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Nirukta and Aṣṭādhyāyī: their shared presuppositions

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1. The aim of this article is to contribute to an understanding of the Aṣṭādhyāyī on the basis of certain presuppositions which it may share with the Nirukta. In order to find out what presuppositions underlie the Nirukta, the aims and methods of that book have to be discovered. This in its turn requires the prior refutation of a misconception which has been connected with the Nirukta for more than a century, the misconception namely that the Nirukta, wholly or partly, deals with the history of words. As a result, most of this article will be concerned with the Nirukta. Apart from some short remarks in Section 2, the Aṣṭādhyāyī will not come into the picture until Section 4, below.

2.1. The nineteenth century saw the birth of Historical Linguistics, or Comparative Philology. As a result, for about a hundred years linguistics "has been completely absorbed in diachrony" (Saussure, 1915: 82). This did not fail to influence the way scholars looked at the work of the native grammarians of India.

Pāṇini's grammar does not easily lend itself to a historical interpretation. None the less, August Wilhelm von Schlegel opined in 1832 that the work of Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patañjali contained speculative etymologies, because it was not based on a knowledge of languages other than Sanskrit (Staal, 1972: 55-56). He took it for granted that those grammarians had been doing something closely similar to what linguists in his own day were doing. Von Schlegel's ideas were already exceptional in his own time.¹ Others, e.g. Franz Bopp (1824: 118 (2)) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (Staal, 1972: 60) knew that the Indian grammarians did not occupy themselves with historical questions.

The temptation to look upon the Uṇādi-sūtras as dealing with the history of words, is far greater than in the case of the Aṣṭādhyāyī. Even Bopp (1824: 133 (17))

¹ A recent author who criticizes Pāṇini for not giving correct diachronic derivations, is Hari Mohan Mishra (1975-76). Liebich (1920: 33-34) is of the opinion that the forms *bhrasj* and *masj*, which we find in Pāṇini's Dhātupāṭha, are closer to the truth than the forms *bhrajj* and *majj*, which are used in the Sanskrit language, because comparison with related languages shows that these roots originally contained a sibilant, be it a voiced one. This opinion also is a product of what may be called the "diachronic fallacy". The same is true of Scharfe's (1977: 111) accusation that Pāṇini "explains the reduplicated aorist *a-pa-pt-am* (from the root *pat* 'fall') ... as an *a*-aorist with an ad hoc invented infix /p/: *a-pa[p]t-am* (VII 4 19)"; see Rocher, 1979: 171.

accuses the author of the Uṇādi-sūtras of making the same mistake as the European etymologists in deriving pronouns from verbal roots. It is clear that the author of the Uṇādi-sūtras could only make the *same* mistake as the European etymologists, if he, like them, sought for the histories of words. If he did not, then it is difficult to say that he made any mistake at all. A historical interpretation is similarly given to the Uṇādi-sūtras by Theodore Goldstücker (1854: 236, 241-42).

The first edition of the Nirukta was prepared by Rudolph Roth, and appeared in 1852. Roth does not seem to have thought that the Nirukta concerned itself with historical questions. After making some uncomplimentary remarks about the Indian [2] mind (Geist), Roth (1852: Einleitung, p. LIV) states: "der Sinn für Geschichte gieng ihm spurlos verloren und er beruhigte sich bei dem erlaubten unschädlichen Genusse der Lösung grammatischer Fragen." Apparently also Yāska had, in Roth's opinion, been content with "the harmless pleasure of solving grammatical problems" for which no historical sense was needed. Certain is that Roth (1852: Erläuterungen, p. 222) describes Yāska's occupation as "exegetical grammatical science".

Probably the first person who ascribed historical intentions to Yāska was Max Müller (1853). In Nir. 2.2 it is said that the derivatives of verbs may be used in one community, the verbs themselves in another. Examples are the noun *śava*, which is used by the Āryas, and the verb *śavati*, found among the Kambojas; further *dātra*, possessed by the Northerners, and the corresponding verb *dāti*, employed by the Easterners. Müller (1853: 374-75) thinks that this means that the Kambojas have preserved the verb *śavati* ("das Verbum śavati noch lebendig erhalten haben") and that the Prācyas (Easterners) no longer possess the verb *dāti* ("das Verbum dāti, schneiden, nicht mehr besitzen").

