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Grammaticalisation of the Brahui Verb *kann-ing* ‘to do’ into a Modal Auxiliary of Possibility¹

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Abstract: This paper examines the semantic development of the Brahui verb *kann-ing* ‘to do’ into a modal auxiliary expressing ability and possibility. In addition to its diverse meanings, *kann-ing* forms a transitive-intransitive pair with *mann-ing* ‘to become’, which implies achievement—a feature shared by *kann-ing*. We argue that *kann-ing* derived the meaning ‘to be able’ from its original sense of ‘to do, achieve’ when used in a durative aspect. Over time, the verb underwent grammaticalisation into a modal auxiliary, and its meaning further generalised to root possibility. Balochi, another major language of Balochistan, also uses the verb *kanag* ‘to do’ as a modal auxiliary for possibility. Alongside the asyndetic conditional construction, this feature might help characterise Balochistan as a linguistic convergence area distinct from the Indian Subcontinent.

1. Introduction

Brahui is the most westerly Dravidian language spoken primarily in the Pakistani province of Balochistan. Most Brahui speakers are bilingual in Balochi, a West Iranian language that dominates the region, and Brahui exhibits extensive lexical and structural borrowing from Balochi. Despite this, Brahui retains many core

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Dravidian words and morphemes, such as the noun *pāl* ‘milk’ (cf. Tamil *pāl*), and the future (negative) morpheme *-p(p)*. Brahui, a separate branch within the Dravidian family, is considered to have split off early from the other Dravidian languages, as it has lost several widely shared features, including the spatial deixis morphemes **i-* (proximal) and **a-* (remote).

This paper will first present various uses of the Brahui verb *kann-ing* ‘to do’.² In addition to its function as a lexical verb, it serves as a modal auxiliary expressing ability and possibility. We will then explore how *kann-ing* developed the meaning ‘to be able, can’ from its original sense of ‘to do, achieve’ when used in a durative aspect. Since *kann-ing* forms a transitive-intransitive pair with *mann-ing* (‘to become’), we argue that *kann-ing* acquired the connotation of achievement shared by *mann-ing*. Cross-linguistically, achievement verbs often develop an ability meaning through grammaticalisation, a process in which lexical items acquire grammatical functions.

Finally, we will highlight a parallel construction in Balochi with the verb *kanag* ‘to do’ and explore the possibility of viewing Balochistan as a linguistic convergence area distinct from the Indian Subcontinent. Masica (1976) noted that Brahui and Balochi only partly shared what he considered South Asian linguistic features. However, from the perspective of the Indian Ocean, Balochistan is a clearly defined geographical region and could also represent a distinct convergence area.

2. Grammaticalisation of *kann-ing*

2.1 Usages of Brahui *kann-ing* ‘to do’

The verb *kann-ing* ‘to do’ is one of the most frequently used verbs in Brahui, with eight primary usages outlined below.

i) ‘to do’

As a transitive verb, *kann-ing* means ‘to do A’, with the object noun referring to

² *-ing* of *kann-ing* is the infinitive suffix. The verb has allomorphs *kann-*, *ke-* and *ka-*, and the past stem is *kar-*. *mann-ing* ‘to become’ has allomorphs *mann-*, *mar-* and *ma-*, and the past stem is *mass-*.

actions, as shown in example (1).

- (1) *don-o* *nekī-as* *kar-es.*
 such-INDF good.deed-INDF do-PST.2SG
 “You *did* such a kind act.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 401)

ii) ‘to make’

In this usage, *kann-ing* means ‘to make someone/something A’, with an object noun or pronoun in the accusative case, and a predicative adjective (as in example (2)) or noun (as in example (3)). *kann-ing* forms transitive-intransitive pairs with *mann-ing* ‘to become’, e.g., *baš mann-ing* ‘to stand up’ vs. *baš kann-ing* ‘to make someone stand up’ with *baš* ‘up’.

- (2) *cunā-k* *bāngo-e* *bevas* *kar-er.*
 child-PL rooster-ACC helpless make-PRF.3PL
 “The children *made* the rooster helpless (i.e., subdued it).”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 30)

- (3) *paxīr* *karār-ā* *iray-e* *musi*
 wanderer slow-ALL bread-ACC three

ṭukkur *kar-e.*
 piece make-PST.3SG

“The wanderer slowly *divided* the bread into three pieces.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 36)

The meaning ‘to feign oneself’ (e.g., *daršān kann-ing* ‘to pretend’) also falls under this usage, as shown in example (4), when the object is a reflexive pronoun.

