Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship

Thinking in Many Tongues

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An Early Post-Vedic Treatise on the Etymological Explanation of Words

Yāska, Etymology

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Nothing much is known about Yāska beyond the fact that he composed the main Indian treatise on etymology, called *Nirukta* (which means *Etymology*). Chronologically he probably belongs to the period between Pāṇini (fourth century BCE), elements of whose grammar he uses, and Patañjali (end of second century BCE).[1] His etymological method proposes analyses of words for which there is no regular grammatical derivation. This method was felt to be particularly useful in interpreting unintelligible words, of which there were many in the ancient Vedic mantras that had been preserved.

Yāska's etymological method draws inspiration from a feature that is frequent in the Vedic Brāhmaṇas. Among other things, these texts bring to light hidden connections between entities on the basis of phonetic similarities between the words that denote them. Superficially, Yāska's *Nirukta* uses a similar procedure, but there are fundamental differences. The *Nirukta* does not bring to light hidden connections between things. It is, unlike the Brāhmaṇas, a "secular" text, much like Pāṇini's grammar. It assumes that regularities similar to those revealed by grammar exist in the case of grammatically opaque words. Etymology extends the realm of grammar and is therefore, in Yāska's words, the "complement of grammar" (*Nirukta* 1.15).

There is no sign of an awareness of plurilingualism in the *Nirukta*. Yāska is aware that different words are used in different circumstances or regions; alternatively, the same words may be used differently. This does not prevent him from deriving nominal words of Old Indo-Aryan from verbal roots of Classical Sanskrit (and vice-versa). He points out that the root *śav* as used among the Kambojas (who inhabited a region in the far northwest of the Indian subcontinent) has a different meaning from that used in Classical Sanskrit. From his perspective, these are all manifestations of one and the same language, presumably the only one he would recognize or be interested in.

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1 Bronkhorst, *A Śabda Reader*, 317.

How does one know whether a given etymological explanation is correct? Meaning is the determining factor. In the case of an unintelligible word, etymological analysis must provide a meaning that fits its context. Yāska deals with unintelligible words that occur in verse-mantras from the *Ṛgveda* and makes a point of showing that his proposed etymological explanations provide a satisfactory meaning in that context. Before coming to that, he introduces his *Etymology* with a number of theoretical reflections. The excerpts translated below come from this introduction.

FIGURE 2.2.1   Yāska, *Nirukta pūrvaṣaṭka*, ca. 1700–1850, UPenn MS Coll. 390, Item 84, 1ᵛ–2ʳ
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Sanskrit Text

Excerpted from Yāska, *The Nighaṇṭu and the Nirukta, the Oldest Indian Treatise on Etymology, Philology, and Semantics*, ed. Lakshman Sarup, 2nd repr. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), 27–28, 29–30, 36–37, 40, 44–47.

1.1   *samāmnāyaḥ samāmnātaḥ/ sa vyākhyātavyaḥ/ tam imaṃ samāmnāyaṃ nighaṇṭava ity ācakṣate/ ...*

tad yāni catvāri padajātāni nāmākhyāte copasarganipātāś ca tāni imāni bhavanti/ tatraitan nāmākhyātayor lakṣaṇaṃ pradiśanti/ bhāvapradhānam ākhyātam/ sattvapradhānāni nāmāni/ tad yatrobhe bhāvapradhāne bhavataḥ pūrvāparībhūtaṃ bhāvam ākhyātenācaṣṭe/ vrajati pacatīti/ upakramaprabhṛty apavargaparyantaṃ mūrtaṃ sattvabhūtaṃ sattvanāmabhiḥ/ vrajyā paktir iti/ ada iti sattvānām upadeśaḥ/ gaur aśvaḥ puruṣo hastīti/ bhavatīti bhāvasya/ āste śete vrajati tiṣṭhatīti/

1.3   *... na nirbaddhā upasargā arthān nirāhur iti śākaṭāyanaḥ/ nāmākhyātayos tu karmopasaṃyogadyotakā bhavanti/ uccāvacāḥ padārthā bhavantīti gārgyaḥ/ ...*

1.4   *atha nipātā uccāvaceṣv artheṣu nipatanti/ apy upamārthe/ api karmopasaṃgrahārthe/ api padapūraṇāḥ/ ...*

