

# Synchronic Etymologising and Its Role in the Acquisition of Language

Johannes Bronkhorst  
Université de Lausanne, Suisse

**Abstract** This article first shows that synchronic etymologising – a phenomenon that finds expression in Yāska’s *Nirukta* and many other Indian texts – is in fact a universal phenomenon found in many (if not all) human cultures as well as in children. It then argues that the tendency to synchronic etymologising plays an essential role in the acquisition of language, a process we all went through in our childhood.

**Keywords** Etymologizing. Cratylus. Nirukta. Language acquisition. Meaning.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Examples of Synchronic Etymologising in Different Cultures. – 3 Attempts to Systematise. – 4 Minimal Meaning Bearers. – 5 Why Synchronic Etymologising?



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## 1 Introduction

Pre-modern cultures often engage in what I will call ‘synchronic etymologising’. Children do too. Synchronic etymologising can most generally be described as the attempt to clarify the meaning of a word with the help of other words that resemble it.

A *synchronic etymology* is to be distinguished from a *historical* (or *diachronic*) *etymology*. A historical etymology presents the origin or early history of a word; it tells us, for example, that a word used in a modern language is derived from another word belonging to an earlier language, or to an earlier stage of the same language. The Hindi pronoun *māim* ‘I’ is derived from the Sanskrit pronoun *mayā* ‘by me’, through the Prakrit pronoun *mae* (Oberlies, 1998, 17). And the English word *etymology* derives, through Old French and Latin, from Greek *etymologia* “study of the true sense (of a word)”, with *-logia* “study of, a speaking of” + *etymon* “true sense, original meaning” (<https://www.etymonline.com/>). Synchronic etymologies do something different, sticking more closely to the etymological sense of *etymology*. They connect a word with one or more others which are believed to elucidate its meaning. The god Rudra, for example, has that name according to the Vedic *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (6.1.3.10), because he cried (*rud-*) in a story that is told about him. Synchronic etymologies tell us nothing about the history of a word, but something about its meaning.

Such synchronic etymologies no longer convince linguists. One can have serious doubts about the possibility, as a general principle, of finding the meaning of a word by comparing it with other words that are similar. Synchronic etymologising is however common in children, as Jean Piaget (1925) and others after him have shown.<sup>1</sup> We are less tolerant with respect to adults who do so; the person who analyses the word *contentment* as concerning being *content* with *men*, or with *tea* (*content-men-t*), is diagnosed as schizophrenic by modern investigators, perhaps rightly so.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Piaget 1925. For more recent confirmations, see e.g. Brook 1970; Scarlett, Press 1975; Williams 1977; Ball, Simpson 1977.

<sup>2</sup> So Werner, Kaplan (1963, 259), citing a patient of Maria Lorenz (1961, 604).

## 2 Examples of Synchronic Etymologising in Different Cultures

Synchronic etymologies are widespread in all pre-modern cultures.<sup>3</sup> Here are some examples:

In the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninhursag, the former is cured when Ninhursag causes deities to be born corresponding to Enki's sick members:

The correspondence between the sick member and the healing deity rests on the [...] etymologizing of the ancient scribes; the Sumerian word for the sick organ contains at least one syllable in common with the name of the deity. Thus e.g. one of the organs that pained Enki was the 'mouth', the Sumerian word for which is *ka*, and the deity created to alleviate this pain is called Nink*ka*-si; similarly, the goddess born to alleviate the pain of the rib, the Sumerian word for which is *ti*, is named Ninti, etc. (Kramer 1969, 37 fn. 13)

An ancient Egyptian text carved inside two pyramids dating from the 24th century BCE "is full of plays on words" such as: "O Atum-Khepre, [...] thou didst arise (*weben*) as the *ben*-bird of the *ben*-stone in the *Ben*-House in Heliopolis" (Wilson 1969, 3). Sauneron (1957, 123 f.) adds further examples and points out that 'plays on words' were considered to give an 'explanation' of the world.<sup>4</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible etymologies are common, especially in connection with names: Adam is linked with *adama* 'earth' (Gen. 2:7); woman, *isha*, is derived from man, *ish* (Gen. 2:23); Cain from *qaniti* 'I have gotten' (Gen. 4:1) etc. (Böhl 1991, 163 f.).

