1
An outline of strategies

Traditional societies exploit flexibility while pretending permanence. This is because belief systems are not legitimated once and for all and therefore require means to cope with conflict and change without facing the challenge of admitting that these have taken place. Within traditional Indian culture, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, the last of these terms denoting what indigenous sources refer to as Vaidika, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava forms of religion, all relied heavily on the scriptural authority of their sacred texts. To provide for change they provided scriptural change, thus advocating permanence while exploiting the exegetical potential of a text. This is why intellectual inquiry in India to a large extent developed, out of necessity, as exegesis for processing texts. This is also why it is important to investigate the means of interpretation made use of in that processing.

Exploring the Indian tradition we are to a considerable extent left to the resources of texts as our sole material. On the one hand, one may argue that this leaves us with a severe limitation of sources, in particular with regard to social status and those cultural undercurrents we have reason to believe must have existed but only occasionally surface in texts. Moreover, the only *direct* conclusions we are permitted to draw on the basis of texts are about ideas and idealised self-representations, whereas historical or anthropological material also touches upon those features of a culture which are not exclusively related to ideas and self-representations and are not necessarily dealt with in texts. On the other hand, the Sanskrit language served as a cultural vehicle of Indian civilisation for around three thousand years, and the same texts provide us with unique source material in that they present us with a number of conflicting belief systems and their attempts at legitimating themselves, and also with a rich theoretical literature which enables us to see what the Indians themselves thought they were doing or said they were doing.

A body of individuals comprising a community builds up patterns of meaning through which it articulates its cultural identity. Such patterns of meaning are ways of classifying the world. On this view, the study of another culture becomes the study of other patterns of meaning.[1] The understanding of

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[1] By this I do not intend to say that 'meaning' is the only gateway to the study of another culture.

a culture therefore requires translation in the widest sense, the fundamental
task being the explication of cultural phenomena within the context of the pat-
terns of meaning to which they belong. There is little in these patterns that is
not specific to that culture, and meaning may exist where the outsider would
not expect to find it.

Although I think of meaning first and foremost as linguistic meaning, I shall
nevertheless treat of meaning in any stronger sense much in the same way,
since I believe we are dealing with the same thing: a property by virtue of
which language and thoughts are linked to features of the world.

Our task, then, is to find interpretable patterns. But there is a serious obsta-
cle here: there cannot be determinate meanings. Meaning is not stationary,
patiently awaiting its discovery. Meaning is generated in the same way that lan-
guage is generated, and thus subject to change and interpretation. In fact,
meaning is created by people interpreting, be that within the patterns of
meaning specific to a culture or in regard to that quest for meaning with which
one sets out to study a culture.[2]

If there are no fixed meanings, then the interpretable pattern may change as
meaning changes. Moreover, sentences of one language may be translated into
another in different ways which all accord equally well with accessible empir-
ical evidence. No one of these translations can claim to be 'the right one' for
they may all be equally defensible. Famous in this respect is W.V. Quine's con-
structed example 'gavagai', tentatively translated 'rabbit' by an imaginary field
linguist. But how are we to know that 'gavagai' applies not to rabbits, but to
undetached rabbit parts or to rabbit stages? These differ not only in factual
matter but also in respect of properties. This example is clearly artificial, but
it serves to bring out the point.[3] Quine also offers more trivial examples such
as the French 'ne . . . rien' where 'rien' translates equally well as 'anything'
and 'nothing' in English, and the classifiers of Japanese – and, one may add,
Chinese – language.[4]

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[2] Perhaps most notably within the field of social anthropology, the methodological shift from
function to meaning brought to light the important epistemological questions this raises; see,
for example, Parkin 1982:xvi. There are other views. According to E. Gellner (1993) 'anthro-
pologists are the anti-scripturalists of the social sciences. Obviously they are not given to the
idea, tempting to at least some historians or orientalists and classicists, that there is no reality
without some document or text.' In this article, which is a feature article in the *TLS* on the state-
of-the-arts and future of anthropology, Gellner goes on to claim that 'one specific weakness in
current anthropology is an excessive attention to "meaning", equivalent to the "interpretive" or
hermeneutic turn in philosophy. This is the view that meaning rather than structure is the key
notion of the subject.' Apart from the fact that static notions of structure are rather irrelevant,
this excludes from his material the vast bulk of literary sources *and* the fact that human beings
communicate by means of language. 'What do we need?', Gellner asks, and replies: 'We do
need a *language*, a typology of societies and institutions' (my emphasis). Can there be a lan-
guage without meaning? To focus on language and meaning is not to treat a culture as 'a self-
sustaining, self-validating system of meaning'. My point is indeed the opposite: there cannot
be determinate meanings, so we have to search for structures and models which take this fact
into consideration.   [3] For the example, see Quine 1960:51 ff.; 1969:30 ff.; 1990:42, 51.
[4] Quine 1969:33 ff.

