for. Considering that in cultural studies of many kinds, translations are key tools, these are by no means trivial observations.

The aim of this paper is to remedy this situation. It provides grammatical, morphological, etymological, lexical, and semantic analyses of the textual content of the GM against the background of the linguistic changes that took place during the transition from early to late Old Indo-Aryan. In other words, this paper explores how the GM would be (or would have been) understood by users of Vedic and Sanskrit.

This exploration is based primarily on pre-medieval sources. As will be seen, only few texts from this period provide explicit information on how the text of the mantra was understood, and we largely have to base our analysis on inferences. The meanings of the individual words of the mantra and its purport as a text only began to receive more attention from medieval commentators (whose sometimes quite fanciful interpretations, however, shall not be dealt with here).

- The paper begins by presenting the GM in its original textual environment (Section 1). Then, each textual component is analyzed in dedicated sections (2–5). The semantic range of each word is discussed against the background of its usage in the primary literature. This is done in the rough chronological order of the selected text genres (for instance: Vedic Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, the Sanskrit Epics, etc.) by comparing the usages of each word in their original contexts.
- Section 2 is dedicated to Savitr̥. The manifestation of this deity changed significantly over time. Contrary to what one might expect, however, little attention was paid to the role he played as the deity addressed in the GM.
- Section 3 turns to a more complicated issue: the nature of the object of the main sentence of the mantra, Savitr̥'s *bhārgas*, and the role it plays in the syntactical construction of the mantra. As we will see, the word *bhārgas* became the subject of a significant semantic change.
- Section 4 analyzes the word *dhīmahi*, the main verb of the text, but an archaic form that fell out of use early on. In this case, later recipients had to deal with a significant change in the grammar of the language and it became necessary to find other ways of understanding it.

- Section 5 briefly deals with the relative sentence at the end of the mantra. As in the case of *dhīmahī*, the grammatical form of the verb *pracodáyāt* at some point became obsolete. In this case, however, this had little effect upon how it was understood.
- Section 6 offers a few concluding remarks on what needs to be considered when translating the text of the mantra. I then summarize the grammatical analyses and possible translations of each word, and propose English and German translations of the entire mantra.
- The appendix contains a list of more than seventy scholarly translations of the GM into European languages.

1. Original context

The earliest testimony of the GM is given in a textual context, namely in the Ṛgveda (RV), where it is part of a hymn dedicated to several gods at the end of the third book (RV III 62). The Anukramaṇīs (or traditional indices) attribute most of the hymns in the third book to Viśvāmitra Gāthina² (or to members of his family), as also the tenth verse of RV III 62, that is, the verse commonly known as Gāyatrī(-Mantra) or Sāvitrī.

The hymn containing the GM is composed in *trcas*, groups of three *rcs* or “verses of praise” that are frequently set in the *gāyatrī* meter. In sum, RV III 62 comprises six *trcas* (i.e., eighteen verses). Formerly, these *trcas* or “triplets” probably were each counted as hymns themselves and were only later conflated into a single hymn. Most of them are very simple and straightforward. This might have been a reaction to the sophisticated style of much of the third book: Jamison and Brereton (2014: 553) interpret the first triplet of the hymn as a suggestion that, in the view of the poets, a simpler style is needed to make the hymns effective again. They conclude that the “hymn would not be especially noteworthy, except that verse 10, dedicated to Savitar, is the Gāyatrī mantra, the best-known verse in the Ṛgveda” (p. 464).

The GM, which at the time of its composition did not yet enjoy its name and reputation, is the first verse of the fourth triplet of the tripartite hymn. This triplet (RV III 62.10–12) is here given as a whole:

tāt savitúr³ váreṇ_iyaṃ⁴ bhárgo devásya dhīmahī |
dhíyo yó naḥ pracodáyāt ||10||

² For Viśvāmitra, see generally Sathaye 2015.

³ Van Nooten & Holland (1994: 608) note that this opening is metrically uncommon.

⁴ The subscript *i* can only be reconstructed from the meter, which requires eight syllables per *pāda*.

devásya savitúr vayám vājayántaḥ púraṃdhiyā |
bhágasya rātīm īmahe ||11||
devám náraḥ savitáram víprā yajñáih suvrktíbhiḥ |
namasyánti dhiyéṣitáh ||12||

10. May we obtain that desirable splendor of the god Impeller, who shall spur on our thoughts!

11. Competing for the generosity of the god Impeller, we ask for the gift of the Apportioner.⁵

12. To the god Impeller do the men, as inspired ones, give reverence with sacrifices and well-twisted verses, when driven by (inspired) thought.⁶

In the following I will concentrate on the text of the GM itself, but in the course of the analysis I will also come back to the two subsequent verses.

2. *savitṛ*

In the Vedic language, *savitṛ* is an agent noun derived from the root *sū* (or secondary *su*) “to impel,” which has to be distinguished from the homophone *sū* “to give birth to.”⁷ *savitṛ* thus literally means “impeller, initiator, arouser, instigator,” or “stimulator.” In the RV he is not only the god who sets everything into motion, but he also puts everything to rest again.⁸ These two activities become manifest in a range of ways and domains. Thus, Savitṛ impels gods, humans, and animals to action; he causes the change of day and night as well as the seasons and is also responsible for the movement of rivers and the wind. After the fulfillment of his daily work he brings all beings to rest, but at the same time continues his impelling activity by stimulating the procreation of offspring.

His outer appearance is sometimes described as well: Most conspicuously, he has a golden tongue and complexion, in addition to golden arms, hands, and eyes. He has a golden coat and is equipped with a golden chariot. Savitṛ was thus not simply an abstract “agent god,” but rather an anthropomorphic deification

⁵ While Bhaga, the “Apportioner,” is one of the Ādityas and a deity in its own right, Brereton (1981: 309–310) points out that the term *bhága* may also be an epithet of Savitṛ. Since both the first and the last verse of the hymn refer to Savitṛ only, it is most likely that *bhága* is indeed just a title of Savitṛ: he is the “Apportioner” who distributes fortune and goods.

⁶ For another translation, on which the present translation is partially based, see Jamison & Brereton 2014: 554.

⁷ For these roots, see Werba 1997: 324–325.

⁸ For a very short introduction to Savitṛ in the RV, see Jamison & Brereton 2014: 44–45; for a more comprehensive description, see Macdonell 2002: 32–35 (with a caveat). For the various theories about Savitṛ’s manifestations in nature, see Haas 2020.

of what was perceived as a certain “cosmic” or “natural” force. This force was especially to be observed at the beginning and end of the day and night – at the transition from darkness to light and *vice versa* – and was felt as the drive to awaken and be active at daybreak and to rest at night.

Savitṛ’s etymologically clear name defined him throughout the entire Vedic period. Being the archetypical initiator, Savitṛ was thought to be the god who sets things in motion and gives them a good start. Oldenberg had already observed that it was a widespread practice to call on Savitṛ at the beginning of Vedic rituals, in both the Śrauta and the Grhya domains,⁹ and he continued to be known for his function as the divine impeller even in the post-Vedic period.

Over time, however, his anthropomorphic characteristics faded into the background, as did his association with the night. On the other hand, his association with the time before sunrise became stronger from the Yajurveda onwards,¹⁰ until he was even identified with the rising sun itself.¹¹ The (probably) earliest complete identification of Savitṛ with the rising sun is found in the Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa, where we learn that “Savitṛ is verily the one over there – the one who gives heat over there.”¹² “The one who gives heat over there” – that is in the sky – is a typical characterization of the sun, which was often simply called *asau*, “the one over there” or “the one yonder.” This does not mean, however, that Savitṛ instantly merged with the sun god, Sūrya. While in later Sanskrit literature, the sun came to be seen as his only manifestation, and the word *savitṛ* was frequently used as a synonym of *sūrya*, he remained a distinct (Vedic) god. Thus, Savitṛ continued to function as a god of fecundity and procreation – an “impeller of new life” – at least until the time of the early Upaniṣads.

But eventually this, too, would change. In the mid-Vedic period, he came into close contact with another deity, one who would gain the upper hand as god of procreation: Prajāpati. The “Lord of Progeny” became one of the most important deities of the Vedic religion. While in the ṚV *prajāpati* was just one of the epithets of Savitṛ,¹³ the new creator deity of the same name in many respects became his successor. The two gods were even identified with each

⁹ Cf. Oldenberg 1897: 479 and 1905: 256–257. In Haas 2022: 122, I argue that this practice was decisive for the choice of the GM as an initiation mantra.