1.12   *itīmāni catvāri padajātāni anukrāntāni/ nāmākhyāte ca upasarganipātāś ca/ tatra nāmāny ākhyātajānīti śākaṭāyano nairuktasamayaś ca/ na sarvāṇīti gārgyo vaiyākaraṇānāṃ caike/ tad yatra svarasaṃskārau samarthau prādeśikena vikāreṇānvitau syātām/ saṃvijñātāni tāni yathā gaur aśvaḥ puruṣo hastīti/*

atha cet sarvāṇy ākhyātajāni nāmāni syuḥ yaḥ kaś ca tat karma kuryāt sarvam tat sattvam tathācakṣīran/ yaḥ kaś cādhvānam aśnuvītāśvaḥ sa vacanīyaḥ syāt/ yat kiṃ cit tṛṃdyāt tṛṇaṃ tat/

athāpi cet sarvāṇy ākhyātajāni nāmāni syur yāvadbhir bhāvaiḥ saṃprayujyeta tāvadbhyo nāmadheyapratilambhaḥ syāt/ ...

English Translation

Translated by Johannes Bronkhorst.

A list of words has been handed down that must be explained. They call this   1.1
list of words *Nighaṇṭus*. ...

   There are four kinds of words: nominal words, verbs, prepositions, and par-
ticles. They declare the definition of nominal words and verbs to be as follows:
the verb is about becoming, nominal words are about existing things. Where
both are about becoming, one designates a becoming that has sequence by
means of a verb, as in "he walks," "he cooks"; and one designates a becoming
that embodies the whole from the beginning to the end by means of nominal
words that express an existing thing, as in "going," "cooking." The pronoun "that"
refers to existing things, as in "cow," "horse," "elephant." The verb "it becomes"
refers to becoming, as in "he sits," "he lies," "he goes," "he stands."

   ... According to Śākaṭāyana, unconnected prepositions express no meanings.   1.3
They suggest secondary connections with the activity of nominal words and
verbs. According to Gārgya, they have various meanings. ...

   Particles occur (i) in various senses; (ii) also in the sense "comparison"; (iii)   1.4
also in the sense "bringing together";[2] (iv) also as expletives. ...[3]

   In this way these four kinds of words have been dealt with: nominal words,   1.12
verbs, prepositions and particles.

   According to Śākaṭāyana and the general agreement of the Etymologists, all
nominal words are derived from verbs. Gārgya and some of the grammarians
think that not all of them are thus derived, but only words in which accent
and grammatical formation agree with the meaning to be expressed and that
have been modified in a way that fits the derivation. Grammatically unanalyz-
able words such as *go* "cow," *aśva* "horse," *puruṣa* "person," *hastin* "elephant," are
conventional.

   [*Objection 1*:] If all nominal words are derived from verbs, the same nominal
words should denote any item that carries out the same activity. Anything that
would "attain" [*aśnuvīta*] the road should then be called *aśva* "horse." Anything
that "pierces" [*tṛndyāt*] should then be called *tṛṇa* "grass."

   [*Objection 2*:] If all nominal words are derived from verbs, something should
have as many names as there are activities for which it can be used. ...

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2   The term *karmopasaṃgraha*, here provisionally translated as "bringing together," is obscure.
3   For this interpretation, see Bronkhorst, "Yāska's Classification of nipātas," 1.

1.13   *athāpi ya eṣāṃ nyāyavān kārmanāmikaḥ saṃskāro yathā cāpi pratītārthāni*
syus tathaināny ācakṣīran/ puruṣaṃ puriśaya ity ācakṣīran/ aṣṭety aśvam/ tar-
danam iti tṛṇam/

   athāpi niṣpanne 'bhivyāhāre 'bhivicārayanti/ prathanāt pṛthivīty āhuḥ/ ka
enām aprathayiṣyat/ kimādhāraś ceti/

   athānanvite 'rthe 'prādeśike vikāre padebhyaḥ padetarārdhānt saṃcaskāra
śākaṭāyanaḥ/ eteḥ kāritaṃ ca yakārādiṃ cāntakaraṇam asteḥ śuddhaṃ ca sa-
kārādiṃ ca/

   athāpi sattvapūrvo bhāva ity āhuḥ/ aparasmād bhāvāt pūrvasya pradeśaḥ
nopapadyata iti/

   tad etan nopapadyate/

1.14   *yatho hi nu vā etat tad yatra svarasaṃskārau samarthau prādeśikena vikāre-*
ṇānvitau syātāṃ sarvaṃ prādeśikam ity evaṃ saty anupālambha eṣa bhavati/

   yatho etad yaḥ kaś ca tat karma kuryāt sarvaṃ tat sattvaṃ tathācakṣīran
iti paśyāmaḥ samānakarmaṇāṃ nāmadheyapratilambham ekeṣāṃ naikeṣāṃ
yathā takṣā parivrājako jīvano bhūmija iti/

   etenaivottaraḥ pratyuktaḥ/

   yatho etad yathā cāpi pratītārthāni syus tathaināny ācakṣīrann iti santy alpa-
prayogāḥ kṛto 'py aikapadikā yathā vratatir damūnā jātya āṭṇāro jāgarūko dar-
vihomīti/