- (4) *o* *ten-e* *nājoṛ* *kar-e* *ki* *ī* *dā* *kārem-ān*
 he REFL-ACC sick do-PST.3SG COMP 1SG this work-ABL

cuṭṭ-iv.
 escape-SBJV.1SG

“He *made himself out* to be ill with the idea of shirking this work.”

(Bray 1934: 156)

iii) ‘to put’

kann-ing means ‘to dress, to put on’, as in example (5), where it combines with *jān-ā* ‘on the body’. When used with nouns denoting merchandise, it means ‘to fix the price of’ (Bray 1934: 157).

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------|------------------|------------------|
| (5) | <i>asiṭ=tā ...</i> | <i>saṛok-o</i> | <i>baniān-as</i> |
| | one=3PL | worn.out-INDF | underwear-INDF |
| | <i>jān-ā</i> | <i>kar-esus.</i> | |
| | body-ALL | do-PLPF.3SG | |

“One of them *was dressed* in worn-out underwear.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 30)

iv) Verbs of communication and perception

kann-ing replaces verbs of speaking (‘to say’) as in example (6) or perception (‘to see’) as in example (7).

- | | | | | |
|-----|-------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| (6) | <i>haft</i> | <i>haft</i> | <i>kar-issā</i> | <i>bann-ing-aṭī</i> |
| | seven | seven | do-CVB | come-INF-LOC |
| | <i>e</i> | <i>ten-ā</i> | <i>xalk-ā.</i> | |
| | COP.PRS.3SG | self-GEN | village-ALL | |

“*Chanting* ‘Seven, seven’, he made his way back to his village.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 300)

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|------------|--------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------|
| (7) | <i>dun</i> | <i>kar-e</i> | <i>aṛe</i> | <i>panjāī</i> | <i>bann-ing</i> | <i>e.</i> |
| | this.way | see-PST.3SG | ITJ | PROP | come-IN | COP.PRS.3SG |

“They *saw* (and said), ‘Look, Panjāī is coming!’”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 499)

v) ‘to move’

kann-ing can also mean ‘to move (something)’, as in example (8), where it means ‘to turn’ or ‘to roll over’, with the reflexive pronoun *ten-e* as its object.

- (8) *e phālū-ā ke-va ten-e zaym lagg-ik.*
 that side-ALL do-PRS.1SG self-ACC sword hit-PRS.3SG

“If I *roll over* on that side (of the bed), the sword (planted on the bed) will pierce me.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 321)

vi) Light verb

kann-ing forms verb phrases with incorporated nouns in the absolute case. For example, *pāṭ kann-ing* ‘to sell firewood’ with *pāṭ* ‘firewood’ in example (9), *boḍ kann-ing* ‘to have lice’ with *boḍ* ‘louse’ in example (10), and *phul kann-ing* ‘to bloom’ with *phul* ‘flower’ in example (11). When used with nouns denoting diseases, it can mean ‘to seize, affect, of illness’ (Bray 1934:156).

- (9) *asi yarīb-as ass-ak. pāṭ kar-eka.*
 one poor-INDF COP-PST.3SG firewood do-IPF.3SG
 “There was a poor man. He *sold* firewood.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 355)

- (10) *dā ambal-nā kāṭum-nā puṭṭ-āk o pucc-āk*
 this friend-GEN head-GEN hair-PL and clothes-PL
boḍ kar-era.
 louse do-IPF.3PL

“*Lice infested* both his hair and his clothes.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 329)

- (11) *šaš tū-ān pad bāy phul kar-e.*
 six month-ABL later garden flower do-PST.3SG
 “Six months later, the garden *was in full bloom*.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 400)

Light verbs with *kann-ing* are highly developed in Brahui, with many combinations that have non-compositional meanings, such as *mon kann-ing* ‘to head towards’ with *mon* ‘face’ in example (12).

- (12) *gahnḍo pinn-ā dīr xalk-ā mon kar-e*
 dam break-PST.3SG water village-ALL face do-PST.3SG

“The dam broke and water headed towards the village.” (elicitation)

vii) Progressive aspect

With the imperfective converb in *-isa*, *kann-ing* expresses the progressive aspect (‘keep ...ing’), as in example (13).