This same attitude towards the Nirukta is evidenced more clearly in Müller's A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature (1859). At the end of a long passage (in paraphrase) from the Nirukta (1.12-14), Müller (1859: 149) comments: "I doubt whether even at present, with all the new light which Comparative Philology has shed on the origin of words, questions like these could be discussed more satisfactorily than they were by Yāska. Like Yāska, we maintain that all nouns have their derivation, but, like Yāska, we must confess that this is a matter of belief rather than of proof."

The historical interpretation of the Nirukta has, since then, been accepted by almost all writers on the subject. Some examples: P. D. Gune (1918: 63-64) remarks in passing that some of the phonetic phenomena dealt with in Comparative Philology were already known to Yāska. Lakshman Sarup (1921: title-page) calls the Nirukta "the oldest Indian treatise on etymology, philology, and semantics". Sarup (1921: Introduction, pp. 65-66) does not even fight shy of giving Yāska's supposed ideas on the origin of language. Siddheshwar Varma (1953: XI) makes "an attempt to evaluate

[Yāska's] etymologies and to show that though of a primitive character, they were, on the whole, not unscientific". Varma (1953: 4) succeeds in his self-imposed task and sees Yāska "as the foremost etymologist of ancient times and certainly ... far in advance of his times".

A few authors made attempts to draw away attention from a too exclusively linguistic interpretation of the Nirukta. Hannes Sköld (1926: 181) noted that "when [the *nairukta*] derived a word from a verbal root, in order to explain it, we may be sure that the thing, or person, or animal, denoted by the word in his eyes came to share in the action of the verb, became, as it were, satisfied by it. For the brahman the word not only represented the thing, or person, or animal, it *was* the same thing, [3] or person, or animal". Sköld shows no sign, however, that he considered the historical interpretation of the Nirukta incorrect.

J. Gonda (1955: 78 (49)), writing primarily about etymologies in the Brāhmaṇas, makes the following observation: "Prae- and non-scientific etymology, based on the belief that words have some inherent connections with the objects, qualities, or processes denoted, does not attempt to find the historical truth about words, but to find the truth about objects and phenomena by means of the words." Gonda (1955: 66-68 (37-39)) stresses the close relationship which exists between the etymologies of the Brāhmaṇas and those of the Nirukta. Nevertheless, Gonda (1955: 73 (44)) thinks that Yāska searched for the origins of words.

Perhaps the only person who protested against a historical interpretation of the Nirukta is K. Kunjunni Raja (1971: 180): "The ancient Indian approach towards etymology was not historical, but mainly descriptive and synchronic. The aim of etymology in India has not been to find out the history of the evolution of the form and meaning of words, but to understand their essence or their real significance through linguistic analysis." Unfortunately Kunjunni Raja makes no effort to produce evidence in support of his thesis. Moreover, in the remainder of the article (which is somewhat confused) Kunjunni Raja seems to fall back into the mistake which he had set out to expose, by speaking about "absolute" and "correct" etymologies as against "fanciful" and "speculative" ones. Are these metaphorical expressions?

2.2. That the historical interpretation of the Nirukta could survive more than a century without discussion, is surprising; the more so since it fits the ancient Indian conditions so little. Even in Europe, before the rise of modern linguistics, development of language could only be pictured as decay from a pure state, which, moreover, was generally held to be still existing (Pedersen, 1931: 3, 7-8; Robins, 1967: 149, 153, 158,

166). This attitude persisted right into the 19th century² (Pedersen, 1931: 242; Robins, 1967: 173). Moreover, the classical grammarians of Europe had difficulties in keeping historical etymology and the formation of derivations and inflections apart (Robins, 1967: 47). This confusion is still present in the writings of Horne Tooke at the end of the 18th, and in the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt in the 19th century (Robins, 1967: 156, 174).

If we ascribe to Yāska as much historical sense as to his pre-nineteenth century European colleagues (which is more than what is warranted), he may have believed that all languages are corruptions of one pure original language. But what else could this original language be but Vedic, the language of the Veda? If we accept this, it becomes difficult to look upon Yāska's etymologies of Vedic words as giving the histories of those words. And if we ascribe to Yāska no historical sense at all, the same is true.