[*Objection 3*:] Moreover, people should then use words of which the forma- 1.13
tion is regular, giving rise to nominal words that express the action concerned
in such a way that the meaning is understood; they should use *puriśaya* "lying
in a city" instead of *puruṣa* "person," *aṣṭṛ* "attainer" instead of *aśva* "horse," *tar-
dana* "means of piercing" instead of *tṛṇa* "grass."

[*Objection 4*:] People speculate with regard to fixed expressions and say: the
earth is called *pṛthivī* because of spreading [*prathana*]. Who would spread it?
And what does it rest on?

[*Objection 5*:] Śākaṭāyana unacceptably formed parts of words out of other
words, even where the meaning of the word is not in agreement with its parts
and the modification does not fit regular grammatical derivation. To derive the
word *satya*, he took as final part the causative form of the root *i*, that is, *āya*,
and of that the portion that begins with *y*, that is, *ya*, and the pure form of *as*,
that is, *ast*, putting the *s* at the beginning. [This gives *sat+ya = satya*]

[*Objection 6*:] Finally, it is said that an activity presupposes an entity that can
be active. The derivation of the name of an earlier entity from its subsequent
activity is not appropriate.

All this is not correct.

There is no disagreement that all those words in which accent and gram- 1.14
matical formation agree with the meaning to be expressed and that have been
modified in a way that fits regular derivation are correctly derived by grammar.

[*Response 1*:] With regard to the objection that if all nominal words are
derived from verbs, the same nominal words should denote any item that car-
ries out the same activity, we see that certain items that carry out the same
activity get the same name, others don't. Examples of the former are "carpen-
ter" [*takṣan*] and "wanderer" [*parivrājaka*], which refer to all those engaged in
those activities; an example of the latter is *bhūmija*, "earth-born," which covers
only certain items that are born from the earth, not all.

[*Response 2*:] This also answers objection 2.

[*Response 3*:] As to the objection that people should use words in such a
way that the meaning is understood, there are indeed words, of rare occur-
rence, which, though ending in primary grammatical suffixes, must be treated
as grammatically unanalyzable words (so that their grammatical formation
does not elucidate their meaning).[4]

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4   For this interpretation, see Bronkhorst, "Nirukta, Uṇādi Sūtra, and Aṣṭādhyāyī," 5.

*yatho etan niṣpanne 'bhivyāhāre 'bhivicārayantīti bhavati hi niṣpanne 'bhivyā-
hāre yogaparīṣṭiḥ/ prathanāt pṛthivīty āhuḥ/ ka enām aprathayiṣyat kimādhā-
raś ceti/ atha vai darśanena pṛthuḥ/ aprathitā ced apy anyaiḥ/ athāpy evaṃ
sarva eva dṛṣṭapravādā upālabhyante/*

*yatho etat padebhyaḥ padetarārdhānt saṃcaskāra iti yo 'nanvite 'rthe saṃ-
caskāra sa tena garhyaḥ saiṣā puruṣagarhā na śāstragarhā/*

*yatho etad aparasmād bhāvāt pūrvasya pradeśaḥ nopapadyata iti paśyāmaḥ
pūrvotpannānāṃ sattvānām aparasmād bhāvān nāmadheyapratilambham
ekeṣāṃ naikeṣāṃ/ ...*

1.15   *athāpy idam antareṇa mantreṣu arthapratyayo na vidyate/ artham apratiya-
ato nātyantaṃ svarasaṃskāroddeśaḥ/*

tad idaṃ vidyāsthānaṃ vyākaraṇasya kārtsnyam/ svārthasādhakaṃ ca/ ...