Kirk (1974, 57 f.) emphasises the use of etymologies in Greek myths and states:

The poets of the Homeric tradition were already intrigued by the resemblance of the name 'Odysseus' to the verb *odussomai* 'I am angry'. [...] Pytho, the old name for Delphi, is derived [in the *Hymn to Apollo*, probably late seventh century BCE] from the serpent destroyed there by Apollo and allowed to rot, *puthein*. [...] Heraclitus the Presocratic philosopher found it significant that one word for a bow resembled the word for 'life' (*biós* and *bíos*), and Aeschyl-

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<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that each of these cultures will understand such etymologies in its own way. Such local differences are not the subject-matter of this article, which concentrates, not on the ways in which this or that tradition differs from other traditions, but on what these traditions have in common.

<sup>4</sup> See further Morenz 1957; Sander-Hansen 1946, esp. 19 f.

lus related the name of Helen to the idea that she ‘took the ships’ (*hele-naus*), that of Apollo to *apollunai*, ‘destroy’, and that of Zeus to *zên*, ‘live’. (58)

Similar efforts at etymologising characterise later Greek antiquity.<sup>5</sup>

An example from medieval Europe is provided by the secret spiritual organisation of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, whose representatives were active in France, Italy, and Belgium from the 12th century onward. They used a hidden language in order to keep their mystery of love secret. Love for them is a soteriological means, and accordingly the word *amor* ‘love’ is interpreted as *a-mor* ‘without death’:

A senefie en sa partie  
Sans, et *mor* senefie *mort*;  
Or l’assemblons, s’aurons *sans mort*.<sup>6</sup>

Caesarius of Heisterbach (ca. 1170-ca. 1240) gives an explanation of the word *mors* ‘death’ in his *Dialogue on Miracles*:<sup>7</sup>

Though the transgression of the first created, death entered into the world. Hence death (*mors*) received its name from ‘biting’ (*morsus*). As soon as man bit (*momordit*) the apple of the forbidden tree, he incurred death and subjected himself as well as his whole posterity to its necessity. Death is also said to have come from ‘bitterness’ (*amaritudine*), because, as it is said, no pain in this life is more bitter than the separation of body and soul.

Elsewhere he explains the word *puer* ‘boy’: “*Puer* (‘boy’) signifies *puer* (*pure*)”.<sup>8</sup>

An example from ethnographic records is the following: among the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands the word *vatuvi* occurs in a magical formula.<sup>9</sup> This word has no grammatical form; it is neither noun nor verb. Malinowski (1935, 2: 249, 260-1) observes:

the real etymological identity of this word will define it as connected with *vitawo*, or the prefix *vitu-*, and the word *vituvatu*, ‘to institute’, ‘to set up’, ‘to direct’, ‘to show’. [It has] also [...] fortui-

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<sup>5</sup> For a study of the etymologies in Homer, see Rank 1951; also Kraus 1987, 31 f. For an (incomplete) list of etymologies in Plutarch, see Strobach 1997, 186 f.

<sup>6</sup> See Eliade 1986, 112.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Zaleski 1988, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Zaleski 1988, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Malinowski (1935, 1: 96, 2: 257) describes it as the most important formula in all Omarakana garden magic.

tous, but magically significant associations with *vatu*, ‘coral boulder’, ‘coral reef’, and the more or less real word *va-tuvi*, ‘to foment’, ‘to make heal’.<sup>10</sup>

These examples suggest that synchronic etymologising is an almost universal feature of pre-modern cultures. Patrick Seriot (2016) points out that the same kind of etymologising raises its head in certain nationalistically coloured modern publications from eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> However, only some cultures explicitly reflected upon this practice, and in doing so confronted the question whether or not individual speech sounds have meanings. Prominent among these cultures are ancient Greece and ancient India.

### 3 Attempts to Systematise

The classical Greek text on etymologising is Plato’s *Cratylus*. It is also the first full investigation of ‘etymologies’ that has survived. In this dialogue Socrates is engaged in a discussion with two other characters, Cratylus and Hermogenes. It is possible, but not certain, that Cratylus represented, in real life, an ‘etymologist’; it seems certain that the ‘etymological’ point of view did have real supporters. Plato’s dialogue, i.e. the person of Socrates in it, initially seems to support it, but changes position in the process of working it out in detail.