One possible source for this indeterminacy of meaning and translation has been suggested by Quine in the form of what he calls the inscrutability of reference.[5] The meaning of a sentence is intimately connected with whether it is true or false. One may even argue that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know the conditions under which it is true. The sentence 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white. Inscrutability of reference is the thesis that if there is one way of connecting words with objects which gives an account of truth conditions of sentences, then there will be endless ways. This theme has variants, but in its simplest form it amounts to stating that you can give exactly the same truth conditions in a language by making systematic shifts in what the singular terms refer to and what satisfies the predicates. You get a different thought if you get a different sentence to represent it. Reference, then, becomes a theoretical construct to explain how parts of sentences contribute to their truth conditions, but there is no unique relation between single external objects and words which is *the* relation of reference.[6]

This links up with a kind of holism, stressed from the beginning of Quine's work, which points to another source of indeterminacy.[7] Different aspects of the mental have to fit together into large patterns, and these patterns involve normative elements. No belief can exist without being surrounded by a whole

[5] See, in particular, Quine l969. The theme has been developed by Donald Davidson (1979). In more recent work, Quine prefers to call what he is talking about 'indeterminacy of reference' (1990:50).

[6] This, incidentally, deals a blow to correspondence theories of truth. Note that the view of reference outlined above is not the only prevalent view of reference in philosophical semantics. The view presented is, roughly, the position of a semantic holism advocated by Quine and later critically developed by Donald Davidson (see, in particular, Davidson 1984 and 1986). Instead of proclaiming the concept of reference as the cornerstone in a theory of semantics, Davidson suggests that a theory of semantics is an empirical theory in as much as it is a theory of truth, or, rather, that it is a theory of semantics based on truth, relying here at the outset on a Tarski-like concept of semantic truth for artificial languages. Roughly, A. Tarski (e.g. 1935; 1956) demonstrated what it is to call a sentence in a language L true by defining another language, a metalanguage ML, that does not have a truth-predicate but which *is* a truth-predicate for the first language L. According to Tarski it is not possible to extend this to natural languages because these are universal, and one will accordingly end up with the problem of self-reference. Still Davidson makes use of Tarski's concept of truth in the realm of natural languages. He renounces the claim that we must have a consistent definition, staying content with a theory of truth instead of a definition of truth. ML must still be richer than L in that it must always contain the predicate 'is true in L'. It is no longer necessarily ontologically richer, only ideally richer. Presupposing meaning, Tarski wanted to throw some light on truth. Davidson wants to throw some light on meaning, and has admirably succeeded in this although there is still a long way to go, for example with regard to the adaptation of quantificational logic, or the substitution of co-referential terms which does not retain the truth-value of sentences. Other philosophers, such as S. Kripke, K. Donnellan, H. Field, and J. Fodor retain the concept of reference as the central one in semantics. What they have in common is, roughly, an effort at giving a semantic theory empirical content by linking words and the world by a causal chain through the relation of reference. This relation between words and the world must be described without the use of intensional terms. For Davidson it is truth, for others it is reference. That it might be possible to criticise the position that the concept of reference is the central one in a theory of semantics without resorting to the almost dogmatic idea of indeterminacy or inscrutability of reference, I shall not enter into here, since the very idea of indeterminacy is instrumental in bringing forward the points I wish to make.   [7] Quine 1951; cf. Davidson 1974.