[4]

These are reflections *a priori*. I shall now show that a non-historical interpretation is in closer agreement with the text of the Nirukta.

2.3. Let us suppose that Yāska was interested in the histories of words. Since the Nirukta contains etymologies also of Vedic words, we must then accept that Yāska distinguished a pre-Vedic stage of his language. What was this stage like? Yāska tells us that nominal words are derived from verbs (Nir. 1.12: *nāmāny ākhyātajāni*; 'nominal word' (*nāman*) includes substantives, adjectives and pronouns, as Mehendale (1978: 6, fn. 4), following Whitney, points out). This provides a link between the pre-Vedic and the Vedic languages. But this is the *only* link between the two languages. The Nirukta contains no indication that the other three kinds of words — verbs, prepositions and particles; see Nir. 1.1 — can be etymologized. In other words, the pre-Vedic language that Yāska envisaged must be supposed to have been identical with its later stages (i.e. primarily Vedic) in as far as verbs, prepositions and particles are concerned. Only nominal words underwent changes.

This queer picture of the pre-Vedic language is confirmed (if we cling to the supposition that Yāska was interested in the history of words) when we see that in the Nirukta nominal words are only derived from *existing* verbs (Liebich, 1919: 25). [Varma (1953: 22) claims that Yāska manufactured "many fictitious verbs". But to support this claim he gives only two instances: *tharv* (Nir. 11.18) and *pum̐s* (Nir. 9.15).

² A very recent expression of this attitude is Rajavade's (1940: XXXIII) comment on Yāska's advice also to derive Vedic nouns from classical verbs: "This insistence on deriving Vedic words from modern roots is unreasonable; those who do so consider modern Sanskrit to be a perfect language and think that Vedic Sanskrit is irregular. But they ought to know that Vedic Sanskrit has a grammar and a vocabulary of its own. It would be more reasonable to say that modern Sanskrit is a development or a corruption of Vedic Sanskrit."

A third instance may not exist. It is further important to note that even these two unattested roots are not presented as historical reconstructions, but as existing roots.]

Then there is Yāska's refusal to accept semantic change. At Nir. 2.1 he emphasizes that in derivations the meanings are to be accounted for, the forms are of far less importance (*na saṃskāram ādriyeta/ ... yathārthaṃ vibhaktiḥ sannamayet/*; see also Mehendale, 1978: 73-77). Yāska sticks to this principle. Where one word has several meanings, it gets several derivations, each derivation accounting for one of the meanings. Where the different meanings are not too dissimilar, the derivations may be the same; where they lie farther apart, the derivations differ. "(The rule is that) they should be explained according to their meaning: if their meanings are uniform, their etymologies are uniform; if their meanings are multiform, their etymologies are multiform." (Nir. 2.7: *tān³ cet samānakarmāṇi samānanirvacanāni/ nānākarmāṇi cen nānānirvacanāni/ yathārthaṃ nirvaktavyāni/*; translation Sarup.)

Let us, in this connection, look at some derivations. Yāska derives the word *mṛtyu*, here meaning "god of death", from the causal root *māray* "kill". Śatabalākṣa, the son of Mudgala, thinks that the word is derived from *mṛta+cyāvay* "who throws down the dead person" (Nir. 11.6: *mṛtyur mārayatīti sataḥ/ mṛtaṃ cyāvayatīti śatabalākṣo maudgalyaḥ/*). The question is why this word could not simply be derived [5] from the non-causal root *mṛ* "die". The answer is not that the etymologists of Yāska's age had a lack of imagination (*pace* Varma, 1953: 38), but that the meaning of the root *mṛ* "die" by itself throws no light on the function of *mṛtyu*, the god of death.