The *Cratylus* contains a great number of practical examples of ‘etymologies’.<sup>12</sup> For our present purposes it is most interesting to see that Socrates pushes his investigation of etymologies to its limits, and it is this advanced investigation that provides him with one of the arguments against ‘etymologies’. His train of thought runs as follows:

If a person asks about the words by means of which names are formed, and again about those by means of which those words were formed, and keeps on doing this indefinitely, he who answers his questions will at last give up [...] Now at what point will he be

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**10** Regarding the last association, *va-tuvi*, Malinowski observes (1935, 260-1): “As a matter of fact, one or two natives [...] gave me this explanation of the word when commenting upon the spell”. It is not clear whether any native made the association with *vatu* explicit.

**11** It remains a playful feature of modern western culture, as illustrated by Lewis Carroll in the Preface to *The Hunting of the Shark*: “Take the two words ‘fuming’ and ‘furious’. Make up your mind that you will say both words, but leave it unsettled which you will say first. Now open your mouth and speak. If your thoughts incline ever to little toward ‘fuming’, you will say ‘fuming, furious’; if they turn, by even a hair’s breadth, toward ‘furious’, you will say ‘furious, fuming’; but if you have that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say ‘frumious!” (cited in Skinner 1957, 294-5).

**12** They have been collected and systematised in Gaiser 1974, 54-7.

right in giving up and stopping? Will it not be when he reaches the names which are the elements of the other names and words? For these, if they are the elements, can no longer rightly appear to be composed of other names. (Flower 1977, 421d-422a)

This gives rise to a question:

How can the earliest names, which are not as yet based upon any others, make clear to us the nature of things, so far as that is possible, which they must do if they are to be names at all? (422d-e)

The answer proposed by Socrates is that “the name-maker grasps with his letters and syllables the reality of the things named and imitates their essential nature” (424a-b). Socrates admits that “it will seem ridiculous that things are made manifest through imitation in letters and syllables” (425d); yet there is no alternative, unless we were to believe that the gods gave the earliest names, or that we got the earliest names from some foreign folk and the foreigners are more ancient than we are, or resort to some other evasive tactic (425d-e). Socrates therefore proceeds to assign meanings to individual letters; it would take us too far to give a detailed account of his results, but the principle is simple: the phonetic nature of a sound corresponds to the object it denotes, the active sound *rho*, for example, expresses activity. By combining these individual letters, the lawgiver makes by letters and syllables a name for each and every thing, and from these names he compounds all the rest by imitation (427c).

Having reached this far, Socrates discovers an insufficiency in the propounded view, which he uses as one of his arguments against it: “If the name is like the thing, the letters of which the primary names are to be formed must be by their very nature like the things” (434a). But not infrequently a word contains sounds which have no right to be there, such as the sound *lambda*, which expresses softness, in the word *sklērótēs* ‘hardness’ (434d). One might of course argue that this is an added sound that does not really belong in this word, but this raises the question how it got there. The answer can only be ‘by custom’ or ‘by convention’, but this takes us back to the position which was intended to be refuted in the first place, i.e. that the relationship between words and their objects is determined by convention. Socrates concludes:

I myself prefer the theory that names are, so far as is possible, like the things named; but really this attractive force of likeness is, as Hermogenes says, a poor thing, and we are compelled to employ in addition this commonplace expedient, convention, to establish the correctness of names. (435c)

One of the things to be noted in this dialogue is the desire to identify the ultimate elements of language and their meanings. Indeed, Socrates appears to turn against the position of Cratylus precisely because his attempt to connect the primary names with the things denoted does not succeed. One could say that the *Cratylus* is the first known attempt to analyse words right down to their ultimate constituents, the sounds.

The classical Indian text on etymologising is Yāska's *Nirukta*. This text is considered to be a 'limb of the Veda' (*vedāṅga*), one of the auxiliary sciences needed to interpret the Veda. It can approximately be dated on the basis of the following reflections. There is reason to believe that Yāska knew Pāṇini's grammar and must therefore be dated later than that famous grammarian (Thieme 1935, \*23\*.\*24\* [530-1]; Bronkhorst 1984, 8 f.).<sup>13</sup> The *Nirukta* is known to Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, and is therefore older than that text.<sup>14</sup> The *Mahābhāṣya* was composed toward the end of the second century preceding the Common Era (Bronkhorst 2016, 43), and Pāṇini appears to belong to the middle of the fourth century before the common era, or to the decennia immediately following it (Hinüber 1989, 34-5; Falk 1993, 304). Yāska must fit in-between, so that we may date him approximately 250 B.C.E., which is after most Vedic texts, including the prose portions called Brāhmaṇas, had been composed.