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galaxy of beliefs, and these beliefs fit together according to the rules of a
certain logic in as much as people try to get as consistent a picture of the world
as possible. But if someone deviates from the normative pattern too much,
you have reason to say that this person does not hold that belief at all.
Moreover, words have semantic properties, that is to say, they do refer to
things in the world. But the meaning of most words depends systematically
on their relations to other words in sentences. Indeterminacy of meaning and
translation may thus arise because someone means different things by the
words than someone else, or means the same things but holds different
beliefs. And even if the facts should happen to lead to a unique way of
working matters out, you have indeterminacy in the form of inscrutability of
reference.

It should be pointed out that this indeterminacy of meaning and translation
applies not only to translation from, say, Sanskrit into English. It applies even
to meaning and 'internal translation' within the same language, even with
regard to one and the same speaker. We often discover – and indeed accept for
the sake of communication – that other speakers of our language use words in
ways that differ from our own. In this case we carry out 'homophonous' trans-
lation.[8]

Since meaning is a property which relates words and the world, then, the
most striking variables in interpretation are language and ontology, the
apprehension of what there is for words to mean. The inner dependency of
what words mean and how the world is ordered implies that changes in one
may entail changes in the other.

In as much as meaning exists, *is* meaning, within a social context, it is by
definition something shared and, accordingly, subject to negotiation within the
limits of the social context. Although meaning is subject to negotiation, then,
there is nonetheless a strong element of intersubjectivity involved if meaning
is to be socially accessible, which it necessarily is. This makes meanings and
beliefs two sides of the same coin. There has to be a certain overlap in beliefs
for people to talk about the same things, although these beliefs do not have to
be identical. Still, the contents of thoughts, that is, the way beliefs, desires, and
other so-called propositional attitudes are correctly described, do not depend
solely on what goes on inside the head of an individual. Meaning is intimately
related to usage. For example, the causal history of a word becomes part of the
meaning of that word, that is, the causal relationship counts in the sense that a
person's concept of a word depends on the kinds of things by which his use of
words has been conditioned.

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[8] See Quine 1969:46. More recently Quine seems to have modified his position somewhat on
this point. Having clarified his thesis of ontological relativity (see Quine 1969) by saying that
what this ontological relativity is relative to is a manual of translation (Quine 1990:51), he states
(ibid.:52): 'But if we choose as our manual of translation the identity transformation, thus
taking the home language at face value, the relativity is resolved. Reference is then explicated
in disquotational paradigms analogous to Tarski's truth paradigm . . .; thus "rabbit" denotes
rabbits, whatever *they* are, and "Boston" designates Boston.'

Now, if you hold a belief, you will be surprised if you recognise that things are not as you have hitherto believed them to be. For example, if you cross the threshold between one room and another, you will be surprised if the room you enter no longer has a floor, provided it used to have one. This surprise requires some experience of a contrast between your previous belief and your subsequent belief. In other words, the surprise involves a belief about the correctness of the belief, and this belief – the concept of belief – you would not hold without language. One may argue with D. Davidson, then, that the very fact that you hold a belief requires some contrast in your mind between what you previously thought and what you find, so that holding a belief entails the concept of belief, and this contrast necessarily requires language.[9]

It is however crucial that we distinguish the holding of a belief from reality being different from the belief held. It seems hard to imagine a concept of belief without some concept of truth and falsity, that is, that there are both true and false beliefs. Meaning has to be intersubjective, and that is sufficient but also necessary for this contrast to arise. In some way, then, we *must* have an idea of intersubjective truth. The notion of truth independent of beliefs cannot exist unless there is something intersubjective, a shared standard acquired through linguistic competence. An idea of objective truth is thus an idea of intersubjective truth, and so there has to be communication if there is to be the contrast necessary for there to be beliefs. This communication is made possible by language which is thus a fundamental means of negotiation at the same time. When people share a language, they share some picture of a common world. Communication to a great extent depends on the same things being salient, but these things may be interpreted in different ways, since meaning is a negotiable entity. At the same time meaning is determined by the community in as much as there is a common language only to the extent that there is a common method of interpretation within a community.

On the one hand, then, meaning is an intersubjective enterprise, while on the other it is always subject to negotiation and interpretation. Accordingly, a culture is not simply a set of fixed patterns of meaning, it is a web of meaning which is semantically creative and therefore rather to be described as a universe of discourse within which there will be different interpretations of the world. It is this discourse we set out to interpret in some way or other when we set out to study a culture. Thus the object of our inquiries is nothing fixed, but rather a pattern of relationships. In order to arrive at qualified interpretations it is therefore crucial that we draw upon sources that are as wide as possible and that we look for constants within these.