¹⁰ See Falk 1988: 14.

¹¹ See Falk 1988: 8–9.

¹² Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa XXVII 7.28: *tad asau vai savitā yo 'sau tapati*; cf. also Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa III 2.3.18.

¹³ See, e.g., ṚV IV 53.2.

other in some texts; that is to say, Savitr came to be seen as one of Prajāpati's many manifestations.¹⁴

In the post-Vedic period, Savitr continued to lose much of his profile. In the Sanskrit Epics, for instance, he most often simply appears as the sun in the sense of a celestial luminary – rising, shining, and setting.¹⁵ While he is sometimes mentioned in a list together with other (usually Vedic) gods,¹⁶ little of his former glory remained. While continuing to appear in ritual contexts, as an individual god he became insignificant, at least outside the domain of Vedic ritual. In general, the texts mentioning or interpreting the GM do not show much concern for him. Instead of elaborating his role as a sun god, they rather focus on his light or, even more frequently, on the mantra or its deification itself.¹⁷

3. *tad, vareṇya, bhargas*

Vedic literature

The object of the main clause of the mantra is expressed in three words. As a first peculiarity, it is invoked with *tād*, a usually anaphoric pronoun that can only refer back to something already known either from the preceding text or from the context.¹⁸ In the case of the GM, which was originally placed at the very beginning of the originally independent, brief hymn ṚV III 62.10–12, an antecedent clause is lacking, and *tād* must therefore refer to something that is well known. Hence *tād* in this case may be translated either with the pronoun “that,”¹⁹ which has indeed been chosen by most translators, or with the definite

¹⁴ See, for instance, Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa XVI 5.17 (tr. Caland 1931: 433) and Jaiminiya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa I 5 (tr. Bodewitz 1973: 30); cf. Falk 1988: 22–23. To facilitate access to the original texts, I occasionally include references to existing translations (usually in brackets and marked with “tr.”). However, the absence of a reference does not mean that no translation exists for a particular passage.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Mahābhārata I 161.20; III 133.18; V 27.6; VII 170.47; VIII 26.73; IX 31.17; XII 163.22; XIII 141.7; XIV 8.10; Rāmāyaṇa III 28.23, 67.28; VI 4.52, 57.20. This was also the case in the Gṛhyasūtras; the Āsvalāyana-Gṛhyasūtra, for instance, prescribes as part of the Upanayana that “the teacher makes him look at the sun, saying: ‘O god Impeller(/O Sun god), this is your *brahmacārīn*, protect him, he shall not die!’” Āsvalāyana-Gṛhyasūtra I 20.7: *ādityam ikṣayed deva savitar eṣa te brahmacārī taṃ gopāya sa mā mr̥ṣety ācāryaḥ*.

¹⁶ Mahābhārata I 59.15, 114.55, 218.35; II 7.19; III 3.18, 118.11, 249.4; VI 116.38; XIII 16.22.

¹⁷ In Atharvaveda-Pariśiṣṭa XLI (5.5), it is even the *sāvitrī* itself – rather than the god to whom it is dedicated – that is identified with the sun: “Verily, the *sāvitrī* is the sun, together with the sun the *sāvitrī* praises, impels – in the morning (*prātar*) it impels forth (*pra+sū*), hence the *sāvitrī*-ness” *ādityo vai sāvitrī ādityena saha sāvitrī stauti suvati prātaḥ prasuvati tasmāt sāvitrīt<v>am*.

¹⁸ Macdonell 2010: 293–294 (§195 [A3]).

¹⁹ For this function of the English word “that,” see Chen 1990: 143.

article “the.”²⁰ Just like the word “that,” *tád* in the mantra can appeal to shared cultural knowledge: both the poet and his audience are familiar with Savitr’s famous *bhārgas*.

Before *bhārgas* is mentioned, however, it is qualified as being *vāreṇya*. *vāreṇya* is basically an adjectivized participle optative passive derived from the verb root *vṛ* (or *vṝ*), “to choose” or “to desire.”²¹ The meaning of this word is agreed upon: “worthy to be chosen” or “desired,” that is, “desirable” or, in a more general sense, “best” or “excellent.”²² Both *tád* and *vāreṇya* (losing their accent in later Sanskrit) retain the same function and meaning in the later literature. But what kind of light is *bhārgas*? And why would one want to obtain it? The etymology of the word *bhārgas* is not completely clear. It is probably derived from **b^helg* or *b^herHǵ*²³ and basically means “splendor, effulgence,” or simply “light.” Its likely cognate *bhrāj* (from *b^herHǵ*) suggests that it may denote a kind of light that evokes the impression of (1) an unsteady flicker as in the case of flames, or (2) movement and effulgence as in the case of the sun, which in the ṚV is often equated with metallic objects.²⁴ In the ṚV, the term *bhārgas* appears only three times;²⁵ two of those times it is connected with Agni, the god of fire.

Ulrike Roesler has pointed out that in the ṚV, Savitr is never the agent of any verb belonging to the semantic sphere of “shining.”²⁶ Although having a golden or shiny complexion himself, Savitr is primarily the one who *brings* light. In view of Savitr’s association with the early morning and evening, it is conceivable that *bhārgas* in the GM indeed denotes some kind of physical light, such as, perhaps, the gentle gleam of the sky before sunrise and after sunset. As a matter of fact, in the Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa, the “heavenly light” (*dyumna*) visible at these times is even explicitly connected with Savitr.²⁷

²⁰ Against this background, then, the occasional translation of the word with “this” (or German *dies*) is problematic.

²¹ For this root, see Werba 1997: 378–379.

²² Thus, even Savitr himself can be called *vāreṇya*; see Atharvaveda VII 73.6 (≈ Śāṅkhāyana-Śrautasūtra V 10.10, with *damūnā-* instead of *vāreṇyo-*) ≈ Atharvaveda (Paippalāda recension) XX 12.10 (tr. Kubisch 2012: 80).

²³ See Mayrhofer 1996: 252; for *bhrāj*, see also Werba 1997: 467 (“(er)glänzen, strahlen”).

²⁴ See Roesler 1997: 150.

²⁵ ṚV I 141.1, III 62.10, X 61.14.

²⁶ Roesler 1997: 229.

²⁷ “... after sunset, before darkness; at dawn, before sunrise. Now in these the heavenly light is the Impeller.” *astam ite purā tamisrāyai suvyuṣṭāyāṃ purodayāt | atho haiṣu savitaiva dyumnaḥ* Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa I 6. Cf. the translations by Bodewitz 1973: 30, Parpola 1998: 226 and 2000: 202. For more on *dyumna*, see Bodewitz 1973: 32–33, n. 13, and 2019 [1974]: 35.

If one assumes that this light is identical with Savitr's *bhārgas*, it is possible to establish some sort of coherence between it and those parts of ṚV III 62.10–12 that refer to inspiration. To do so, it is necessary to consider the cultural background of early Vedic poetry. For the composers of the ṚV, light, intuition, inspiration, and the act of composing hymns were integrally related. First, Vedic poets thought that hymns appealing to the gods should be inspired by something already existent, rather than being created "out of nothing." They considered their ideas and inspirations to be something that must be received, not produced. Second, they felt inspiration and insight to be a kind of sight or vision. Sight requires light, and the gods are consequently often asked to bestow this visionary light, which was also generally associated with the sacral world and the states of beatitude and bliss.²⁸

The reception of inspiration is often associated with a special time, the early morning. Jan Gonda observed:

Now, the visions or inspiration of the Vedic poets are often said to be transmitted early in the morning (cf. e.g., ṚV 3, 39, 2; 7, 79, 5; 10, 172, 2 ff.). This inspiration (*dhīh*) belonged to those power-concepts which appear or re-appear before daybreak. In the transmission of *dhī* a definite activity of gods of light and the early morning was a determinant factor.²⁹

Since Savitr, too, is associated with the morning, this fact may also pertain to the GM. Being, in a very general sense, a prayer for inspiration, it might even have been composed and used just at that time. Thus, the verses following the GM could indicate that Savitr is being asked to bestow his light *in order* to inspire the thoughts of the poets, which are needed to create hymns of praise (and to perform sacrifices) in honor of the gods. The gods, in turn, are then besought to provide worldly goods to the poets.