- (13) *o* *kan-ā* *rand-aṭ* *bar-isa* *kar-eka.*
 he 1SG-GEN track-INS come-CVB do-IPF.3SG
 “He *kept on* following me.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 67)

viii) Possibility

Furthermore, *kann-ing* functions as a modal auxiliary meaning ‘can, to be able’, taking a verb in the infinitive (*-ing*) as its complement, as shown in examples (14) and (15).

- (14) *amar* *nā* *dāī* *mann-ing* *ke-va.*
 How 2SG-GEN midwife become-INF be.able-PRS.1SG
 “(I am a man.) How *can* I serve as your midwife?”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 631)

- (15) *ust* *husonī-ān* *dīr* *ting-ing* *ka-ttav.*
 heart pain-ABL water drink-INF be.able-NEG.PST.3SG
 “It *could not* drink water due to the distress.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 341)

Among these meanings, the vii) ‘progressive aspect’ and viii) ‘possibility’ are functional, and are believed to have originated from lexical meanings. In the following sections, we explore how these meanings have emerged.

2.2 Process of Grammaticalisation

Grammaticalisation is the process by which a word with lexical meaning shifts to take on a grammatical function. While the original meaning of the word may be lost, it can also be retained. In the case of Brahui *kann-ing*, which primarily

means ‘to do’ or ‘to make’, it is originally a lexical verb. Its use as a modal auxiliary probably developed through grammaticalisation.

However, Heine and Kuteva (2002), in their cross-linguistic collection of grammaticalisation cases, do not provide an example of a shift from ‘to do’ to an expression of ability. In this section, we explore the possible path through which *kann-ing* evolved into a modal auxiliary.

2.3 Implication of achievement

In some examples of *kann-ing* ‘to do, to make’, such as in examples (16), (17) and (18), we observe an implication of achievement.

- (16) *pār-e lāl.malūk et-e havāl-e. pār-e juān kar-eṭ.*
 say-PST.3SG PROP give-IMP news-ACC say-PST.3SG well do-PST.1SG
 “(The giant) said, ‘Lāl Malūk, tell me how it went’. (Lāl Malūk) said, ‘I *did* it well”.

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 416)

- (17) *dā kul kārem-te kar-e.*
 he all work-PL.ACC do-PST.3SG
 “He *fulfilled* every task (I gave him).”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 482)

- (18) *ant-as pā-re o ke-k.*
 what.REL-INDF say-PRS.2PL that do-PRS.3SG
 “He *achieves* whatever task you guys set.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 491)

When *kann-ing* is used with this meaning of achievement and takes another verb as its object, it conveys the sense of ‘to achieve doing A’. If this achievement extends to a stative or durative aspect typically indicated by a present-tense verb (e.g., ‘to be in the state of achieving A’), it becomes synonymous with expressing ability (‘to be able to do A’). Example (19) illustrates this sense of ability: Over time, the meaning of ability was further generalised, and *kann-ing* evolved to express root possibility, as shown in (20).

- (19) *lāl.malūk* *pār-e* *ī* *bann-ing* *ke-va.*
 PROP say-PST.3SG 1SG come-INF be.able-PRS.1SG
 “Lāl Malūk said, ‘I can come (to the fairy land with my magic flying sofa)’”.

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 428)

- (20) *āna-aṭ* *ant-as* *mann-ing* *ke-k.*
 anna-INS what-INDF become-INF be.able-PRS.3SG
 “What is possible to happen with an anna (=What can [the shepherd] possibly do with an anna?)”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 297)

2.4 Transitive-intransitive pair of ‘do’ and ‘become’

Many languages, including English, have verbs meaning ‘to do’ that also convey a sense of ‘to achieve’, as seen with Brahui *kann-ing* in examples (16) to (18). However, in these languages, verbs meaning ‘to do’ have rarely evolved into modal auxiliaries, as *kann-ing* has in Brahui. Therefore, the hypothesis that the meaning of ‘accomplishment’ developed into ‘possibility’ may not seem entirely convincing.