The *Nirukta* tries to make sense of, and bring order into, the synchronic etymologising that is common in the Vedic Brāhmaṇas. How does it do so? Here we have to keep in mind that Yāska, being a Vedic Brahmin, could not reject the validity of these etymologies.<sup>15</sup> Their validity was, for him, beyond doubt. His question was rather: how have they been arrived at? And, how does one establish new ones?

A number of rules are formulated in the second chapter of the *Nirukta* that should enable a student to find etymologies on his own.<sup>16</sup> The most important among these is no doubt the rule that etymologising should, first of all, be guided by the meaning of the word concerned; phonetic considerations play a less important role:

One should examine [a word] being intent upon [its] meaning, with the help of some similarity in function (with other words). When

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**13** Scharfe (1977, 119) is slightly more circumspect: "While we cannot be certain that Yāska knew Pāṇini, he must have known a grammar so close to the Aṣṭādhyāyī as to be almost identical with it". Arguments for Yāska's greater antiquity based on his more "conservative" or "primitive" approach are without merit, not least because "the *Nirukta* and the Aṣṭādhyāyī can be looked upon as rational elaborations of the same set (or closely similar sets) of presuppositions" (Bronkhorst 1981, 14).

**14** Cf. e.g. Limaye 1974, 9, 14, 15, 93.

**15** Yāska's etymologies can of course not be completely extracted from his Vedic background, an issue taken up by in some recent scholarship (e.g. Kahrs 1988; Visigalli 2017).

**16** For a full discussion, see Deeg 1995, 78 f.

not even such a similarity is present one should explain on the basis of similarity in a syllable or in a single sound. (*Nirukta* 2.1)<sup>17</sup>

In the case of unknown words, therefore, one looks at the context in which they occur (usually a Vedic hymn), so as to get a first impression of their meaning. Subsequently, one looks for other words (they have to be verbal forms, according to the *Nirukta*) that are more or less similar to the word under study. Semantic considerations, however, come first. So a verbal form which is less similar but closer to the expected meaning is to be preferred to a more similar verbal form that does not support the desired meaning. And words that are known to have several meanings also have several etymologies. An example is the word *go*:

The word *go* is a name for 'earth' because it goes (*gata*) far and because living beings go (*gacchanti*) on it. Or [it is a name] of something<sup>18</sup> which moves (*gāti*). *o* [in *go*] is a nominal suffix. Moreover, [the word *go*] is the name of an animal (viz. 'cow') for this same reason.... Also a bow-string is called *go*... because it sets arrows in motion (*gamayati*). (*Nirukta* 2.5)

And if one does not find verbal forms that resemble the word to be explained, one should not be discouraged.

#### 4 Minimal Meaning Bearers

The *Nirukta* gives no explanation as to why 'etymologies' should be valid at all. One way it might have accounted for the validity of synchronic etymologies based on the similarity between words (for those who accept this validity) would be to claim that there are ultimate meaning bearers, such as individual sounds or small groups of them, each with its own specific meaning. Plato's *Cratylus* does explore this possibility, as we have seen. However, the *Nirukta* does not adopt this position.<sup>19</sup> That is to say, it does not accept the possibility of a sound-symbolic theory. A number of early Buddhist texts, on the other hand, while referring to Brahmanic learning, mention the term

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<sup>17</sup> The translations of *Nirukta* are by the Author.

<sup>18</sup> This interpretation of Sanskrit *gāter vā* follows Kahrs 1984, § 12; cf. Kahrs 1998, 115, 132-3. Kahrs' "substitutional model" of Yāska's etymologising, though interesting, does not stand up to criticism; see Bronkhorst 2001, 171-6; Visigalli 2022.