However, another interpretation – for which some justification can be found in later literature – appears to be just as plausible. In the hymn ṚV III 62.10–12, Savitr, who is also given the epithet "Apportioner" (*bhāga*), is asked to be generous to those who strive for his *púramdhi*, his "plenitude," and hanker after his *rātī*, his "generosity" or "gift." It has to be stressed that it is not the light but Savitr himself (*dhíyo yó*-³⁰ [m.]) who inspires the poets, and it is quite possible that the somewhat elusive *bhārgas* of the GM is not so much an "inspirational" as it is a more "profane" light (as can be found in later texts).

²⁸ Gonda 1975: 68.

²⁹ Gonda 1981: 7. For a collection of early passages showing the importance of the morning time for ritual purposes, see Gonda 1981: 6–7.

³⁰ In this article, hyphens after Sanskrit words indicate that the word is a sandhi form.

Thus, it may rather belong to the same category as *púramdhi* and *rā́tí*, two words that do not really belong to the domain of inspiration.

The answer to the question of what kind of light *bhargas* might be is partly dependent on how one understands the syntactic construction of the GM. In 1954, Vishva Bandhu published a paper in which he argued that the word *yó-* “who” in *pāda* c should be interpreted as a variant neuter form of *yád* “which,” and was correlated to *tád* and *bhargas*. In this way, *bhargas* becomes the agent of *pracodáyāt*, “shall inspire” or “set in motion.” Since Bandhu was apparently convinced that it cannot be Savitr who is to inspire the poets, he suggested a rather cumbersome – and ultimately unacceptable – distortion of the grammar of the text. Most other translators continued to accept Savitr as the agent of *pracodáyāt*.

In turn, Walter Slaje argued for a reading of the verse that – while being grammatically possible – again suggested that there could be a causal or at least a temporal relationship between *bhargas* and the inspiration referred to in the last *pāda*.³¹ Slaje interpreted *tád* as an adverb with the meaning “thus, so”³² and read *pāda* c as a final clause (“in order that ...”). Read this way, Savitr would first be asked to confer his *bhargas*, in order that *he* shall inspire the poets. The logical coherence of these events is not entirely clear: if Savitr’s *bhargas* is interpreted as an entity that has the power to invoke inspiration, it is strange that the text is formulated in such a way as to indicate that it is Savitr – *yó-* – and not the *bhargas* who is expected to stimulate the thoughts of his worshippers.

Of course, it might not be advisable to expect too great a degree of logical order in a work of poetry. It might be significant, however, that in two other verses similar in wording to the GM, *tád* is most likely not used as an adverb. In RV I 159.5, *tád* is a qualifier of the neuter noun *rádhas*, “largesse,” following it immediately afterwards, and in V 82.1, of the neuter *bhójana*.³³ While this does

³¹ Slaje 2007: 3, n. 6.

³² Slaje 2019: 205: “So laßt uns denn / Das strahlend helle Licht / Des Gottes / Auf daß er unser Denken / Vorwärts treibe!” (the slashes inserted here stand for line breaks in the original). Cf. also Slaje 2007: 3 (“Wir wollen uns dies strahlende Licht des Gottes Savitr verschaffen, dass unsere Gedanken er beflügelt”) and the similar translation in Slaje 2009: 525, n. 11 (“Wir wollen uns das ersehnte Licht [...]).

³³ RV I 159.5: “The desirable largesse of Savitar shall we think upon today at the impulse of the god. For us, o Heaven and Earth, through your kind attention establish wealth consisting of goods and a hundred cows.” *tád rádho adyá savitúr váreṇiyaṃ, vayám devásya prasavé manāmahe | asmábhyaṃ dyāvāprthivī sucetúnā, rayiṃ dhattaṃ vāsumantaṃ śatagvīnam ||* tr. Jamison & Brereton 2014: 338. RV V 82.1: “This we choose of Savitar’s: the sustenance of the god – the Apportioner’s best vanquishing power, which best confers wholeness – (that) would we acquire.” *tát savitúr vṛṇīmahe vayám devásya bhójanam | śráéṣṭham sarvadhátamaṃ túraṃ bhágasya dhīmahi ||* tr. Jamison & Brereton 2014: 765. The verbal similarities between these verses and the GM have been discussed in Brereton 2022: 76–77.

not rule out that *tád* could be an adverb – it is, in any case, grammatically possible to translate *tád* with “so” – I would argue that in the GM, too, *tád* qualifies the neuter noun *bhārgas*.

There are further reasons to interpret *bhārgas* as an object of desire rather than as a source of inspiration. In several Brāhmaṇas, *bhārgas* (sometimes in the form *bhārga*) is equated with *vīryà* “heroic power” or “vigor,” which the personified Waters take from Varuṇa when he is consecrated.³⁴ It is also frequently associated or mentioned alongside *vārcas* “luster,” *yāsas* “fame,” *ójas* “vigor,” *bála* “strength,” *māhas* “greatness,” *śrī* “splendor,” *yajñasya yad yāsas* “that which is the fame of the sacrifice,” *yajñāsya yát páyas* “that which is the essence of the sacrifice,” *bhaga* “portion,” and *stoma* “praise.”³⁵ This makes it likely that in the RV, too, the word does not necessarily denote the inspiring “gleam” of Savitr̥ in the early morning, but a somewhat less sublime “splendor” or “glory.”

Post-Vedic literature

Turning to the post-Vedic period, we observe that the word *bhargas* almost dropped into desuetude. Only a few sources employ it, most notably the Maitrāyaṇīya-Upaniṣad (MaitrU) and the Śvetāśvatara-Upaniṣad (ŚvetU).³⁶ As it is one of the few texts dealing with the meaning of the actual text of the GM, the testimony of the MaitrU is especially intriguing. Evidently, the author had a particular interest in Savitr̥’s *bhargas* (here perhaps better translated as “effulgence”), even more than in Savitr̥ himself. After explaining every *pāda* of the verse, he even adds a separate comment just on this word. I here translate the relevant passage (excluding a portion that can be safely considered a later interpolation):³⁷

³⁴ Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa V 4.5.1 (tr. Eggeling 1864: 113) and Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa XVIII 9.1 (tr. Caland 1931: 493). Cf. also Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa II 101 and MaitrS IV 3.

³⁵ AV VI 69.3 (*vārcas, yāsas, yajñāsya yát páyas*), XIX 37.1 (*vārcas, yāsas, ójas, váyas, bála*); Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa II 5.7.1.10 (*vārcas, yāsas, ójas, bála*); Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa II 258 (*śrī*); Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa XII 3.4.7 (*bhārgas, māhas, yāsas*); Śāṅkhāyana-Araṇyaka VII 1.4, XII 1.5 (*yajñasya yad yāsas*); Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra XVII 43 (*mahas, bhaga, yāsas*); Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa I 1 (*mahat, yāsas, stoma, bhukti, sarva*), IX 8 (*bhargayaśasi*); Gopatha-Brāhmaṇa V 15 (*mahas, yāsas, sarvam*).

³⁶ According to van Buitenen (1962: 71) one should put the original MaitrU “not too much later than the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, while some portions, like 6.33 are definitely older”; according to Olivelle (1998: 13), the TaitrU can be assigned to the sixth or fifth centuries BCE. Oberlies (1988: 54), on the other hand, placed the MaitrU *after* the ŚvetU, a text dated by Olivelle (1998: 13) to the “the last few centuries BCE” and by Sanderson even to after the second century CE (for references, see Okita 2017: 359, n. 6). The MaitrU may in fact be several centuries younger; cf. Mallinson 2014: 170.

³⁷ See van Buitenen 1962.

[With regard to *pāda* a] “That desirable [effulgence] of the Impeller”: the Impeller is yonder sun. He is thus to be preferred by someone who desires the Self – thus the Veda exegetes say.

Next [with regard to *pāda* b] “we visualize the Effulgence of the god”: the god is the Impeller. Therefore, I think on him who is called his [i.e., the god’s] Effulgence³⁸ – thus the Veda exegetes say.

Next [with regard to *pāda* c] “who may inspire our insights”: the insights are thoughts. “...who may inspire” them for us – thus the Veda exegetes say.

Next [with regard to the word] “Effulgence”: he who is placed in yonder sun or is the star in the eye, he is called Effulgence. “Effulgence (*bhargas*)” because his movement (*gati*) is by means of the beams of light (*bhā*), or he is called Effulgence because he roasts (*bharjayati*) – thus the Veda exegetes say. [...]