In order to highlight the importance and validity of the discourse metaphor, let me take one step further. If we move from the observation of, logically speaking, fairly simple things to the postulation of relatively more complex

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[9] See, for example, Davidson 1975. Davidson differs at this point from other philosophers of language who consider language a sufficient cause for this contrast to arise. According to Davidson it is a necessary cause.

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and sophisticated things, there has to be a pattern among the simpler things.
So we have to find that pattern. So-called propositional attitudes are theoret-
ical concepts from the point of view of the interpreter. He or she can only
observe the simpler things such as actions and choices, and go from there to
the more complex. But no piece of logic says that if a person holds a certain
belief or has a certain desire he will act in a certain way. He may even prefer
not to act at all. The power of propositional attitudes to underpin and ration-
alise some specific way of acting may thus be merely potential until it is even-
tually *actuated* in discourse. This also implies that it is impossible to separate
discourse from the notion of power, in particular the power to be semantically
creative. The way we deal with this notion, however, calls for some caution.
It is crucial to differentiate the notion of semantic or philosophical power
from the notion of social power in as much as we are here dealing with power
at two very different levels. On the semantic level we are dealing with
meaning which is social and hence intersubjectively accessible. At this formal
level power has nothing to do with social rules or the power to define or
execute such rules. Still, if a person within a specific culture has the power to
determine the reference of the words of a shared language, then that person
has the capacity to interpret and determine the contents of thoughts. In one
respect he or she may then have the power to define the meaning of objects
and actions, even the power to define others, for this capacity rests not only
on a person's ability to be semantically creative, but also on the same person's
social position to be so. In this way the two notions and levels of power are
linked. If there is no clearly codified system in a community, then it is possi-
ble for those who have the power to do so to reconstruct, reinterpret, and make
existing data fit in as desired. In a ritual, for example, where the purpose or
meaning to some extent has been lost or blurred, it is possible to encode new
meaning into it; so also with scripture. A person possessing both functions of
power, the social as well as the linguistic, may thus be able to orchestrate and
synchronise even the syntax, the very rhythm of life in a community through
such means as narrative events or ritual, or through exegesis of authoritative
texts.

In line with the arguments presented so far, it is clear that our object of
study comes to be the universe of discourse itself, and that it is in the *consis-
tency* of this discourse that it becomes possible to capture certain constants
within semantically creative patterns of meaning. Now, the recognition that
our matrix is the consistency of discourse does entail a basic shift in our
fundamental question. Instead of asking *what* something means, we have to
turn to a logically more fundamental question: *how* do we figure out what
something or someone means or believes etc.? This shift from *what* to *how* is
epistemological in nature, and not very different from hermeneutics con-
ceived of as the elucidation of the conditions which make knowledge possi-
ble. It also implies that our investigation will move within the realm of
cognition.

The Indian tradition and its means of interpretation

Given this background it seems justified to claim that it is important to investigate the *methods* of interpretation employed in a specific culture and the models upon which these methods rest. The extent to which such an investigation is helpful for our understanding or, indeed, possible to carry out at all, may of course vary from culture to culture. In the case of the Indian tradition the conditions for carrying out such an investigation are remarkably favourable.

Whereas the Brahmanical tradition basically is ritual and exegesis of ritual, Buddhism and Jainism present themselves as doctrines. They all represent certain conflicting ideologies and values, but they have one more thing in common: they all get their authorisation from scripture. This puts scripture in a crucial position when it comes to negotiation of meaning and authority.