A second example is the following. In Nir. 7.20 a mantra (RV 10.188.1) is cited, in which the words *aśva* and *jātavedas* are in apposition. *Jātavedas*, we would think, is here compared to a horse, is "like a horse". Since no particle of comparison (such as *iva*) has been used in the mantra, Yāska prefers to interpret the mantra differently. He explains *aśva* as *samaśnuvāna* "who pervades everywhere". No need to say, this sense is absolutely new to the word *aśva*. Yāska appears to be willing to go to any extent to avoid a semantic "change", from "horse" to "like a horse". It is true that Yāska allows, as a second choice, that the word *aśva* is used in a comparative sense (Nir. 7.20: *api vopamārthe syāt/ aśvam iva ...*). The theoretical justification for this had been given in Nir. 3.18, where we read that when the particles etc. expressive of comparison are dropped, words can be "expressive of a simile by virtue of their meaning" (*arthopama*): *atha luptopamāny arthopamānīty ācakṣate*.

If we sum up the above, we come to the following results. If we accept that Yāska was interested in the histories of words, we must also accept that he had some

³ Note that the word *tāni* refers back to *sattva*, the "entities" of which nominal words are expressive according to Nir. 1.1. Compare this with Gonda's remark quoted in subsection 2.1 above.

conception of the pre-Vedic stage of the Sanskrit language. This pre-Vedic language must have been, in Yāska's opinion, identical with the Vedic language where verbs, particles and prepositions are concerned. The only words that changed in the course of time are the nominal ones. The meanings of the nominal words, however, remained unaltered throughout.

These somewhat bizarre ideas, which we are forced to ascribe to Yāska as long as we give a historical interpretation to the Nirukta, constitute, in my opinion, a good reason to abandon that interpretation.

2.4. There is one passage in the Nirukta which indicates that Yāska did not consider the Vedic language a precursor in time of Classical Sanskrit. In Nir. 2.2 we read that certain "Vedic primary nouns are derived from roots of Classical Sanskrit" (*bhāṣikebhyo dhātubhyo naigamāḥ kṛto bhāṣyante*). Does this mean that in Yāska's opinion the classical language preceded the Vedic language? Evidently not, for almost without interruption he continues: "and also nouns of Classical Sanskrit from Vedic roots" (*athāpi naigamebhyo bhāṣikāḥ*). I consider these statements clear evidence that Yāska did not conceive of Vedic and Classical Sanskrit as being ordered in time. I shall, none the less, mention two alternative interpretations of this passage. They will be shown not to stand criticism.

The above passage might be taken to mean that nouns of the classical language are really derived from Vedic roots, that the Vedic nouns, on the other hand, are not [6] derived from classical roots, but from roots which existed in the pre-Vedic and Vedic languages. These roots, so it might be maintained, were somehow not used in the Vedic scriptures, and came again to the surface in the post-Vedic, classical language. It is clear that this interpretation is artificial in the extreme, and has to be discarded.

Secondly, one might ascribe to Yāska a primitive mentality (after the manner of Lévy-Bruhl), on account of which he failed to see the contradiction arising from a derivation of Vedic nouns from classical roots. This has to be rejected for the following reason. In Nir. 11.23 half a mantra (RV 10.72.4) is quoted, according to which Dakṣa is the son of Aditi, and Aditi the daughter of Dakṣa. Yāska does not fail to see the contradiction, and makes attempts to solve it.

The conclusion we have to draw is that Yāska considered the Vedic and the classical languages somehow contemporaneous.

2.5. Nir. 2.1 states, in Mehendale's (1978: 73) paraphrase, that "words which, when derived from the verbs, can be shown to conform to the rules of accent and formation laid down by the grammarians and when these words also contain an obvious root indicating the action then these words should be so derived, i.e. they should be derived

from the obvious roots" (*tad yeṣu padeṣu svarasaṃskārau samarthau prādeśikena vikāreṇānvitau syātām tathā tāni nirbrūyāt*). We learn from Nir. 1.12 that according to Gārgya and some of the grammarians *only* such words should be etymologized (*na sarvāṇīti gārgyo vaiyākaraṇānām caike tad yatra svarasaṃskārau samarthau prādeśikena vikāreṇānvitau syātām*). Yāska does not accept this restriction, but emphasizes again that such derivations are fully acceptable (Nir. 1.14: *yatho hi nu vā etat tad yatra svarasaṃskārau samarthau prādeśikena vikāreṇānvitau syātām sarvaṃ prādeśikam ity evaṃ saty anupālabha eṣa bhavati*).