1.18   *sthāṇur ayaṃ bhārahāraḥ kilābhūd adhītya vedaṃ na vijānāti yo 'rtham/
yo 'rthajña it sakalaṃ bhadram aśnute nākam eti jñānavidhūtapāpmā/
yad gṛhītam avijñātaṃ nigadenaiva śabdyate /
anagnāv iva śuṣkaidho na taj jvalati karhi cit / ...*

2.1–3   *atha nirvacanam/ tad yeṣu padeṣu svarasaṃskārau samarthau prādeśikena
vikāreṇānvitau syātāṃ tathā tāni nirbrūyāt/ athānanvite 'rthe 'prādeśike vikāre
'rthanityaḥ parīkṣeta/ kena cid vṛttisāmānyena/ avidyamāne sāmānye 'py akṣar-
avarṇasāmānyān nirbrūyāt/ na tv eva na nirbrūyāt/ na saṃskāram ādriyeta/ ...
yathārthaṃ vibhaktīḥ sannamayet/ ... athāpi bhāṣikebhyo dhātubhyo naigamāḥ
kṛto bhāṣyante/ ... athāpi naigamebhyo bhāṣikāḥ/ ... athāpi prakṛtaya evaikeṣu
bhāṣyante/ vikṛtaya ekeṣu/ śavatir gatikarmā kaṃbojeṣv eva bhāṣyate/ ...*

[*Response 4*:] Concerning the objection that people speculate with regard to fixed expressions: the examination of rules cannot but concern fixed expressions. They say: the earth is called *pṛthivī* because of spreading [*prathana*]. Who would spread it? And what does it rest on? Well, it is clearly spread out, even if others did not spread it out. What is more, if we proceed like you, all statements about what can be seen become objects of disagreement.

[*Response 5*:] Regarding the objection that Śākaṭāyana unacceptably formed parts of words out of other words: he who forms a word even though its meaning is not in agreement with its parts, he should be blamed for that; the blame rests with the person, not with the science of Etymology.

[*Response 6*:] With regard to the objection that the derivation of the name of an earlier entity from its subsequent activity is not appropriate: we see cases where entities are named after activities they perform after they have come into being; other cases are not like that. ...[5]

Moreover, without this there is no understanding of the meaning of man-   1.15
tras. And for someone who does not understand the meaning there will not be ascertainment of accent and grammatical formation.

This science is the complement of grammar and a means towards one's goal.

...

The man who having studied the Veda does not know its meaning is a block-   1.18
head, the bearer of a burden. He who knows its meaning attains what is good and goes to heaven, his sins dispelled by knowledge. What has been grasped but not understood is mere words. Like dry fuel where there is no fire, it will never burn ...

We now turn to etymology. Words in which accent and grammatical forma-   2.1–3
tion agree with the meaning to be expressed and that have been modified in a way that fits the derivation, such words should be explained in agreement with their regular grammatical derivation. But if the meaning is not accompanied by the right accent and formation and the modification is not such as fits a grammatical derivation, in such cases one should look for a derivation based on the meaning and explain the word on the basis of some similarity of behavior in undergoing a phonetic change, that is, similarity with a phonetic change accepted by the grammarians for the explanation of other forms in grammar. If not even such similarity is found, one should explain the word on the basis of similarity in a syllable or in a single sound. But one should not abstain from providing an etymological explanation. In such cases one should not heed the

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5   This passage also occurs in Bronkhorst, *A Śabda Reader*, 74–76.

evam ekapadāni nirbrūyāt/ atha taddhitasamāseṣv ekaparvasu vānekaparva-su ca pūrvaṃ pūrvam aparam aparaṃ pravibhajya nirbrūyāt/ ...

naikapadāni nirbrūyāt/ nāvaiyākaraṇāya/ nānupasannāya/ anidaṃvide vā/ nityaṃ hy avijñātur vijñāne 'sūyā/

grammatical formation. ... The divisions of words into syllables and individual sounds should be interpreted according to the sense of the words to be derived. ... Vedic primary nouns are derived from roots of Classical Sanskrit. ... And words of Classical Sanskrit from Vedic roots. ... Only primary forms are used among certain speakers; only secondary forms among others: the verb *śav* in the sense of "go" is only used among the Kambojas. ... This way one should explain grammatically unanalyzed words. In the case of secondary formations and compounds that consist of one or several parts, one should explain them having first divided them into earlier and later portions. ... One should not explain grammatically unanalyzed words to a non-grammarian, or to a non-resident pupil, or to someone who is not conversant with it. For the scorn of the ignorant for knowledge is eternal.[6]

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6 Part of this passage also occurs in Bronkhorst, *A Śabda Reader*, 73.

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