<sup>19</sup> It does occasionally present 'deep' forms which 'hide' behind the surface forms; e.g. *Nir.* 1.1: *te nigantava eva santo nigamanān nighaṅtava ucyaṅta ity aupamanyav[ah]* "According to Aupamanyava, these [lists of words] are called *nighaṅtus*, being really *nigantus* because they are quoted (*nigamanāt*)".



*akṣaraprabheda* (Pali *akkharappabheda*),<sup>20</sup> which Franke (1913, 87 fn. 6) translates “Unterscheidung der Silben” (distinction of syllables); the Pali commentators specify that the reference is to two forms of linguistic analysis, one of them being etymologising. This suggests that the idea that individual sounds or syllables have meanings of their own, and that this presumed fact explains synchronic etymologies, was not unknown in ancient India, even though the *Nirukta* does not mention it. However, the evidence is scant and suggestive, rather than probative.

Patañjali, the most authoritative commentator on Pāṇini’s grammar, considers and subsequently rejects the proposal that individual sounds have meanings.<sup>21</sup> Among the reasons he adduces – following his predecessor Kātyāyana, whose statements (*vārttika*) he comments – is the following: in grammatical derivations there can be transposition, loss, addition, and modification of sounds. If sounds had meanings, these meanings, too, would undergo transposition, loss, addition, and modification. Such is not however the case. This argumentation is of particular interest, for Yāska’s *Nirukta* (2.1-2) had presented almost exactly the same reasons in order to show that when etymologising, one is free to transpose, remove, add, or modify sounds. This proves that – in the opinion of their practitioners – neither etymologising nor grammar could possibly lead to meanings of individual sounds.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean that the idea of ‘real’ meanings attaching to individual sounds was abandoned by all in ancient India. A different attitude towards language, and towards sacred utterances in particular, can be found in its religious literature. This alternate attitude takes interest in the deeper – some would say: mystical – meaning of these utterances. Already the Vedic texts sometimes ascribe significances to parts of words that have nothing to do with their ordinary meanings. For example, the three syllables of the word *pu-ru-ṣa* ‘person, self’ are stated to correspond to a threefold division of the self: to be placed respectively in the world of the sacrificer, in the world of the immortal (?) and in the heavenly world (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 3.46 [15.2]). The three syllables of *hṛ-da-yam* ‘heart’ are explained as follows:

*hṛ* is one syllable. Both his own people and others bring (*hṛ*) offerings unto him who knows this. *da* is one syllable. Both his own people and others give (*dā*) unto him who knows this. *yam* is one syllable. To the heavenly world goes (*eti* [pl. *yanti*]) he who knows this.<sup>23</sup>

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20 See Bronkhorst 1989, 129 f.

21 *Mahābhāṣya*, ed. Kielhorn, Bombay 1880-85, 1: 30-2.

22 An exception must of course be made for such verbal roots and other grammatical elements that consist of just one sound.

23 *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 5.3; tr. Hume 1975.

The 36,000 syllables of 1,000 *bṛhatī* hymns correspond to as many days of a hundred years, according to the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* (2.2.4). The seventeen syllables of the utterances *o śrāvaya*, *astu śrausaṭ*, *yaja*, *ye yajāmahe* and *vausaṭ* are the seventeenfold god Prajāpati (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 12.3.3.3).

Two passages from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* are even more detailed. The word *satyam* ‘truth’ is said to consist of three syllables *sa-tī-yam*;<sup>24</sup> *sa(t)* is the immortal, *tī* the mortal, with *yam* the two are restrained (root *yam-* ‘restrain’) (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.3.5). The three syllables of *ud-gī-tha* ‘chanting of the Sāmaveda’ mean respectively ‘breath’ – because one stands up (*uttiṣṭhati*) thanks to it –, ‘speech’ (*gīr*), and ‘food’ – in which all this is established (*sthita*) – (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.3.6). The second of these two analyses tries to keep contact with the ‘real’ meanings of the syllables concerned, the first one does not even attempt to do so.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* contains a story (5.2) that is interesting in the present context. The gods, men and demons dwelt with father Prajāpati as students of sacred knowledge. Asking for instruction, Prajāpati uttered the same syllable *da* to each of them. The gods understood this as *dāmyata* ‘restrain yourself’, the men as *datta* ‘give’, while the demons understood this same syllable *da* as *dayadhvam* ‘be compassionate’. The divine voice, which is thunder, repeats the same: *da da da*, which is *dāmyata*, *datta*, *dayadhvam*. Therefore one should practice restraint (*dama*), liberality (*dāna*) and compassion (*dayā*). Unfortunately the passage does not explain the point of this story, and perhaps one should not attach too much significance to it. It may however be legitimate to surmise that it attributes three different meanings to the single syllable *da*, meanings which normally express themselves through the intermediary of the words *dāmyata* (or *dama*), *datta* (or *dāna*) and *dayadhvam* (or *dayā*).<sup>25</sup>