In many South Asian languages, verbs meaning ‘to do’ form transitive and intransitive verb pairs with verbs meaning ‘to become’. These pairs function as light verbs combining with nouns that denote actions or events. For example, in the South Dravidian language Toda, the verbs *kīy-* ‘to do’ and *o x-* ‘to become’ form a pair, as in *uṭ kīy-* ‘to create’ vs. *uṭ o x-* ‘to be created’ with the noun *uṭ* ‘creation’. This is a productive way of forming transitive-intransitive or active-passive pairs in Toda. Similarly, Brahui has pairs such as *pur kann-ing* ‘to fill’ vs. *pur mann-ing* ‘to become full’ from *pur* ‘full’.

Furthermore, some languages, including Brahui, use the verb ‘to become’ with an added connotation of achievement. For instance, in example (21), Brahui *mann-ing* not only means ‘to become’ but also ‘to be achieved’.

- (21) *dāsā* *od-e* *omet* *as* *ki* *o-nā*
 Now he-ACC hope COP.PST.3SG COMP that-GEN

<i>nokarī</i>	<i>mar-ek.</i>
employment	become-PRS.3SG

“Now he was hopeful that he would *get* a job (lit. employment would *be achieved* for him).”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 40)

In Kuṛux, the verb *man-nā* (‘to become’), considered cognate with Brahui *mann-ing* (Burrow and Emeneau 1984: 424, s.v. 4778), also means ‘to be produced’ or ‘to be abundant’ (Grignard 1924: 480), as shown in example (22).³

(22) <i>ōnd</i>	<i>sāl</i>	<i>=jun</i>	<i>mal</i>	<i>man-ō</i>	(Kuṛux)
one	year	FOC	not	become-FUT.3SG.NM	

“For one year, *there will be* no crop (lit. it will not become)”

(Kobayashi and Tirkey 2017: 363)

Since *kann-ing* and *mann-ing* form a transitive-intransitive pair, and *mann-ing* has a clear sense of achievement, it is likely that *kann-ing* also acquired this meaning, if it did not possess it initially. As discussed in §2.3, the sense of achievement can evolve into the meaning of ability, which *kann-ing* expresses. Over time, Brahui *kann-ing* underwent grammaticalisation as a modal auxiliary, retaining its original lexical meaning, and its meaning of ability was further extended to encompass possibility.

Given that *mann-ing* is the intransitive counterpart of *kann-ing*, it is reasonable to expect it to denote either ability or possibility. Indeed, *mann-ing* conveys a sense of possibility, as seen in example (23), where the main verb functions as the subject of *mann-ing*.⁴

³ Outside Dravidian, Standard Japanese *dekiru* also means both ‘to be made, to be achieved’ and ‘to be able’. In Kagoshima Japanese, *naru* ‘to become’ functions as an auxiliary verb of possibility.

⁴ Since an expression of ability typically requires an object (‘to be able to do A’), the intransitive verb *mann-ing* is limited to conveying a possibility meaning (‘to do A is possible’).

- (23) *num guāzī ka-bo. khaṭṭ-ing mar-ek.*
 you.PL practice do-IMP.PL win-INF become-PRS.3SG
 “You practice. *You can* win (lit., It *will be possible* to win).” (elicitation)

A close parallel is found in Toda, which also uses the verb ‘to become’ as a modal auxiliary for possibility, as shown in example (24).

- (24) *i ku x e dm, nery iloθ, muk fi t*
 this girl both sari without up go.VBN
o xofin (Toda)
 become.NEG.COMPL
 “since both these girls being without saris could not go up (to heaven)”
 (Emeneau 1984:370, §169.36)

2.5 Generalisation from Ability to Possibility

If the use of *kann-ing* as a modal auxiliary originates from the ‘achievement’ meaning of *kann-ing*, the most basic meaning of *kann-ing* as a modal auxiliary would be ability, as in examples (14), (15), and (25), where it implies the speaker’s financial ability.

- (25) *pūrā kann-ing ka-ppara*
 full do-INF do-NEG.PRS.1SG
 “I *cannot* cover the price in full”
 (Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 313)

Example (26) also appears to illustrate the ‘ability’ meaning, but here, the speaker refuses to give his daughter in marriage without imposing a bet on the suitor as a matter of principle. Thus, it is better categorised as an example of ‘(un)acceptability’. Example (27) also describes an unacceptable situation.

