

## 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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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE ORIENTAL PUBLICATIONS 55  
INDIAN SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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

# *Indian semantic analysis*

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, United Kingdom <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1998

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Times Norman 10/12pt in QuarkXPress® [SE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 63188 2 hardback

*In memoriam Nils Simonsson*





'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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## 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

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-

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.





# 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.<sup>1</sup> The understanding of

<sup>1</sup> 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 patterns 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 obstacle here: there cannot be determinate meanings. Meaning is not stationary, patiently awaiting its discovery. Meaning is generated in the same way that language 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 empirical 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 constructed 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 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) 'anthropologists 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 language 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.

<sup>3</sup> For the example, see Quine 1960:51 ff.; 1969:30 ff.; 1990:42, 51.

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

This links up with a kind of holism, stressed from the beginning of Quine's work, which points to another source of indeterminacy.<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Quine 1969. 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).

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Quine 1951; cf. Davidson 1974.

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' translation.<sup>8</sup>

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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

<sup>9</sup> 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.

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 theoretical 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 rationalise some specific way of acting may thus be merely potential until it is eventually *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 possible 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 *consistency* 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 conceived of as the elucidation of the conditions which make knowledge possible. 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 *Mahāvvyutpatti* 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.<sup>10</sup> Such superimposition of modern theories may

<sup>10</sup> 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

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 patterns, 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 analysis, 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 unintelligible 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 problems 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. Bharṭṛhari, 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 interpretation employed when grammatical questions are to be settled (VP 2.482):

*kr̥te 'tha patañjalinā guruṇā tīrthadarśinā /  
sarveṣāṃ nyāyabijānāṃ mahābhāṣye nibandhane //*

Then, when the *Mahābhāṣya*, the foundation for all justifications of principles of interpretation, was composed by Patañjali, the Guru, Master of the [various] systems [of received knowledge] . . .<sup>11</sup>

For the present investigation it is precisely the constant factors and the indigenous interpretations of them at various points in time which are of interest. The information provided by commentaries is accordingly essential. My own position in general is that commentaries should be assigned a central role in our philological investigations. For Sūtra texts there is every reason to believe that oral commentaries existed alongside the texts themselves, although this is of course hard to prove. The explanations of a teacher would fulfil the same function as an oral commentary if they were transmitted regularly from teacher to pupil. And the distinction between a text that contains or embeds an afterthought – not necessarily articulated very clearly – and a text with a separate commentary seems to me quite arbitrary. Any text contains numerous levels of thought made more or less specific. The difference between some of these invariably latent but vaguely expressed levels and a commentary may accordingly turn out to be such that the commentary is closer to ‘the text’. We have only to be clear about what questions we have asked on what basis and what is the textual evidence for our answers.

One may also argue that our motivation for a study of commentaries is not in the first place linked to the interpretation of beliefs, but rather to the way in which commentaries express cognition. A commentary is, of course, a work in its own right and rooted in its own milieu. Accordingly, it may be fairly uninteresting whether Patañjali asks questions which we consider ‘intelligent’. In an investigation of the present kind it may prove more fruitful not to focus so much on the purpose of a commentator, but rather consider the methods he applied.

#### *A note on the presentation and citation of text passages*

Unless otherwise indicated text passages are presented in the form in which they appear in the editions from which they are cited with the obvious exception of passages from manuscripts. Emendations are indicated separately, either in notes or in the discussion of the passage in question. All text passages are cited in full and, except in a very few cases, provided with translations.

<sup>11</sup> For *pātañjalīnā* of the edition I read *patañjalīnā*; the same form *pātañjalīnā*, although not in the context of this verse, is met with in the MSS. of Aggavaṃsa’s *Saddanūti* and retained by the editor of that text, H. Smith (1928–30:710,6). However, I would also there emend to *patañjalīnā*; cf. Kahrs 1992:190, note 2. Cardona (1978:81) too quotes the verse with the form *patañjalīnā* without further comment. I follow the interpretations of *nyāyabījānām* and *nibandhane* suggested by Cardona (ibid.:83, note 4; 87–93), partly based on the commentary of Puṇyarāja; *tīrtha* ‘where one goes down into water’ normally refers to a religious doctrine, but seems here to be used in a broader sense.

Only thus can a reader follow the arguments presented and unambiguously judge their foundation, and only thus will my interpretations of text passages appear in an undisguised form, revealing weaknesses and preferred choices. Necessary supplements of words in the English translations which are not in the Sanskrit original are indicated by square brackets. All references to text-places are given as indicated in the list of abbreviations and bibliography.