An early indication that individual speech sounds were looked upon as possessing powers may be found, according to Thieme (1985), in the last verse of the *Maitrāyaṇīya Saṃhitā*, which is also the first verse of the Śaunakīya recension of the *Atharvaveda*. This verse reads:<sup>26</sup> “The thrice seven that go around, wearing all the shapes – let the Lord of Speech put their powers into my body’s [parts] today”.

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<sup>24</sup> *tī* is the dual of *tī*, as Keith (1909, 207) pointed out. The analysis *sa-tī-yam* is also found in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 5.5.1, *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* 2.1.5. For another explanation of *satyam* (= *sa* + *tyam*), see *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.3, *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 1.6, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.6; see Kudelska 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Houben 1997, 70.

<sup>26</sup> *Maitrāyaṇīya Saṃhitā* 4.12.1 ~ *Atharvaveda* (Śaunakīya) 1.1 ~ *Atharvaveda* (Paippalāda) 1.6: *ye trisaptāḥ pariyaṅti viśvā rūpāṇi bibhrataḥ/ vācaspātir balā tēṣāṃ tan(u)vò 'dya dadhātu me// tr.* Thieme 1985. Doubts regarding Thieme’s interpretation of this verse have been raised by Deshpande 1997, 33 f.

Thieme argues that ‘the thrice seven’ are the sounds of language and shows how they can, and may have been, looked upon as constituting a list of 21 elements. He then concludes (565):

The basic sound units of the sacred language, amounting to the sacred number ‘thrice seven’, are the basic sacred elements of the sacred language. Being sacred, they are loaded with magic powers. Rehearsing them the brahmacārin will not only obtain the technical ability of correctly repeating and retaining what his teacher recites to him, he will, also, appropriate those magic powers: ‘May the Lord of Speech put their powers into my body’s [parts] (or: in my body) today (i.e., at the beginning of my vedic studies)’.

These are examples from Vedic literature. They are not confined to that literature. Similar examples can be found in more recent texts. The *Devī Bhāgavata* (9.1.6-7; cited and translated in Jacobsen 1999, 26-7) explains the word *prakṛti* in two ways, the second one dividing the word into the three syllables *pra-kṛ-ti*:

The *pra*-word means the most excellent *sattva guṇa*, *kṛ* means the middle *rajas guṇa*, and *ti* denotes the *tamas guṇa*. She whose own nature is *triguṇa*, is endowed with powers. She is superior in creating, therefore she is called *prakṛti*.<sup>27</sup>

They point the way to a much more widespread concern with the deeper significance of small groups of sounds, and even individual sounds. It manifests itself in the speculative analyses of the sacred syllable *om*,<sup>28</sup> also in other places, and reaches its apogee in certain Tantric texts, which attribute a specific metaphysical significance to every sound of the Sanskrit language (see Padoux 1990). These Tantric developments are not without precursors in Vedic literature. See, for example, the following passage from the *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa*, also called *Tāṇḍya Mahā Brāhmaṇa* (20.14.2) and *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (2.244; close to, but not identical with it): “Prajāpati alone was here. Vāc alone was his own; Vāc was second to him. He reflected, ‘Let me send forth this Vāc. She will spread forth, pervading all this.’ He sent forth Vāc. She spread forth, pervading all this. She extended upwards as a continuous stream of water. [Uttering the sound] *a*, he split off a third of it - that became the earth... [Uttering the sound] *ka* he split off a [second] third - that became the midregions...

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<sup>27</sup> *guṇe sattve prakṛṣṭe ca pra-śabdo vartate śrutah/ madhyame rajasi kṛṣṭe ca ti-śabdasya tamasi smṛtaḥ/ triguṇātmasvarūpā yā sā ca śaktisamanvitā/ pradhānā sṛṣṭikaraṇe prakṛtis tena kathiyate//*

<sup>28</sup> In the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* and elsewhere.