- (26) *o var ī kann-ing ka-ppara.*
 that way 1SG do-INF do-NEG.PRS.1SG
 “I *cannot* do that way”
 (Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 645)

- (27) *na* *nī* *kan-e* *kašš-ing* ***ke-sa***
 nor 2SG 1SG-ACC pull.out-INF be.able-PRS.2SG
pīrī-ṭī
 old.age-LOC
 (Wife to husband) “You *cannot* leave me alone when we are old.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 572)

Example (28) is spoken by a royal guard who refuses to answer the addressee based on the rules. Here, *kann-ing* indicates permission. The same applies to example (29).

- (28) *nī* *kan-e* *soj* *kann-ing* ***ka-ppesa***.
 2SG 1SG-ACC inquiry do-INF do-NEG.PRS.2SG
 “You *may not* ask me (directly).”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 621)

- (29) *nan* *nema-yān* *pad* *kane-ā* *bann-ing* ***ke-sa***.
 night middle-ALL after 1SG-ALL come-INF be.able-PRS.2SG
 (Bride to bridegroom) “You *may* approach me after midnight.”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 320)

(30) implies censure directed at royal guards who dared arrest the speaker, a king. Here, *kann-ing* conveys a sense of impudence.

- (30) *num* *kan-e* *amar* *dann-ing* ***ke-re***
 2PL 1SG-ACC how take-INF be.able-PRS.2PL
 “How *can* (=How dare) you guys arrest me?”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 314)

When the ‘ability’ meaning becomes generalised, *kann-ing* extends to cover root possibility, as seen in examples (31) and (32).

- (31) *ant* *asiṭ-nā* *dušman* *kull-anā* *dušman* *mann-ing*
 Q one-GEN enemy all-GEN enemy be-INF
ke-k.
 be.possible-PRS.3SG

“*Can* the enemy of one be an enemy of all?”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 140)

- (32) *amar* *mann-ing* *ke-k* *nī* *ten-ā*
 how become-INF be.able-PRS.3SG 2SG self-GEN
kuben-ā *vaxt-anā* *sangatt-e* *gīrām* *ke-s.*
 heavy-ADJ time-GEN friend-ACC forgetting do-SBJV.2SG

“How *is it possible* that you forget a friend from your difficult times?”

(Ali and Kobayashi 2024: 77)

Finally, *mann-ing ke-k* further develops into an adverbial phrase meaning ‘maybe’ or ‘perhaps’.

3. Areal Factor

Brahui is spoken in Balochistan, where the majority of the population speaks Balochi, a West Iranian language. Balochi also uses the verb *kanag* ‘to do’ to express possibility, with a complement verb in the past stem, as shown in example (33).

- (33) *man* *maróchi* *shahrá* *shota* *nakanán*
 I today to.town go.PST. STEM do.NEG.PRS.1SG
 “I cannot go to town today.” (Jahani 2019: 208)

Although this construction (a finite form of *kanag* ‘to do’ with a past stem) does not exactly parallel the Brahui construction (a finite form of *kann-ing* ‘to do’ with an infinitive), and the processes of grammaticalisation may differ between Brahui and Balochi, the use of the verb ‘to do’ as a modal auxiliary is not observed in the languages of the surrounding areas.

Languages in the same geographical area can sometimes develop common features, even if they are not genealogically related. Such an area is referred to as a ‘convergence area’ or ‘linguistic area’, with the Balkans and the Indian Subcontinent often cited as examples. In his book on linguistic convergence in

South Asia, Masica (1976:181) notes that Brahui and Balochi, the two major languages of Balochistan, share South Asian features only marginally. Since none of the Dravidian languages we know of, or few Modern Iranian languages, use the verb ‘to do’ as a modal auxiliary,⁵ it is possible that this usage developed in parallel as an areal feature of Balochistan. Although Balochistan may be considered a peripheral region from the perspective of the Indian Subcontinent, it is a clearly defined geographical area within the Indian Ocean and might conceivably constitute a convergence area of its own.

Furthermore, Kobayashi and Ali (2024) observed that Brahui and Balochi share the feature of forming conditional clauses using only the verb in the past tense, without a conjunction such as ‘if’. This asyndetic conditional construction, along with the use of the verb ‘to do’ as a modal auxiliary discussed here, might contribute to defining Balochistan as a convergence area.

⁵ Kurmanji Kurdish uses the verb ‘to do’ with a subjunctive form of the main verb, and Wakhi uses the verb ‘to do’ with an infinitive of a transitive verb, to express ability (Fujimoto 2024: 9f.).

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