He, it should be known, is the lord of the Self, he is Śambhu, Bhava, Rudra, the Lord of Progeny, the all-creator, Hiraṇyagarbha, the truth, the vital force, the goose, the preceptor, Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, the sun, the Impeller, the Placer, the Ordainer, the sovereign, Indra, Indu. He, the one who gives heat like fire hidden by fire, by the thousand-eyed Golden Egg,³⁹ he is to be looked for, to be sought after.⁴⁰

This passage is instructive in a number of ways. First, a close reading shows that the text is not really interested in Savitṛ. Rather, it elaborates on the *bhargas*,

³⁸ Cf. the misleading translations by Gonda 1963: 286: “Because Savitar is God (*devaḥ*) I meditate (*cintayāmi*, explication of *dhīmahī*) upon that which [!] is called his light (*bhargah*)” and van Buitenen 1962: 136: “deva is savitā. The One who is its[!] *bhargas*, on Him I think.”

³⁹ In Hindu cosmogony, the Golden Egg is the original source of the entire universe; it is occasionally identified with Brahmā, Prajāpati, and the Vedic Puruṣa, who has a thousand eyes; see Gonda 1974, especially pp. 46–47.

⁴⁰ MaitrU VI 7–8: *tat savitur vareṇyam ity asau vā ādityaḥ savitā | sa vā evaṃ pravaraṇīya ātmakāmenety āhur brahmavādinaḥ | atha bhargo devasya dhīmahīti savitā vai devaḥ | tato yo 'sya bhargākhyas tam cintayāmīty āhur brahmavādinaḥ | atha dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayād iti buddhayo vai dhiyaḥ | tā yo 'smākaṃ pracodayād ity āhur brahmavādinaḥ | atha bhargā iti yo ha vā amuṣminn āditye nihitas tārako 'kṣiṇi vaiṣa bhargākhyah | bhābhir gatiḥ asya hīti bhargah | bharjayatīti vā eṣa bhargā ity āhur brahmavādinaḥ ||7|| [...] eṣa khalv ātmeśānaḥ śambhur bhavo rudraḥ prajāpatir viśvasṛg ghirānyagarbhaḥ satyaṃ prāṇo haṃsaḥ śāstā viṣṇur nārāyaṇo 'rkaḥ savitā dhātā vidhātā samrāḍ indra indur | ya eṣa tapaty agnir ivāgnināpihitaḥ sahasrākṣeṇa hiraṇmayenāṇḍenaiṣa vai jijñāsītavyo 'nveṣṭayaḥ. Cf. the translation by van Buitenen 1962: 136.*

which it takes to be a masculine word ending either in *a* or *as*,⁴¹ even though it is impossible to analyze *bhargo-* in the GM in this way. The reason for this is that it assumes a male god in the background of the mantra “who is called his Effulgence” (*yo 'sya bhargākhyas-*): it is this “Effulgence” who is at the center of the mantra and is worthy of visualization or contemplation. As the following text shows, a great number of deities are identical with (or, rather, manifestations of) this single great god, among them not only Rudra, Viṣṇu, and Indra, but even Savitṛ himself! Thus, instead of focusing on Savitṛ – the sun – directly, the author chose to twist the grammar of the text in order to arrive at the god who is not only located within the sun and moves by means of its rays but is the sunlight itself.

Turning to the ŚvetU, a theistic text dedicated to the god Rudra/Śiva, we observe that here, too, the object of the mantra was valued higher than the god in possession of that object. The reference to the GM is found in the following verse, which also alludes to another famous Vedic text, the Nāsadiya Hymn (RV X 129):⁴²

When there was darkness, then there was neither day nor night, neither the existent nor the non-existent – Śiva alone was there. He was the imperishable/the Syllable,⁴³ he was “that desirable [effulgence] of the Impeller,” and from him has come forth the ancient insight.⁴⁴

In this verse, only the first *pāda* of the GM is quoted; the word *bhargas* itself is missing. It is, however, instructive to observe how this *pāda* is embedded in the sentence: both the first *tad* and the second one in *tat savitur vareṇyaṃ-* refer to the aforementioned Śiva and should be translated as “he.”⁴⁵ This means that the verse not only quotes from the GM, but even reinterprets its structure and integrates it into the new sentence, a technique also employed in other

⁴¹ As in *bhargākhyāḥ* and *bhābhir gatir asya hīti bhargaḥ* or as in *bharjayatīti vā eṣa bhargā ity āhur brahmavādinaḥ*.

⁴² For this and other Vedic quotations (or paraphrases) in the ŚvetU, see Salomon 1986 and Oberlies 1988.

⁴³ The word *akṣara* means “imperishable” as well as “syllable.” Since the time of the Brāhmaṇas, it has been associated with the syllable *om* (as “the Great Syllable”; see Gerety 2015: 129–135 and van Buitenen 1959), which is not only significant as a sacred syllable itself, but also frequently precedes the GM. It is very likely that both meanings are intended in the verse.

⁴⁴ ŚvetU IV 18: *yadā tamas tan na divā na rātrir, na san na cāśac chiva eva kevalaḥ | tad akṣaraṃ tat savitur vareṇyaṃ, prajñā ca tasmāt prasṛtā purāṇī ||* cf. the translations by Olivelle 1998: 427 and Oberlies 1998: 89–90.

⁴⁵ Cf. Oberlies 1998: 90, nn. 78–79; contra Salomon 1986: 174, n. 18 (see p. 178).

Upaniṣads.⁴⁶ Although the quotation stops before it, I would argue that the *bhargas* is nevertheless present: the beginning of a verse (a so-called *pratīka*) such as *tat savitur vareṇyam* is often used to bring the verse back to mind – an easy feat in the case of the GM. As a consequence, it must have been clear that “that which is desirable” is indeed Savitr’s *bhargas*.

But why cite the GM in the first place? According to Richard Salomon,

it is precisely because of the authority of the verse (and perhaps for no other reason, since it is not particularly relevant in and of itself) that the composer chose to quote it here. In fact, this is only one more instance of a pronounced pattern throughout the Ś[vet]U of choosing verses for citation from the Vedas, and particularly from the RV, more on account of their popularity or perceived authority than because of any particular relevance to the context or theme of the Upaniṣad itself.⁴⁷

However, while the GM certainly was a renowned text at the time of the ŚvetU, I doubt that this was the only reason why the author selected it.⁴⁸ Rather, I would argue that there is a contrast between the “darkness” in the first half of the verse and the implicit *bhargas* in the second: in the beginning, there was darkness, and Śiva was the only light, from which everything emerged. The *pāda* following the GM quotation, in turn, possibly continues another aspect of the *bhargas*: “from him/it [Rudra = *bhargas*] has come forth the ancient insight (*prajñā*).” This would mean that Rudra – particularly in the form of Savitr’s *bhargas*, his “inspirational light” – is the primordial fountainhead of wisdom and insight.

Irrespective of whether one accepts this interpretation or not, it is clear that *bhargas* here does not denote the worldly “splendor” or “fame” that was coveted by the Ṛgvedic poets. Rather, it is presented as a much more powerful entity, the divine source of the universe. In this respect, the ŚvetU is similar to the MaitrU, where the *bhargas* is even reinterpreted as a male deity.

⁴⁶ A similar case is given in Kaṭha-Upaniṣad 2.17, where the word *brahmajajñam* is used both to denote the sun and, at the same time, to refer to a specific Vedic verse beginning with *bráhma jajñānám*- (given, for instance, in Taittirīya-Saṃhitā IV 2.8.8d); cf. Haas 2019: 1036 with n. 73.

⁴⁷ Salomon 1986: 172.

⁴⁸ This argument was already criticized by Oberlies, whose own explanation (Oberlies 1998: 90, n. 80), however, is incomprehensible to me: “Anders als Salomon, der die Ansicht vertritt, daß der Verfasser unseres Verses den ṛgvedischen ausschließlich wegen des hohen Ansehens[...], das dieser genoß, zitiert, glaube ich, daß dieses erweiterte Prädikatsnomen eine konkrete Aussage macht: Rudra ist der Antrieb, der Impuls, der aus der Urmaterie (*akṣara*-) die Schöpfung entstehen läßt.” No “Antrieb” or “Impuls” is ever mentioned.