[Uttering the sound] *ho* he cast [the last] third upwards – that became the heaven” (tr. Holdrege 1994, 44). The context provides no clue as to why exactly these sound have the effect described.

Tantric speculations like these present, in a way, the Indian counterpart of Plato’s ‘primary names’ discussed above, and the ‘primary sounds’ of the Stoics. Yet there is a major difference. These Tantric speculations base themselves primarily on so-called *bīja-mantras*, utterances that are usually devoid of ordinary meaning. The metaphysical meanings assigned to the individual sounds are not, therefore, meant to contribute to the meanings of ordinary words that contain them. No longer restrained by the shackles of ordinary language use, the Tantric authors could establish the meanings of all the sounds of the Sanskrit language.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear that these Tantric speculations are far removed from etymologies, including synchronic etymologies. Note, however, that these Tantric speculations have parallels in the Jewish Kabala and similar developments within Islam.<sup>30</sup> Yet, though removed from etymologies, these speculations cannot be separated from them. They are, in a way, the ultimate outcome of the analysing process which found its inspiration in those etymologies.

## 5 Why Synchronic Etymologising?

It is time to return to synchronic etymologising. What induces people to engage in this futile activity? With the exception of grammatically related words – such as *go*, *going*, *goes* – synchronic etymologising does not elucidate the meaning of words. And yet, it is not the cultural specificity of one or two cultures; it rather appears to be a universal feature. What is going on here?

The answer I propose is as follows. Understanding a flow of spoken language is a complicated process. Christiansen and Chater (2022, 37) speak in this connection of the “puzzle [...] that we are able to keep up with the onslaught of language at all”. An essential part of this process, they point out, is “‘chunking’: a fundamental memory process by which we can combine two or more elements into a single unit” (39):

Once the acoustic signal from the speaker’s voice has been separated from the background, it is converted from a complex sound

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<sup>29</sup> See Padoux 1990, 235 ff.; Ruegg 1959, 108 f.

<sup>30</sup> For the Jewish Kabala, see Scholem 1983, 55-99 (“Le nom de Dieu ou la théorie du langage dans la Kabale; mystique du langage”); for Sufism, see Schimmel 1975, 411 ff. (“Letter Symbolism in Sufi literature”). Staal (1979, 7) briefly refers to the parallelism between Kabala and the Tantric speculations under consideration.

wave into a simple initial chunk-based format, such as phonemes [...] or syllables. [...] these sound-based units arrive at an astonishing rate in fluent speech. (42)

Indeed,

[t]he need for the brain to continually chunk the input, and make chunks of chunks, explains why human language, despite their enormous variation, are all organised into hierarchies of units, such as phonemes, syllables, words and phrases. (45)

It follows that, without knowledge of the relevant chunks, fluent speech will remain unintelligible. And clearly, those who are learning a new language (including most notably children) have to learn to identify those chunks.<sup>31</sup> This process can be seen in the making in mistakes that children sometimes make:

... consider the delightfully bizarre **I am being have**, as a response to **Behave!**. The child may reason that **I am being quiet** is a perfectly good response to **Be quiet!** so why shouldn't **Behave!** follow a similar pattern? (110; emphasis in the original)

We can conclude that we all analyse linguistic utterances in our childhood and end up with words and concepts related to them. Without the tendency to analyse, we would not be able to acquire language. However, this tendency to analyse linguistic utterances does not stop at the level of words. Analysis continues and enables language users to identify morphemes. But it does not stop there either: we go on looking for meaningful constituents below the level of morphemes (like 'be' and 'have' in the above example). At this point our analysis will no longer provide us with deeper understanding; this, at least, is the opinion of us moderns. Many pre-modern people disagreed and persisted in searching for more elementary word constituents, sometimes even for their most elementary parts. As we have seen, children do the same.

All this may look innocent enough, even naïve. However, the tendency to segment linguistic utterances and look for meaningful units even below the level of words and morphemes may tell us something more important about the way we learn language. Far from encouraging to look for linguistic units corresponding to pre-existing mental representations, it suggests that our representations are the out-

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**31** It appears that "a fundamental task of language acquisition, segmentation of words from fluent speech, can be accomplished by 8-month-old infants based solely on the statistical relationships between neighboring speech sounds" (Saffran 1996).

come of the segmentation ('chunking') of the linguistic utterances we are confronted with.

