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978-0-521-63188-4 - Indian Semantic Analysis: The Nirvacana Tradition

Eivind Kahrs

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INDIAN SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

The *nirvacana* tradition

The Indian tradition of semantic elucidation known as *nirvacana* analysis represented a powerful hermeneutic tool in the exegesis and transmission of authoritative scripture. Nevertheless, it has all too frequently been dismissed by modern scholars as anything from folk-etymology to a primitive forerunner of historical linguistics. Eivind Kahrs argues that such views fall short of explaining both its acceptance within the sophisticated grammatical tradition of *vyākaraṇa* and its effective usage in the processing of Sanskrit texts. He establishes his argument by investigating the learned Sanskrit literature of Śaiva Kashmir, and explains the *nirvacana* tradition in the light of a model of substitution, used at least since the time of the Upaniṣads and later refined in the technical literatures of grammar and ritual. According to this model, a substitute (*ādeśa*) takes the place (*sthāna*) of the original placeholder (*sthānin*). On the basis of a searching analysis of Sanskrit texts, the author argues that this *sthāna* 'place' can be interpreted as 'meaning', the model thereby providing favourable circumstances for reinterpretation and change.

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Bhairava, Nepal, seventeenth century, courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

In memoriam Nils Simonsson

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Eivind Kahrs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything . . .

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the looking-glass*)

Or, in a more subtle way:

Make the following experiment: *say* ‘It’s cold here’ and *mean* ‘It’s warm here’. Can you do it? – And what are you doing as you do it? And is there only one way of doing it?

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
1 An outline of strategies	1
2 Nirvacanaśāstra	13
3 Praxis: Śaiva Kashmir	55
4 The universe of Yāska	98
5 Substitution	175
6 Epilogue	268
<i>Abbreviations and bibliography</i>	280
<i>Indexes</i>	295

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[More information](#)

PREFACE

From an early concern with Buddhism, in particular with Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, my interest came to concentrate on the nature of the Buddhist-Brahmanical controversies in the field of epistemology. However, as my research progressed, my attention shifted to the question of whether one might describe a pattern of consistencies underlying Indian Śāstric exposition in general. On a larger scale, I became concerned with the questions of how classical Indian culture determined what something or someone meant or believed, how meaning was created and negotiated, how cultural change was promoted and how it was opposed. Such questions necessarily involve an extensive study of texts from various areas of Sanskrit literature, the indigenous processing of these texts, and the models and means of interpretation which were used in that processing. This led me to investigate the patterns of the Indian linguistic and ritualistic traditions.

That the linguistic tradition known as *vyākaraṇa* is one of the most interesting fields of study within the area of Śāstric Sanskrit is common knowledge. What has been less focused upon is that there existed in India another, parallel tradition of linguistic analysis which served a different purpose. This is the tradition known as *nirukta* or *nirvacanaśāstra*. Both of these traditions are classed among the six *vedāṅgas*, the disciplines auxiliary to the Veda, or, more specifically, the branches of knowledge designed to preserve it. This, however, did not prevent them from being widely resorted to by Buddhists and Jains as well. While the grammatical tradition is well known to us through a number of treatises, among which the fundamental work is the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, Pāṇini's famous grammar, only one basic work of *nirvacanaśāstra* has survived, namely Yāska's *Nirukta*. But even though only one basic work has come down to us, the methods and principles of interpretation met with in that work remained very much alive in Indian Śāstric literature. Nevertheless, in modern Indology the device of *nirvacana* analysis, basically a method of semantic elucidation which ultimately involves a theory of meaning (an answer to the question of what it is for words to mean what they mean), has either been disregarded completely or been interpreted as anything from folk-etymology to an ancient forerunner of historical linguistics. Such approaches leave one crucial problem unresolved: how could the method of *nirvacana* analysis work

xiv Preface

for so many centuries as a highly potent tool in negotiating that intersubjective but evasive property called meaning which links words and the world?

In this book I venture to show how *nirvacana* analysis was put to work in that ordering process whereby a culture is created and how the model underlying it fits in with patterns attested elsewhere in the Indian tradition. In broader terms, this is asking *how* something comes to mean what it means, rather than asking *what* it means. My point here is simply one of logical order: the question of how something comes to mean what it means is more fundamental logically speaking, and an answer to this question may enable us to carry our investigations of Indian cultural history a step further.

That the method of *nirvacana* analysis did indeed become a powerful tool in negotiating meaning, I shall amply demonstrate by presenting and analysing material from the Sanskrit literature of Śaiva Kashmir composed around the turn of the millennium. *How* it could become such a powerful tool can be explained once the method of *nirvacana* analysis is interpreted according to a model provided by the Indian tradition itself, namely the model of substitution: one element appears ‘in the place of’ another. This model – known at least since the time of the Upaniṣads, that is to say, since the time when the Indians consciously started on a quest for meaning in the stronger sense – was refined and developed in the technical literatures of grammar and ritual. It is only through a detailed study of these literatures that it becomes possible to investigate this model of substitution and to find out what it involves. A large part of the present work consists therefore in detailed analysis of material from Sanskrit Śāstric texts, an analysis which investigates the relation of ‘being in the place of’ and makes it clear that this ‘place’ can be interpreted as ‘meaning’, a circumstance that enables ritual and linguistic elements to replace other elements under given semantic conditions.

The basic ideas of this book were presented at the Colloque annuel de la Société d’Histoire et d’Epistémologie des Sciences du Langage in Paris in January 1995. ‘Interprétation et la tradition indienne du *nirukta*’ will appear in *Histoire, Epistémologie, Langage* 20.1, Paris, 1998. ‘Some observations on the *sthānasambandha*’, which draws on material from chapter 5 of this book, will appear in a Felicitation Volume for George Cardona, edited by Madhav M. Deshpande and Peter Edwin Hook, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

This book would never have been completed without support from a number of individuals. First of all I would like to express my gratitude to my *ādiguru*, the late Nils Simonsson, whose unfailing enthusiasm encouraged me to pursue the research that has culminated in this book. My gratitude also goes to my other teachers in Oslo, Knut Kristiansen and Georg von Simson. Albrecht Wezler was very supportive in the early stages of this work. Since we first met in 1981, George Cardona has very generously responded to any queries I have had in the field of *vyākaraṇa*, within and without the scope of this book. My opponents at the public defence of my dissertation *Substitution and change* in the University of Oslo, Johannes Bronkhorst and Gunilla Gren-Eklund, pro-

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface* xv

vided invaluable criticism and support. The material of that dissertation is largely incorporated here. I am also grateful to Olav Gjelsvik for stimulating discussions on philosophical matters. A Visiting Research Fellowship to Wolfson College, Oxford, in 1982–3 brought me in touch with two persons to whom I find it hard to express my gratitude in adequate terms, James W. Benson and Alexis Sanderson. Over the years, these two scholars have not only supported and criticised my work at various stages, but also generously shared with me their own ideas in their chosen fields of study. Their example has been my inspiration; the shortcomings are my own. Since 1987 this work was interrupted several times for a variety of reasons. My thanks are due to my Cambridge colleagues K.R. Norman and John D. Smith for putting me back on track, and to my wife Sudeshna Guha for making it shine. I am grateful to the President and Fellows of Queens' College, particularly to Nigel Leask, for providing a stimulating environment. Finally, I would like to thank Alison Gilderdale at Cambridge University Press for being such an excellent copy-editor when seeing the typescript through the press.