4. *dhīmahi*

Vedic literature

In the Vedic language, the main verb of the mantra is either an aorist injunctive⁴⁹ or an aorist optative⁵⁰ form of the root *dhā* “to put.”⁵¹ Used in the middle voice (or medium), it means “to take, to receive” or “to obtain.” The aorist optative is usually taken to denote a *wish*, that is, it has a cupitive function.⁵² The injunctive on the other hand “originally expressed an action irrespective of tense or mood, the context showing which was meant.”⁵³

According to Peter-Arnold Mumm, the injunctive is used to denote situations or actions that are for some reason obvious to the hearer, because it expresses a fact or an action that is either (1) already known (“as everybody knows”); is (2) according to common sense logically preceding/following the present situation (“it’s obvious/self-explanatory that now...”); or (3) coincides with its expression (“I now proclaim”).⁵⁴ In his analysis of the aorist injunctive,⁵⁵ Eystein Dahl, too, concluded that the aorist injunctive “is underspecified with regard to tense and modality” (2010: 333), but further remarked that because of its being an aorist it denotes the perfective aspect. The perfective aspect conveyed by the aorist simply expresses that an action is seen as a complete (and sometimes also completed) whole, that is, not as continuous or habitual. In the case of the aorist injunctive and optative, this often means that an action is causally and temporally prior to another contextually salient situation.⁵⁶ This is in any case also valid in the context of the GM, which ends with a verb pointing to a future event.

But how should *dhīmahi* be analyzed in the hymn of the RV? The question is whether Savitr̥ should be asked to bestow his light or whether he will give it himself. In most hymns that are (at least partly) directed at Savitr̥, it is the very first verse that extols his appearance.⁵⁷ They describe how he has arrived, how he has raised his golden arms, and how he has brought his light. It is only then that he is asked for protection, wealth, progeny, etc. As I imagine it, many of these hymns were created and recited in the presence of the god, that is, just

⁴⁹ Macdonell 2010: 171 (§148 [3]). *dhīmáhi* ← *dhī* (weak root aorist stem) + *mahi* (secondary ending in the 1st person plural).

⁵⁰ Werba 1997: 298; cf. Meier 1922: 58. *dhīmáhi* ← *dhī* + *ī* (optative suffix) + *mahi*.

⁵¹ For this root, see Werba 1997: 298–299.

⁵² For an analysis of the aorist optative, see Dahl 2010: 308–314.

⁵³ Macdonell 2010: 350 (§215B).

⁵⁴ Mumm 1995. For (1), see p. 178; for (2), pp. 187 and 182; for (3), p. 180.

⁵⁵ Dahl 2010: 320–333.

⁵⁶ Dahl 2010: 311 and 326.

⁵⁷ Cf. RV IV 54.1, VI 71.1, VII 39.1.

before daybreak, or just following sunset. In this case, the poet reciting the hymn simply states the obvious: all who are present “have now received” the light of Savitr̥, who will now inspire the creation of hymns, as the last verse of the hymn indicates. Mumm adduces three cases in which an injunctive (one time an aorist injunctive) may be used for the immediate past in order to express something relevant to the present situation,⁵⁸ and it cannot be ruled out that this is also true for the GM. If that is the case, we could then translate the GM thus: “We have (obviously) obtained the desirable splendor of the god Impeller, who shall (now) spur on our thoughts.”⁵⁹

The *communis opinio*, however, is to analyze *dhīmahi* as an optative. Berthold Delbrück thought it to be an injunctive, in this case one that denotes a wish whose fulfillment is outside of the power of the speaker.⁶⁰ This use would eventually be equivalent to the cupitive use of the optative. Arthur A. Macdonell, too, analyzed it as an aorist injunctive, which for him is dependent on context, but generally expresses a desire.⁶¹ The verbal form in the next verse of the hymn – the present indicative *īmahe* “we ask” or “beg” – may indeed suggest a cupitive reading of *dhīmahi*. Karl Hoffmann, lastly, properly called it an optative. In the instances he refers to, *dhīmahi* can be found to be in close proximity to unambiguous optative forms.⁶² In addition, the co-occurrence of *dhīmahi* with voluntative and cupitive verbs such as *vṛ/vṝ* “to choose, to desire”⁶³ or *yā/ī* “to ask, to beg”⁶⁴ is conspicuous.

In the case of the GM, the optative (i.e., cupitive) reading is indeed the more natural one.⁶⁵ Thus, in the RV, *dhīmahi* in all likelihood expresses a wish, that is, something that cannot be achieved by the speakers themselves. It is used in the meaning of “appropriation” rather than “reception”: even though Savitr̥’s light can be seen, it has yet to become the property of the poet, it does not yet infuse him. This means that it can be translated, for example, as “may we make our own” or “may we obtain.”

⁵⁸ RV X 86.18, VII 58.5, and 73.2; see Mumm 1995: 17–18.

⁵⁹ Cf. Geldner’s (1951: 410) translation.

⁶⁰ Delbrück 1888: 356. He refers to RV V 82.6, VII 66.9, and X 36.5.

⁶¹ Macdonell 1910: 369 (§503 [3]), n. 6 and 2010: 350 (§215B).

⁶² Hoffmann 1967: 254, n. 286. He refers to RV I 17.6 (*sanéma*), II 11.12 (*vanema*), V 21.1 (*idhīmahi*), and VII 66.9 (*syāma*).

⁶³ RV V 82.1 X 36.5d (= X 36.7d).

⁶⁴ RV X 35.4.

⁶⁵ However, one may doubt that all instances of *dhīmahi* in the RV have to be interpreted as optatives. This is not the place to pursue the subject further; however, in several instances it seems plausible to me to understand it as an injunctive used in one of the functions outlined by Mumm: e.g., RV I 131.2; III 29.4, 30.19; V 21.1, 82.6; VII 15.7, X 16.12, 36.7, 66.2, 87.22.

Since the injunctive died out in the mid-Vedic language, understanding it as anything other than an optative became impossible. As I have demonstrated elsewhere⁶⁶ the Vedic texts that were composed after the ṚV generally do not show any concern for the meaning of the GM, let alone for the word *dhīmahi*. We may nevertheless assume that, in the mid- and late-Vedic periods, the form continued to be understood as being derived from *dhā*.

Post-Vedic literature

As the language evolved, aorist optatives, too, went out of use. While aorist forms continued to be used in Epic and Classical Sanskrit, these are always in the indicative. This means that – some time in or after the late-Vedic period – the form *dhīmahi* could no longer be easily understood as part of the contemporary language. As a consequence, those who pondered the meaning of the text came up with new interpretations. On account of its similarity with the word *dhiyo-*, “insights” or “thoughts,” the form *dhīmahi* was reinterpreted as being derived from the root *dhī*, which means “to see, to think” or “to conceive of,”⁶⁷ a root that may also be related to *dhyā/dhyai*, which has a similar meaning.⁶⁸ It is not clear whether the form *dhīmahi* was understood to be an indicative or optative of either of these roots – that is whether it meant “we contemplate/visualize” or “may we contemplate/visualize.” The correct optative form would be **dīdhīmahi* for *dhī* (and *dhyāyemahi* for *dhyā/dhyai*). We may speculate, however, that in either case the “aberrant” form *dhīmahi* was simply thought to be a peculiarity of the Vedic language.⁶⁹

One of the earliest texts hinting at such an interpretation might be the MaitrU translated above, where, in his explanation of *pāda* b, the author explains that “I think (*cint*) on him who is called his [i.e., the god’s] Effulgence.” Insofar as the author seems to paraphrase the text of the mantra, he probably understood *dhīmahi* in the sense of “we contemplate/visualize.” This interpretation became very popular with medieval commentators such as Sāyaṇa,⁷⁰ and has remained extremely popular up to the present day. However, I do not know of any other pre-medieval texts that attest to it.

⁶⁶ Haas 2022: 83–109.

⁶⁷ Cf. Mayrhofer 1992: 793 and Werba 1997: 299–300.

⁶⁸ Cf. Mayrhofer 1992: 777–778 and Werba 1997: 433.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Joshi 1964: 379.

⁷⁰ Cf. the gloss *vayaṃ dhyāyāmaḥ* in his Ṛgveda-Bhāṣya; see Müller 1854: 773.