Some Indian thinkers illustrated this, somewhat simplistically, as follows. By listening to the different expressions 'bring the cow' and 'tie up the cow', a child learns that the common part of these two utterances, 'cow', refers to a cow. The two expressions 'bring the cow' and 'tie up the cow' are initially connected, in the child's mind, with two altogether different situations. However, the two situations have one element in common, and the two utterances have one portion in common, i.e. the cow and the word 'cow' respectively. This word does not correspond to a pre-existing representation, but the representation is created through the segmentation of the utterances: the common linguistic unit 'cow' induces us to carve out of the two experiences corresponding to 'bring the cow' and 'tie up the cow' the part they have in common.<sup>32</sup> In other words, we learn language through the segmentation of holistic utterances, and our representations come about in the same way.<sup>33</sup>

The same process may have been at work in the very first language users, many millennia ago: holistic utterances were segmented and interpreted so as to give rise to specific representations. The origin of language is of course a topic of much debate, in which the theory of a holophrastic protolanguage is but one candidate among others.<sup>34</sup>

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**32** On the role of language in creating concepts, see Bronkhorst 2022, § 3.

**33** Similarly Arbib 2012, 287: "Initially, the child will use only a single word, but the word may well serve as a holophrase - a whole utterance whose pieces have not separate meaning for the child. Thus, the sound patterns that we write as *want milk* and *milk* may have the identical meaning that the child wants milk - but at a stage where the child has no meaning for *milk* save as part of the consummatory act that it involves (and certainly no general concept of *consummatory act!*). However, eventually, the child begins to fractionate its utterances, so that *milk* can be talked of outside the context of wanting, and *want* can be applied to different things in the child's world".

**34** See Arbib 2012, 254 ff. Derek Bickerton (2010, 171), while still resisting the notion of a holistic protolanguage, has come to accept that specific representations are analysed out of evaluations of situations. To cite his own words: "Initial displacement signals might well have been holistic; a signal, rather than meaning simply 'elephant' like a modern word, might have been interpreted as something equivalent to 'There's a dead elephant out there and we can eat it if we all move quickly' (there is no need to suppose that the underlying semantics of such a modern-language message would have been represented - a mental image of a dead elephant plus the thought of all that meat would have been enough). While such a usage of 'elephant' might qualify technically as displacement (insofar as it conveyed information that might be already several hours old about a sight perhaps several miles distant), its meaning, unlike that of words, would be tied to one kind of situation involving elephants. However, once this degree of displacement was available (that is, once the 'elephant' signal was freed from its dependence on a physically-present, sensorily-accessible elephant), the road was opened to further developments: use of the same signal on seeing elephant footprints or dung, or imitations of elephants in children's play, for example. Use of a constantly widening range of contexts would move the signal closer to becoming a true symbol - closer to the kind of meaning exemplified by the modern word 'elephant'". Note in this connec-

This is clearly not the place to discuss the various pros and cons of this theory with respect to its competitors.<sup>35</sup> However, the human tendency (with which we are apparently born) to analyse and segment linguistic utterances even beyond what is objectively meaningful should count as an argument in its favour.<sup>36</sup>

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tion that a recent publication (Schel et al. 2013) demonstrates that "some chimpanzee alarm calls show numerous hallmarks of intentional communication".

**35** See Bronkhorst 2012, 55-69.

**36** Note also Arbib 2012, 265: "The process of fractionation continues even in modern languages as words get decomposed to new words or word-stems: 'helicopter' yields 'copter', even though it was formed as 'helico + pter (wing)'; 'cybernetics' yields 'cyber-', even though its etymology involves the stem 'cybern-' (as in 'govern'); web + log -> blog, and kangaroo -> roo -> roobar (a device on the front of Australian country vehicles for protection in case of a collision with a kangaroo); hamburger (= bun typical of Hamburg) -> cheeseburger, veggieburger, and so on". Arbib, Iriki (2013, 490) speak of "an adaptive pressure to speed the production and recognition for [...] distinctions as a basis for acquiring a lexicon and a (proto)syntax".

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