It is true that in none of the above passages Yāska uses the word "grammar" (*vyākaraṇa*). It is none the less clear that these passages are about grammar. Moreover, elsewhere in the Nirukta (1.15) Yāska says: "This science is the complement of grammar" (*tad idaṃ vidyāsthānaṃ vyākaraṇasya kārtsnyam*). Grammatical derivations, we conclude, differ from Yāska's etymologies in that they are simpler, more perspicacious than the latter; there is however no essential difference between the two.

But grammar is synchronic, not diachronic. I had occasion to point this out in subsection 2.1 above. A consequence of this is that the etymologies of the Nirukta are not diachronic either.

2.6. On many occasions the Nirukta gives several etymologies of one single word in one single meaning. There is reason to believe that all such etymologies were [7] considered simultaneously correct. (This is also the opinion of J. Gonda (1955: 72(43)).)

Śaunaka's Bṛhad-Devatā (2.102-03) tells us: "The analysis of the derived forms (*guṇa*) may be [effected] by the aid of all roots (*dhātu*) the characteristic of which is present, and the sense of which is to be expressed [by those derived forms]. A word (*pada*), of which the [radical] characteristics can be etymologized, whether it be derived from two roots, many roots, or one root, is one consisting of sound (*śabda*) that contains root, preposition, members (*avayava*), and derived forms (*guṇa*)." (*yāvatām eva dhātūnām liṅgaṃ rūdhigataṃ bhavet/ arthaś cāpy abhidheyaḥ syāt tāvadbhīr guṇavigrahaḥ// dhātūpasargāvayavaguṇaśabdaṃ dvidhātujam/ bahvekadhātujam vāpi padaṃ nirvācyalakṣaṇam//*) Difficult as these two verses are, it seems clear that their author considered it possible that a word has simultaneously several etymologies. This certainly is how Durga understands the verses, for he quotes the first one in a passage where he argues that the word *nighaṇṭu* is derived from the three roots *gam*, *han* and *hṛ* *simultaneously* (Durga on Nir. 1.1, p. 9, l. 14-15). The three roots, Durga tells us, "come together in emulation and say: 'explain this [word], which is like me, with me, explain it with me'". (... *gamir hantir haratiś cāhaṃpūrvikayā saṃnipatya vadanti mamānurūpaṃ mayaitaṃ nirbrūhi mayaitaṃ nirbrūhī*; p. 9, l. 20-21.)

The Nirukta contains no explicit statement to the effect that several etymologies of one word in one meaning can be simultaneously correct. But the position taken by Śaunaka and Durga in this matter makes it reasonable to accept the same for the Nirukta. Yāska's procedure also seems to indicate the same thing. Consider the word *anna* "food". Yāska gives two etymologies: from *ā-nam* and from *ad* (Nir. 3.9). Here it cannot reasonably be maintained that Yāska was in doubt whether or not this word *anna* was to be connected with the root *ad*. Its formation is not irregular; parallel cases are *bhinna* from the root *bhid*, and *panna* from the root *pad*. Moreover, the meaning of *anna*, "food", puts its connection with *ad* "eat" beyond doubt. It seems safe to conclude that the derivation of *anna* from *ā-nam* is to be taken *in addition to* the one from *ad*.

But if indeed the different derivations of one word in one meaning were meant to be simultaneously valid, we must again admit that Yāska's etymologies were not intended as descriptions of the histories of the words concerned. This could only be maintained on the assumption that according to Yāska an inordinately large number of words is each the result of a growing together — i.e. assuming an identical form in the course of time — of two or more different words. This assumption deserves no serious attention.

2.7. What we have learned in the preceding subsections can be summed up as follows. Yāska's etymologies were not intended to describe the history of words. [8] Yāska seems to have had no idea that the language which he studied was subject to change. Indeed, he was not aware that the classical language had developed out of the Vedic language. He looked upon both as timeless, perhaps we may say, eternal.

It seems that the Nirukta contains only one indication that its author knew that at least certain things in language change in the course of time. This is Nir. 9.26, where we read that the river Vipāś was formerly called "Uruñjirā" (*pūrvam āsīd uruñjirā*).