At the core of mainstream Brahmanism is the Veda, a corpus of scriptures considered to be revealed; at its fringes are the Āgamas (lit. 'received [knowledge]'), Purāṇas ('old [stories and expositions]'), and the groups of heterodox texts known as Tantras. For the Mīmāṃsaka, the extreme Vedic ritualist, even myth is *arthavāda*, a rhetorical elaboration of topic-matter coming up in ritual, designed to encourage or to dissuade. Myth is thus part of religious discourse, its purpose being to explain and promote a rite. Jainism and Buddhism developed a canonical literature. With the rise of the Mahāyāna, Buddhism even produced an entirely new corpus of Sūtra texts which were claimed to have been assembled by Bodhisattvas at a council of their own and therefore to be considered as genuinely presenting the Buddhist doctrine on a par with the earlier Sūtra texts attributed to the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. And within the frame of the Mahāyāna concept of *upāyakauśalya* 'skilful means [of teaching the doctrine]' it was held that there is no right doctrine *per se*: the doctrine may be taught in any way that would make people understand the message, the only important things being the intention of a text and how that intention suits a particular context. All this involved exegesis and the processing of texts.

When people share a belief system, then assurance of a change in belief cannot come from outside the system, nor can something inside it produce support except when it can be shown to rest on something independently trustworthy. To some extent such a trustworthy entity exists in the Indian tradition in the form of established and widely accepted methods of interpretation. In fact, they have left their traces in several Asian languages far beyond the Indian borders through the translations of Sanskrit texts which accompanied the spread of Buddhism. They have permeated the Tibetan translations from Sanskrit completely, and as recently as the eighteenth century these techniques were still alive in Manchuria when the Buddhist dictionary *Mahāvyutpatti* was translated into Manchu.

But even within such a context of fairly well-established methods of interpretation it would be a mistake to think that we study material which constitutes a logically connected whole. It is therefore important to look for

structures at a level deeper than the material taken at face value, namely to search at one remove for the models underlying these means of interpretation through a detailed examination of texts composed by those who were directly engaged in the study of scripture and performance of ritual. If we can trace such an underlying model, then we have a constant which can be investigated further in its own right in order to see how it fits in with models and patterns emerging from other parts of our material.

One way to execute this task is to focus upon fixed technical methods, that is, upon systematically ordered ways of interpretation met with over and over again in the texts, and then see what patterns emerge. In this work I shall concentrate on one such consistent means of interpretation, namely the device of *nirvacana* analysis. By suggesting a model of thought underlying it, I hope to show how this method worked – consciously or unconsciously – in the minds of those who employed it, and how it could become such a powerful tool in negotiating and defining meaning.

A note concerning method

First of all, an inquiry into culturally specific means of interpretation has to be carried out through concepts and thought patterns that are clearly indigenous. This is not to advocate that form of relativism which holds that a valid explanation of another culture can only happen through indigenous concepts and thought patterns. In the attempt to achieve a basis for comparative cultural studies, I agree that such an approach runs the risk of merely replacing one set of concepts and values with another. But so does the opposite approach: an explanation of another culture in terms of concepts and thought patterns that are clearly imposed on it from the outside. For the comparative endeavour I believe one needs both and that it is indeed in the application of both sets of concepts and values that a fruitful basis for comparison lies. And if we are able to identify the mechanisms by which another culture transforms its indigenous happenings into meaningful patterns, we have achieved something that may contribute to a foundation for comparative studies. But this can only happen if we first make our inquiries into another culture through concepts and thought patterns that are recognised within the framework of that culture itself.

That a better understanding of Indian culture on its own terms is required before comparative studies can be carried out with any success may be illustrated by the example of indigenous Indian grammar. Several scholars have warned against a tendency among linguists to be more concerned about how modern linguistic theories relate to indigenous Sanskrit grammar than in what that grammar actually teaches.[10] Such superimposition of modern theories may

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[10] For example, P. Thieme (1961:x), R. Rocher (1968:339), C. Cardona (1969:3). The issue and the controversy arising from it have been sensibly discussed by Cardona (1976:236–7).

in fact block the way for a clear understanding of Indian grammar. How can any comparison be carried out before there is anything to compare?

If one is to investigate systematically applied means of interpretation, it is obvious that this can only happen through an extensive study of texts. My method is therefore simply philological in that I shall – as far as possible – let the texts speak for themselves. I shall use texts as anthropologists use informants, with the additional advantage that the textual material stems from various points of a time-span covering roughly 2,500 years. If in that landscape one finds patterns that are repeated over and over again, it seems to me likely that one has detected certain basic features of classical Indian traditions, features which may then be considered stable points in our understanding and interpretation of that culture. In ordering and analysing the material I shall, of course, have to classify and arrange it according to what seems to me consistent and relevant, but I shall invariably proceed on the basis of textual material and models emerging from it.