5. *dhī, pra+cud*

The beginning of the third *pāda* shows what the Ṛgvedic poets expected Savitr̥ to do. *dhī* is derived from the verbal root *dhī*, which we already met with above. Its primary meaning is “thought,” but it is also thought that is qualified in a certain way, namely “visionary thought” or “inspiration.”⁷¹ The alliteration with *dhīmahi* is, therefore, not the corollary of a *figura etymologica* – as we saw, *dhī* and *dhīmahi* are unrelated – but should rather be interpreted as a pun made by the poet.⁷² In the GM, Savitr̥ is expected to “stimulate” or “inspire” – *prá+cud*,⁷³ literally “to cause to move forward” – the thoughts of the praying poets. *prá+cud* is also used, for instance, for the action of setting a car into motion or driving it (ṚV VIII 12.3). In the Ṛgvedic language, *pracodáyāt* is a subjunctive form of a causative formed from *cud*, combined with the preverb *prá*. The subjunctive form probably does not express a wish, but something that is expected to happen in the future.

Since the subjunctive began to die out in the times of the Brāhmaṇas, many reciters of the GM must have had some difficulties in understanding this form (just as they must have had problems with *dhīmahi* a little later). The most prominent forms containing the suffix *yā* by the end of the Brāhmaṇa period were the optative and its close cousin, the benedictive, also known as precative. However, it is impossible to categorize the form *pracodáyāt* as either an optative or benedictive: the optative of *pracodáyati* would be *pracodáyet*. Forming the benedictive of causative verbs, on the other hand, is a far more difficult matter. The main characteristic of the benedictive is the insertion of *s* between the modal suffix of the optative and the ending (in the very rare forms in the middle voice, it is sometimes the other way round: *sī[y]*).⁷⁴ Most often, this form is made from aorist stems, and is thus very close to the aorist optative (lacking the *s* of the benedictive). The aorist of causatives is usually the reduplicating aorist, and the aorist optative would therefore be **pracūcudét*.⁷⁵ Apparently, no active benedictive form of a reduplicating aorist is attested (in the middle voice, we only find *rīriṣīṣṭa* [ṚV VI 51.7]), and it would be rather speculative to postulate *pracūcudyās* or *pracūcudyāt*.

These grammatical problems notwithstanding, it is plausible that the recipients of the GM actually did categorize *pracodáyāt* as a special, “archaic”

⁷¹ See generally Gonda 1975: 65–73.

⁷² This pun, however, was already recognized by Ṛgvedic poets; see Brereton 2022: 76–77.

⁷³ Werba 1997: 276.

⁷⁴ See Macdonell 2010: 175 (§150).

⁷⁵ Cf. Macdonell 2010: 174 (§149.4). This form is not attested.

optative (or benedictive) – just as in the case of *dhīmahī*.⁷⁶ Unlike *dhīmahī*, however, reinterpreting *pracodāyāt* as an optative or benedictive did not involve major semantic innovations. Again, to my knowledge, pre-medieval texts generally remain silent on this word.

6. Conclusion

The analyses above have demonstrated that translating the text of the GM is by no means a straightforward task. When translating verse from a Bronze-Age text such as the ṚV, this may seem obvious. But given the numerous translations available – and the many more we can expect in the future from both scholars and laypersons – it is worth repeating. At the same time, it should also be underscored that there cannot, and indeed need not, be a single correct translation: any translation may be deemed accurate if it is based on the linguistically arguable meanings of the word-forms of the text, and is in line with the context.

When viewing ṚV III 62.10 as a verse contained within a hymn, the textual context has to be considered. When viewing it as a mantra, the ritual context has to be taken into account. Moreover, when translating historical texts, we need to be aware that a mantra may not have had the same meaning for its recipients as it did four centuries earlier or later. It may be the case that a word no longer had a linguistically clear meaning at all, and that those recipients were more or less forced to reconstruct or invent a meaning ad hoc. For some of them only parts of it were relevant, for others the meaning of the mantra may not have mattered at all. For these reasons, one has to be very cautious with copy-and-paste translations.

The following table summarizes those translations I consider suitable for the individual words, purely in view of the general linguistic context. The table also sums up the grammatical analyses and indicates semantic or grammatical changes between Vedic and Sanskrit (a transition that was by no means abrupt):⁷⁷

⁷⁶ At least in theory there are even rules for forming a benedictive from the present stem of secondary verbs. Both Whitney (2008: 384 [§1049]) and Müller (1886: 112 [§385], n. 2 [see p. 113]) explain that in the benedictive active of causative verbs, the suffix *ay* is replaced by the suffix *yā-s*. Neither offer any further references; Whitney even regards this formation “as purely fictitious.”

⁷⁷ Note that Epic and Classical Sanskrit do not use accents.

<i>tát-</i>	“that” sandhi form of <i>tád</i> , accusative singular in the neuter of the pronoun <i>sá/tá (tád)</i>
<i>savitúr</i>	“of Savitr̥/the Impeller/Initiator/Instigator”; Sanskrit also “of the Sun” genitive singular of the masculine noun <i>savitṛ́</i> , agent noun derived from the root <i>sū</i>
<i>váreṇyam-</i>	“desirable, excellent” sandhi form of <i>váreṇyam</i> , accusative singular of the neuter form of <i>váreṇya</i> , adjectivized participle optative in the passive voice derived from <i>vṛ/vṛ̃</i>
<i>bhárgo-</i>	“splendor, effulgence, radiance” sandhi form of <i>bhárgas</i> , accusative singular of the neuter noun <i>bhárgas</i>
<i>devásya</i>	“of the god/the divine” genitive singular of the masculine noun <i>devá</i>
<i>dhīmahi</i>	“may we/would we/we wish to” + “obtain/attain/receive/make our own” (or: “we have obtained” etc.), Sanskrit also “(may) we contemplate/visualize” first person plural in the middle voice of the aorist optative or injunctive of <i>dhā</i> ; Sanskrit speakers also interpreted it as a “Vedic” first person plural of the present indicative or optative of <i>dhī</i>
<i>dhíyo-</i>	“thoughts, inspirations” sandhi form of <i>dhíyas</i> , accusative plural of the feminine noun <i>dhí</i> , root-noun derived from <i>dhī</i>
<i>yó-</i>	“who”

sandhi form of *yás*, nominative accusative of the masculine form of the relative pronoun *yá*

naḥ

“our”

enclitic form of *asmākam*, genitive plural of *asmá* (*asmád*)

pracodáyāt

“shall/will” + “spur on/inspire/stimulate”

third person singular in the active voice of the conjunctive of the causative of *prá+cud*; Sanskrit-speakers also interpreted it as a “Vedic” optative, that is “(may) spur on” etc.

Even more valid translations can certainly be found for the individual words, and there is also more than one way to put them together. I here propose the following two pairs of English and German translations (the German translations are somewhat less literal, but emulate the *gāyatrī* meter), based, on the one hand, on the Ṛgvedic reading and, on the other, on a general Sanskrit reading (which has to be adapted depending on the context). One could say that the Ṛgvedic and the Sanskrit translations present extremes; for many recipients, the sense of the text must have been in the middle, so to speak, or a mixture of both:

“May we obtain that desirable splendor of the god Impeller, who shall spur on our thoughts!” (RV)

“We visualize that excellent effulgence of the Sun god, who may inspire our thoughts!” (Sanskrit)

“Jenen begehrten Glanz des Gotts Antreiber mögen wir empfahn, der unsre Geister vorwärts bringt!” (RV)

“Das wünschenswerte Leuchten des Sonnengottes erschauen wir, der unser Denken inspiriert!” (Sanskrit)

Appendix: collection of translations

This appendix lists all scholarly and complete translations of the GM into European languages that I came across during my research. (Many more, much less accurate translations or paraphrases exist, but are not included here.) I call

a translation “scholarly” if it is oriented around the original wording and is done by someone who in my (admittedly subjective) judgment has learned Vedic or Sanskrit beyond the level of a mere superficial acquaintance. Both due to their great number and my own language skills, English and German translations predominate. It has to be emphasized, therefore, that this list is *not* the result of a systematic search for translations.

The earliest known paraphrase in a non-Indo-Aryan language, Persian, is that by the Mughal prince Dara Shukoh (1615–1659). In his *Sirr-i Akbar*, there is an echo of a passage from the *MaitrU*, in which the GM is explained.⁷⁸

Those who are well-read in the Vedas have said: He should meditate on the sun in such a way as to visualize it within himself. Those who are well-read in the Vedas have also said this: The shine of the mind that we have found is an image of this one. You should say: “O Sun, give us the shine of the mind from your light!”⁷⁹

It is the last sentence that is meant to reflect the content of the GM; however, it cannot be called a translation.