3.1. If Yāska's etymologies do not represent the histories of the words etymologized, what then do they do?

As far as I can see, there are three, and only three, situations in which one can rightfully say that a word is derived from another word: 1. The word evolved out of the other word in the course of time. 2. One has a system of grammar which produces words out of other words, or parts of words. 3. The speakers of the language under study employ (probably unconsciously) a system of grammar which produces words out of other words, or parts of words. (The third situation is no more than a special case of the second. In spite of that, only in the third and the first situation can one claim absolute validity for the derivations. In the second situation the case is different. To take an example, in Pāṇini's grammar *bhavati* is derived from *bhū*, *śreṣṭha* from *praśasya*. If

we take another grammar, *bhavati* may then be derived from *gam*, or from something different again.)

None of these three situations applies to Yāska. That he did not search for the history of words, has been shown in the preceding section. It is also clear that Yāska's etymologies are not derivations in a particular grammar. And to think that Yāska searched for the grammatical system unconsciously used by the speakers of Sanskrit, seems to me an importation of modern ideas into the Nirukta compared with which the historical interpretation is innocent.

This forces us to conclude that Yāska's endeavours were, from a modern point of view, completely and utterly mistaken. This may seem an unfair judgement to pass on a person who lived more than two thousand years ago. But only thus, I believe, can we start trying to understand Yāska on his own terms.

3.2. Of the three situations which we considered in the preceding subsection, the third one deserves some more attention. It is true that Yāska did not search for the grammatical system unconsciously used by the speakers of the Sanskrit language. But perhaps Yāska, starting from thought associations which, he discovered, connected different words, came to assign an objective existence to those associations. These objectified thought associations were then considered to reveal the essence of the thing denoted, and helped gaining an insight into the true meaning of the word.

[9] Such confusion between external and internal reality has since long been recognized as one of the characteristics of magic. (See e.g. Frazer, 1922: 12.) For a recent discussion on the relation between magic and language, see Skorupski, 1976: esp. pp. 144-48. A similar belief in the close connection between words and things is found in children (Piaget, 1968: 78).

If we accept that Yāska's etymologies have to be looked at in this light, we find ourselves in close agreement with what Gonda said about the etymologies in the Brāhmaṇas (subsection 2.1, above). Important differences remain, however. The etymologies in the Brāhmaṇas may be used to gain control over persons or things, to further one's own interests (Gonda, 1955: 78 (49)). In the Nirukta there is no trace of such aims. Here this kind of magic has been developed into a method to find the meanings of words, a method, moreover, that is bound by a number of rules (Mehendale, 1978: 72-77). I shall now present evidence from the Nirukta which supports this interpretation.

3.3. The first thing we must realize is that the Nirukta is primarily concerned with the meanings of words. In the case of nominal words, it provides a method to discover the same. This explains a number of otherwise obscure features of the Nirukta.

To begin with, the Nirukta (1.1) presents itself as a commentary on the Nighaṇṭu, a list of words. But what commentary it is! Of the five chapters of the Nighaṇṭu, only the last two are explained in detail. Of the first three chapters hardly any words are explained. These first three chapters consist of groups of synonyms. In a large number of cases the Nirukta explains the word which gives the meanings of such a group of synonyms, but which is not, as a rule, itself one of the group. Earlier authors were puzzled by this. Sköld (1926: 178) suspected that the first three chapters did not originally form part of the Nighaṇṭu. Rajavade (1940: VI) opined that the first chapter of the Nirukta was not original to it.

The problem is easily solved as follows. The Nirukta presents a method to find the meaning, or the deeper significance, of words. The first three chapters of the Nighaṇṭu contain synonyms, words whose meanings are therefore known. Here there is, consequently, no need for Yāska's method.⁴

Why then does Yāska so often etymologize words which indicate the meanings of the groups of synonyms? These are words of everyday use, even less than the others in need of semantic elucidation. The answer must be that Yāska in this way wants to show what his method is worth. If this method is to be a trustworthy guide in finding the meanings of unknown words, it must be able to account for the meanings of well-known words. The correctness of this answer is supported by the following circumstance. Almost every time Yāska explains a word that "really" belongs to the first three chapters of the Nighaṇṭu (i.e., that is not a gloss), the [10] word concerned has more than one meaning. Yāska therefore gives two etymologies of those words, from the same root when the meanings are similar, from different roots otherwise. As example can serve Ngh. 1.4, a group of six words, each of which means both "heaven" and "sun". Each of the words of this group is dealt with, and in each case the two meanings are accounted for (Nir. 2.13-14). Obviously such words, more than those which have but one meaning, are suitable to demonstrate the value of Yāska's method. It accounts not for just one meaning, it accounts for all the meanings that the word possesses.