Now, if the method of *nirvacana* analysis is eventually to be understood only through a model revealed by the patterns that have emerged from its study, the model is inherent in the material itself. The model is thus not validated until it has emerged from an analysis of textual material which draws upon sources that are as wide as possible and then been tested on the same material from which it emerged. Although this poses some problems, among them a problem of circularity, I see no real obstacles here.

For practical reasons alone only a limited number of texts can be taken into consideration. To get around the problem of having to present endless source material, I shall offer a limited range of suitable sample material from sources wide apart in time and content. In investigating further the model that emerges from the fundamental source material, I shall stick to technical literatures since this is where such models may be expected to stand out most clearly and be presented and discussed in a 'neutral' manner. Moreover, the very topic of this investigation – the study of indigenous means of interpretation and their underlying models – calls for more than a superficial study of texts. Details are what counts here. I shall therefore not only let the texts speak for themselves but in some cases let them speak at great length and provide discussion in extreme detail. This may make the book tedious to read, but I can see no other way of getting sufficiently close to the core of the textual material. Only thus will consistent patterns emerge and provide us with a model, and only thus can this model be investigated further. However, I have deliberately tried to make the book as short as possible by choosing to present – in relevant contexts – only exemplary material, that is to say, only whatever evidence I consider sufficient to make a case even where examples could be multiplied infinitely or where a case is considered inconclusive in spite of the wealth of material.

The problem of circularity is solved by first exploring what tenets and models emerge from the textual material and then investigating whether – and how – these eventually link up with and make sense in the light of tenets and models

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known from other parts of Indian Śāstric literature, the technical literatures of
ritual and grammar in particular. If it is seen to fit into and link up with such pat-
terns, this test will give the model a platform and justification outside the circle
from which it emerged. At that stage it becomes possible to see how it fits the
original material and my hypothesis for interpreting the device of *nirvacana*
analysis.

The role of indigenous commentaries

Various positions have been taken with regard to the role that is to be assigned
to indigenous commentaries in the interpretation of Sanskrit texts. With regard
to the relationship between Pāṇini, the author of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, the core work
of the Indian grammatical tradition, and Patañjali, the author of the
Mahābhāṣya or 'Great commentary' on that work, Paul Kiparsky has taken
this attitude (1979:246; emphasis in the original):

> The real danger is *that we let Patañjali ask our questions for us* and thereby accept
> his presuppositions about the goals and theoretical foundations of linguistic analy-
> sis, instead of trying to see them in Pāṇini's own way. Thereby we lock ourselves
> into Patañjali's particular universe of discourse and anachronistically impose the
> ideas of Patañjali on Pāṇini, without realizing what a great gulf actually separates
> the two.

I am aware that the case of Pāṇini's grammar may be considered special,
but to my mind it is special also because it would have been completely unin-
telligible without the indigenous commentaries in the first place. In other
words, it is only after one has achieved an understanding of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* by
means of the commentaries that one would be able to investigate this text at
all. But I think Kiparsky's view contains tenets acceptable to many Sanskritists
with regard to a number of other texts or to Sanskrit texts in general.

Of course it is sometimes necessary to investigate problems in a particular
text internally or to analyse a text by exploring its internal structure. Kiparsky's
own work is a brilliant example of a study which poses questions with a scope
beyond that of the *Mahābhāṣya*. And of course the commentators sometimes get
it wrong when they try to analyse tricky passages or consciously cover up prob-
lems when they search for an easy way out of internal inconsistencies. But such
incidents should not lead one to exclude the contributions of the commentators.
If we think we can ask intelligent questions, then why should we not accept that
a scholar like Patañjali could? He did, after all, know the *vyākaraṇa* tradition
pretty well. Bhartṛhari, the famous fifth-century grammarian and philosopher
of language, refers in his *Vākyapadīya* to Patañjali as the Master (*guru*) and the
Mahābhāṣya as the foundation for the justification of all principles of interpreta-
tion employed when grammatical questions are to be settled (VP 2.482):

> kṛte 'tha patañjalinā guruṇā tīrthadarśinā /
> sarveṣāṃ nyāyabījānāṃ mahābhāṣye nibandhane //