According to Theodor Benfey, the GM was first translated into a European language by Manuel da Assomcoon (= Manoel/Manuel da Assumpçam/Assumpção), a Portuguese missionary who worked in Bengal in the eighteenth century; Benfey’s statement, however, is probably the result of a misunderstanding.⁸⁰ The first published and widely received “translation”

⁷⁸ For a partial translation of this passage, see above p. 58.

⁷⁹ *Ki bed-xwānān cunīn gufta and: Va ba āftāb cunīn mašghuli kunad ki o rā ba tasavvur-i xwad darāvarad. Va bed-xwānān cunīn gufta and ki raušani-yi ‘aql ki mā yāfta em, az hamin tasavvur ast, bāyad ki bigoyed ki “Ai āftāb, mā rā ham az nūr-i xwad raušani-yi ‘aql bidahed!”* *Sirr-i Akbar*: 248 (§7). I would like to thank Stephan Popp and Svevo D’Onofrio for transcribing and translating this passage (personal communication, January 15 and 16, 2023).

⁸⁰ Benfey (1848: 277, n. 1) states that the GM was “übers. [= übersetzt, i.e., “translated”] zuerst von Fra Manuel da Assomcoon,” but does not specify his source. Two works by Assumpçam are known and accessible to me: a Portuguese/Bengali grammar-cum-vocabulary list (Assumpçam 1743a) and a catechism (1743b). As already noted by Cannon (1977: 186, n. 12), in his vocabulary list Assumpçam (1743a: 126) translates the word “Gaitri” as “Origem da ley,” (i.e., “source of law”), and on p. 575 provides a transcription of what he there calls the “GATRI DOS BRAMENES”: “Ongbhur bhoboxó, tothoxobitur bhoroniong bhorg de boxio dhimohi o ono proso doiat.” Neither in this work nor in the catechism, however, is there a translation (in the latter case this is of course hardly surprising). The most plausible explanation is that Assumpçam never translated the GM and Benfey simply misunderstood Jones’s statement that “the original *Gayatri*, or holiest verse in the Veda, has already been published, though very incorrectly, by *Fra Manuel da Assomcaon*” (Teignmouth 1980 [1799]: 365 and 1799: 415; note that Benfey not only cites Jones, but, like him, also uses

(which is still more of a paraphrase supplemented by interpretative glosses) of the GM is in fact that by Sir William Jones from 1799:

LET us adore the supremacy of *that* divine sun, the godhead who illuminates all, who recreates all, from whom all proceed, to whom all must return, whom we invoke to direct our understandings aright in our progress toward his holy seat.⁸¹

After his death in 1794, four much more literal renditions were found among his notes:⁸²

“That sun’s supremacy (or greater than the sun), God, let us adore which may well direct.”

“That Light far greater than the sun,
The light of God, let us adore.”

“Illud, sole praestantius
Lumen Dei meditemur
Intellectus qui nostros dirigat.”

“Than you bright sun more splendid far
The light of God let us adore
Which only can our minds direct.”

Parts of the GM also found their way to Europe in Anquetil Duperron’s translation of Dara Shukoh’s text echoing the MaitrU (“Oupnek’hat Mitri”), first published in 1801 (p. 324):

Quicumque vult quòd illum âtma obtineat, cum medio ejus (solis) obtinebit: quòd Beid khanan (τᾶ Beid lectores) hoc modo dixerunt: et cum sole (soli) maschghouli (homo) hoc modo faciat, quòd lucem ejus cum

the anglicized spelling “Manuel” instead of “Manoel”). Had Jones been aware of an earlier translation (and not just publication), he most likely would have mentioned this.

⁸¹ Teignmouth 1980 [1799]: 367. Jones himself must have been aware that this is not a direct translation; see footnote 82 below. See also generally Cannon 1977; cf. Johnson 2011: 56–57.

⁸² See Martinengo-Cesaresco 1902: 100–101. Martinengo-Cesaresco (p. 100) also quotes another rendition of Jones, which he himself apparently called “paraphrase or tica”: “Let us meditate with adoration on the supreme essence of the Divine Sun which illuminates all, recreates all, from which all proceed, to which all must return, and which we invoke to direct our understanding aright in our progress to his holy seats.”

imaginatione (in cogitatione) in se adducat: Beid khaṇan dixerunt, quòd rectitudo intelligentiæ quam nos acquisivimus, ex illâ imaginatione es: oportet (quòd) dicat, quòd â sol! nobis (mihi) etiam è luce propriâ (tuâ) lumen intellectûs des.

In the following two centuries, however, numerous direct translations were produced:⁸³

1. Let us meditate on the adorable light of the the divine ruler (Savitri): may it guide our intellects.
– Henry Thomas Colebrooke 1808: 400 (RV)
2. We mediate [sic] on that Supreme Spirit of the splendid sun who directs our understandings.
– Ram Mohun Roy 1901 [¹1827]: 121 (RV)
3. Diesen, des Zeugers, herrlichen Glanz mögen empfangen wir, des Gotts, der unsre Werke fördern soll.
– Theodor Benfey 1848: 276–277 (Sāmaveda)
4. Nous adorons la noble lumière du divin Savitri, qui lui-même provoque nos prières.
– Simon-Alexandre Langlois 1850: 100 (RV)
5. We meditate on that desirable light of the divine SAVITRI, who influences our pious rites.
– Horace Hayman Wilson 1857: 110 (RV)
6. Wir denken nach über [nach Benfey's Uebersetzung: Mögen wir empfangen] das herrliche licht des göttlichen Savitri; möge er unsre Erkenntnisse [Werke] fördern!
– Paul Wurm 1874: 33 (RV); brackets in the original

⁸³ In the following, I will give the source for the translation in round brackets if specified by the translator. Several translators have also included the Vyāhṛtis in their renditions of the GM; I do not quote them here.

7. Dass wir des Gottes Savitar
begehrtes Licht erlangten doch,
Der unsre Bitten fördere.
– Hermann Grassmann 1876: 105 (RV)
8. Let us meditate (or, we meditate) on that excellent glory of the divine
Vivifier. May he enlighten (or stimulate) our understandings.
– Monier Williams 1877: 61 (RV)
9. May we obtain the glorious light of the divine Savitri, who, we trust, may
inspire our prayers!
– Julius Eggeling 1882: 356 (Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa)
10. Let us meditate on the excellent glory of the divine vivifying Sun, may he
enlighten our understandings!
– Monier Williams 1882: 164 (RV)
11. this splendor of Savitar the god, object of our desire, we would procure
us |
who will stir into activity our devices |
– Alfred Ludwig 1886: 436 (RV)
12. May we attain that excellent glory of Savitar the God: So may he stimulate
our prayers!
– Ralph Thomas Hotchkin Griffith 1991 [¹1893]: 348 (Sāmaveda)
13. Of Savitar, the heavenly, that longed-for glory may we win,
And may himself inspire our prayers.
– Edward Washburn Hopkins 1895: 46 (RV)
14. Let us meditate on the to-be-longed-for light of the Inspirer; may it incite
all our efforts.
– Robert Watson Frazer 1898: 61, n. 2
15. May we attain that excellent glory of Savitar the God: So may he stimulate
our prayers.
– Ralph Thomas Hotchkin Griffith 1899: 21, 205, 255 (Vājasaneyi-
Saṃhitā)
16. Let us meditate on that excellent glory of the divine Vivifier;
May he enlighten (or stimulate) our understandings.
– William Joseph Wilkins 1900: 30

17. Mögen wir erlangen den herrlichen Glanz des Gottes Savitar, der unsere Andacht fördern möge.
 - Heinrich Stöner 1901: 42 (Mantra-Brāhmaṇa)
18. (I here refer to Jones's translations cited above, which were written before 1794 but apparently were not published until 1902.)
19. May we attain the excellent glory of Savitr the god: So may he stimulate our prayers.
 - Arthur Berriedale Keith 1908: 56 (Śāṅkhāyana-Āraṇyaka)
20. That excellent glory of Savitr,
The god we meditate,
That he may stimulate our prayers.
 - Arthur Berriedale Keith 1914: 75 (Taittirīya-Saṃhitā)
21. Gott Savitars ersehnten Glanz,
Den möchten wir erlangen jetzt!
Er stärk' uns Andacht und Gebet.
 - Von Schroeder 1914: 9 (ṚV)
22. Möchten wir uns diesen herrlichen Glanz des Gottes Savitr zu eigen machen, damit er unsere Lieder begeistere.
 - Willem Caland 1921: 202 (ĀpŚS)
23. We choose for ourselves that excellent refulgence of god Savitr, who may stimulate our prayers.
 - Vinayak Mahadev Apte 1939: 34 (ṚV)
24. Pussions-nous recevoir cette excellente lumière du dieu Savitar, et qu'il donne l'impulsion à nos pieuses pensées!
 - Paul-Émile Dumont 1939: 25 (Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā/Taittirīya-Saṃhitā/ṚV)
25. This desirable splendour of god Savitr may we accept, who may urge on our prayers
 - Jan Mark Dresden 1941: 5 (Mānava-Gṛhyasūtra)
26. we contemplate that esteemed (longed for) refulgence (glory) of the divine Savitr who may inspire our intellects (or actions).