That the Nirukta is primarily interested in the meanings of words, is further confirmed by the following. Before Yāska starts commenting on the words of the Nighaṇṭu, he gives a fairly long introduction (Nir. 1.1 - 2.4). In this introduction he first explains that there are four kinds of words: nominal words (*nāman*), verbs (*ākhyāta*), prepositions (*upasarga*) and particles (*nipāta*) (Nir. 1.1). Subsequently he shows that the meanings of verbs fall into six main categories (Nir. 1.2-3). Then the prepositions are

⁴ So Sköld, 1926: 109; Roth, 1852: Erläuterungen, p. 3. Note that Sköld's book contains two apparently contradictory opinions regarding this matter.

discussed; they have various meanings, a number of which is given (Nir. 1.3). The meanings of the particles are divided into four categories: comparison, *karmopasaṃgraha* (a not fully understood term), various meanings, no meaning (Nir. 1.4-11; see Bronkhorst, 1979). Finally the nominal words are discussed: Nominal words are derived from verbs (Nir. 1.12). This statement gives rise to a few subordinate discussions, which establish its validity (Nir. 1.12-14), and enumerate the advantages of accepting its correctness (Nir. 1.15-20). The first of these advantages is that "without this there is no understanding of the meaning in the mantras" (... *idam antareṇa mantreṣv arthapratyayo na vidyate*; Nir. 1.15). Nir. 2.1-4 gives the rules to be observed while deriving nominal words from verbs. It is clear from this description that Yāska's introduction gives a survey of the *meanings* of all four kinds of words. Such an introduction would be completely out of place in a book dealing with the history of words. In a book devoted to the meanings of words, on the other hand, this introduction fits well.

A number of words from the fourth and fifth chapters of the Nighaṇṭu is not etymologized. The following list is based on Sköld, 1926: 183-364: *aśvājanī* (Ngh. 5.3.15; Nir. 9.19); *asinvatī* (Ngh. 4.3.17; Nir. 6.4); *canaḥ* (Ngh. 4.3.64; Nir. 6.16); *dāvane* (Ngh. 4.1.32; Nir. 4.18); *bhārjikaḥ* (Ngh. 4.3.19; Nir. 6.4); *śītāman* (Ngh. 4.1.3; Nir. 4.3); *śīpre* (Ngh. 4.1.11; 4.3.73; Nir. 6.17). In all these cases the Nirukta tells us the meaning of the word concerned, but gives no etymology. The case of *śītāman* is particularly interesting, for Yāska rejects no fewer than three etymologies, because they do not account for what Yāska is the correct meaning, "fore-foot" (*dos*). The "correct" meaning is arrived at on the basis of the Vedic passages in which the words occur. This, incidentally, explains why so many Vedic mantras are quoted and explained in the Nirukta. They give an impression of what the meaning of the unknown word must be like, or the other [11] way round, they show that the meaning obtained by means of an etymology is acceptable.

One more feature of the Nirukta which shows that this book is primarily concerned with meanings, is its use of the preverb+root *nis-vac* "explain". Already Sköld (1926: 109) observed: "The use which the Nirukta itself makes of the compounds of *nis+√vac* shows, that the meaning of these words did not at all imply etymologizing". We note that the word *nirukta* itself is derived from the combination *nis-vac*.

All this shows 1. that the main purpose of the Nirukta is to give semantic elucidation of words, and 2. that the etymologies are simply part of this semantic elucidation; they are not supposed to bring in any other element (historical or what not).

3.4. I shall now present what evidence I know of that the etymologies were thought to throw light on the essence of the things denoted. It consists in a number of objections

raised against Yāska's method, and Yāska's replies to the same. The last of these objections, number 7, reads: "Further, they say that an activity is preceded by the entity [in which it resides; hence] the derivation⁵ of a prior [entity] from a posterior activity is not tenable" (Nir. 1.13: *athāpi sattvapūrvō bhāva ity āhuḥ/ aparasmād bhāvāt pūrvasya pradeśo nopapadyata iti*). Activity (*bhāva*) is what is expressed by a verb, entity (*sattva*) what is denoted by a nominal word (see Nir. 1.1). An activity is logically dependent upon the entity in which it resides, and follows the latter in a way. It cannot, therefore, be part of the essence of that entity. As far as I can see, this objection presupposes that etymologies reveal the essence of the things denoted by the words concerned. Yāska does not, in his reply, protest against this presupposition. He merely points out that experience teaches us that in certain cases posterior activities *are* responsible for the names of prior entities (Nir. 1.14: *yatho etad aparasmād bhāvāt pūrvasya pradeśo nopapadyata iti paśyāmaḥ pūrvotpannānām sattvānām aparasmād bhāvān nāmadheyapratilambham ekeṣām naikeṣām ...*).

Objections 2-4 say that if indeed nominal words are derived from verbs, all entities which perform the same action should have the same name (objection 2; Nir. 1.12); a thing should have as many names as there are actions with which it is connected (objection 3; Nir. 1.12); nominal words should have regular forms, from which their meanings are clearly understood (objection 4; Nir. 1.13). Yāska replies (Nir. 1.14) that these requirements are fulfilled in certain cases, not in others. In this whole discussion it is taken for granted that etymologies are intended to reveal the deeper meaning of nominal words, to bring to light the activities connected with the things denoted.

3.5. The procedure of the author of the Nirukta can now be characterized as [12] follows. In order to arrive at the meaning of an unknown word, the context in which that word occurs is studied to get a first idea of its meaning. Subsequently an analysis of the word is undertaken, in which the parts are connected with verbal roots that show similarity in form. The meanings of the parts must account for the meaning of the word.

Two presuppositions underlie this procedure: (1) The meaning of a nominal word is the result of a combination of the meanings of its parts. (2) The meanings of those parts are not assigned to them by convention, they intimately belong to them, more intimately even than the meanings of nominal words to those nominal words; for if we wish to get a deeper insight into the meaning of a nominal word, we have to turn to its parts, and the meanings belonging to them.

⁵ In translating the word *pradeśa* I follow Scharfe (1977: 121-22).

4. Of⁶ the two presuppositions which I mentioned at the end of subsection 3.5, above, one (the first one) also underlies the Aṣṭādhyāyī. In another article (Bronkhorst, 1980) I have tried to show that Pāṇini's grammar starts from a semantic input, which gives rise to grammatical elements, which, when combined in accordance with the rules of grammar, in their turn produce utterances of the Sanskrit language. The utterances thus obtained give expression to a combination of the meanings (semantic elements) which started the process.

It is reasonable to accept that also the second presupposition underlies the Aṣṭādhyāyī. That the Nirukta calls itself "complement of grammar" (see subsection 2.5, above) makes this all the more reasonable (whether or not Yāska knew the Aṣṭādhyāyī). This means that the grammatical elements used in the Aṣṭādhyāyī, as well as the semantic elements which give rise to them, were not looked upon as mere conventions to facilitate the description of the Sanskrit language. On the contrary, they are the real elements which underlie the phenomenal manifestation of that language.

Seen in this light, the Nirukta and the Aṣṭādhyāyī can be looked upon as rational elaborations of the same set (or closely similar sets) of presuppositions. Both assume that the meaning of words and larger utterances is the sum of the meanings of their separate parts. The author of the Aṣṭādhyāyī set out to show in detail how these small units of meaning, these semantic elements, find expression in the phenomenal language. The author of the Nirukta, on the other hand, used his supposed knowledge in a different way. He developed a method with the help of which every word, however obscure it might seem, could be forced to yield its meaning to the investigator. He also tried to give strict rules that should be observed while using his method. The nature of his endeavour, however, brought about that these rules could not be as strict as the ones that govern grammatical derivations.

⁶ In writing this section I have drawn inspiration from an unpublished article by P. Thieme, entitled "Pāṇini".

[13]

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