- Pandurang Vaman Kane 1941: 302
- 27. Dieses vorzügliche Licht des Gottes S a v i t ṛ empfangen wir, der unsere Gedanken anregen soll.
– Karl Friedrich Geldner 1951: 410 (ṚV)
- 28. Of Savitr this glorious [...] Light of the God may we obtain [...] Who may inspire our prayers
– Willem Caland 1953: 39 (Śāṅkhāyana-Śrautasūtra)
- 29. Let us think on the lovely splendour of the god Savitr,
that he may inspire our minds.
– Arthur Llewellyn Basham 1959 [¹1954]: 162 (ṚV)
- 30. Nous voulons avoir en partage cette splendeur désirable du divin Savitar; et lui, puisse-t-il diriger nos pensées!
– Jean Varenne 1960: 83 (Mahā-Nārāyaṇa-Upaniṣad)
- 31. that we obtain that desirable (excellent) radiance of god Savitar who is to impel our 'visions' (intuitions, which are to be transformed into mantras)
– Jan Gonda 1963: 284
- 32. On that excellent glory of the god Savitr we meditate, that he may stimulate our prayers.
– Jeanette van Gelder 1963: 136 (Mānava-Śrautasūtra)
- 33. That excellent glory of Savitr, the god, we meditate, that he may stimulate our prayers.
– C. G. Kashikar 1964: 139 (Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra)
- 34. That we obtain that desirable (excellent) radiance of god Savitar who is (may be expected) to stimulate our visions
– Robert Charles Zaehner 1966: 3 (ṚV)
- 35. Let us meditate on the most excellent light of the Creator (the Sun); may he guide our intellect
– Rajbali Pandey 1994 [¹1969]: 39 (Gobhila-Gr̥hyasūtra)
- 36. That we obtain that desirable (excellent) radiance of god Savitar who is (may be expected) to stimulate our visions
– Jan Gonda 1975: 52

37. We hope to obtain that desirable (excellent) radiance (brightness) of god Savitar, who will (is expected to) stimulate (inspire) our 'visions'
 - Jan Gonda 1975: 68
38. Dies vorzügliche Licht des Gottes Savitr bedenken wir, der unsere Gedanken befördern soll
 - Adalbert J. Gail 1978: 334, n. 3
39. May we receive this desirable light of the god Savitr, who shall impel our thoughts.
 - Frits Staal 1983/I: 30 and 1989: 23
40. puissions-nous posséder cet éclat désirable du dieu Savitr en sorte qu'il incite nos pensées!
 - Louis Renou 1985: 566
41. We contemplate the excellent glory of the divine Savitr; may he inspire our intellect!
 - Brian K. Smith 1986: 72 (RV)
42. May we obtain that esteemed effulgence of the god Savitr, who would inspire our thoughts
 - Shingo Einoo 1993: 201
43. Let us think on that desirable splendour of the celestial Inspirer. May he stimulate us to insightful thoughts.
 - Julius Lipner 1994: 42
44. May we acquire that desirable brightness of the Divine Impeller [Deva Savitr]; may he stimulate our thoughts.
 - Timothy Lubin 1994: 135; brackets in the original
45. Méditons sur la lumière resplendissante du divin Soleil, afin qu'il inspire nos pensées.
 - Huet 2023 [¹1998]: 321
46. We meditate on the glorious splendor of the Arouser divine: may he himself illumine our inner vision!
 - William K. Mahoney 1998: 171 (RV)

47. Mögen wir uns auf diesen strahlenden Glanz von Gott Savitr̥ (die Sonne) konzentrieren, der unseren Geist anregt.
 – Axel Michaels 1998: 171 (RV)
48. On that excellent glory of god Savitr̥ we reflect, that he may stimulate our prayers.
 – Patrick Olivelle 1998: 530 (cf. p. 153)
49. We will receive that best brilliance of the divine Instigator so that he may enliven our thoughts.
 – Asko Parpola 1998: 205 (RV)
50. That excellent [glory] of Savitr̥ [...] The glory of god we meditate [...] That he may stimulate our prayers.
 – Patrick Olivelle 2000: 293 (BaudhDhS); “[glory]” in the original
51. We want to put in ourselves the desirable lustre of the god Savitr̥, who would impel our poetical thoughts.
 – Shingo Einoo 2002: 44 (RV)
52. That most excellent splendor of the heavenly Sun we consider, so that he may arouse our inspirations.
 – Hartmut Scharfe 2002: 112 (RV)
53. We meditate on the lovely
 Glory of the god Savitr̥
 That he may stimulate our minds
 – Valerie Roebuck 2003 [¹2000] (RV)
54. May we take to ourselves that excellent effulgence of the divine Savitr̥, that he may impel our thoughts.
 – Susan J. Rosenfield 2004: 140 (Kaṭha-Brāhmaṇa)
55. Wir wollen uns dies strahlende Licht des Gottes Savitr̥ verschaffen, dass unsere Gedanken er beflügelt.
 – Walter Slaje 2007: 3 (RV)
56. This desirable light of the god Savitr̥ we apprehend: may he sharpen our thoughts
 – Martin Litchfield West 2007: 215 (RV)

57. May we receive this excellent splendour of the god Savitā, which should inspire our thoughts!
– Frits Staal 2008: 220 (RV)
58. Wir wollen uns das ersehnte Licht des Gottes Savitṛ verschaffen, daß unsere Gedanken er beflügle.
– Walter Slaje 2009: 525, n. 11 (Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad)
59. Dieses, des Gottes Savitar,
wünschenswertes Licht möchten wir (in uns) setzen,
der unsere Eingebungen antreiben soll.
– Michael Witzel in Witzel et al. 2013: 108 (RV)
60. Might we make our own that desirable effulgence of god Savitar,
who will rouse forth our insights.
– Stephanie Jamison & Joel Peter Brereton 2014: 554 (RV)
61. Let us direct our attention to that most excellent radiant energy (*bhārgas*)
of the deva Savitṛ who may impel our vision (*dhī*).
– Lauren Michelle Bausch 2015: 109 (RV)
62. Let us place [within us/our minds upon]
that most desirable radiance of the Lord Savitṛ,
Who will then stimulate our own insights.
– Adheesh Sathaye 2015: 35 (RV); brackets in the original
63. May we attain that desirable splendor of the Heavenly Impeller [Deva
Savitṛ], that he might stimulate our thoughts
– Timothy Lubin 2018: 100 (RV); brackets in the original
64. That excellent glory of the sun (Sāvitr̥), the god, we meditate, that he may
stimulate our prayers.
– Axel Michaels 2018 (RV)
65. We wish to obtain that desirable sparkle of Savitṛ who shall impel our
thoughts.
– Michael Witzel 2018 (RV)
66. We hope to obtain the desirable radiance of the god Savitṛ: may he
stimulate our thought.
– Mieko Kajihara 2019: 1 (RV)

67. May we place within ourselves the radiance of the divine Savitri, the Sun God,
who shall then awaken our insight.
– Maitreya Larios 2019 (RV)⁸⁴
68. That excellent glory of Savitri, the god, we meditate, that he may stimulate our thoughts.
– Patrick Olivelle 2019: 316, n. 12 (Yājñavalkya-Smṛti)
69. So laßt uns denn
Das strahlend helle Licht
Des Gottes Savitar empfangen,
Auf daß er unser Denken
Vorwärts treibe!
– Walter Slaje 2019: 45 (RV)
70. The excellent divine power of the Sun.
May we contemplate the radiance of that god.
May this inspire our understanding.
– Zoë Slatoff 2019: 30
71. Might we make our own that desirable effulgence of god Savitar, who will spur on our insights.
– Joel Peter Brereton & Stephanie Jamison 2020: 213 (RV)

⁸⁴ Larios 2019 also provides translations of the mantra into eight other languages.

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