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THEORETICAL BASES FOR YĀSKA'S *NIRUKTA*

The paper prepared for this session aims to give to this audience some methodological procedures I have chosen just to give a new translation of Yāska's *Nirukta*. In this sense, I went to modern Western linguistics, namely the Saussurean linguistics, not to do a remake of that Sanskrit text, but to get some help to my interpretation. As a matter of fact, Yāska's *Nirukta* does not make a bad figure when confronted to modern Western linguistics.

1. A text about linguistic issues written by Yāska, who lived in the 5th century BC, as has been proposed by its researchers, the *Nirukta* has come to be, within the long current of texts about language which were elaborated in ancient India, a unique text – and this is a fact that troubles its study. There is no other work entirely dedicated to the subject therein analysed, which means that there is no other text which can be compared to it and serve the purpose of a control paradigm: each and every inference or analytical proposal must be gleaned from its own content and organisation. This, in all likelihood, is the reason why it has been so much referred to and its stringent strategies of analysis so little studied with a sufficient accuracy degree. As often affirmed, it touches upon the “meaning” of “words”, being thus a treatise on “Etymology”. As it will be seen, this assertion does not correspond either to the essence of the author's analyses or to its objectives and final results.

2. The word that embodies its title – *Nirukta* –, considered in its common sense, means “explanation” and does not point out to any restricted domain of Sanskrit language: it is the Sanskrit term for any “explanation”. In its technical sense, however, as employed by Yāska, it points to a specific area in linguistic studies, the one covered by the “*artha* explanation”, which is an integrate part of linguistic units. Thus it is not a treatise on Etymology, as it is often assumed, because what Yāska seeks in his study is not the restoration and search for the “word’s original form”: he does not depart from a present form and remount towards an ancient one – a fact that could presuppose a change, an evolution in the form of the “word”, in its *signifiant* [the sound form of a word]. And Yāska would never have adopted such a procedure: this change at the level of the sound form has never happened in Sanskrit... As a matter of fact, if he works with the “form of ‘words’” at every moment, it is because his aim is to explain its *signifié* [that which is meant by a word]. That’s why his treatise must be decisively and obligatorily inscribed within the domain of Semantics: Yāska is not a *vaiyākaraṇin*, “analyst (of morphology)” – but a *nairuktin* “explainer (of meaning)” – one could say, with all certainty, a “semanticist”. If the “history of the ‘word’” is present in his work, its character must be looked for somewhere else in the text of Yāska itself.

3. The *artha*, Yāska’s object of investigation, also deserves some comments. In its regular sense, *artha* means “goods, treasure, property”; technically, in the way the author employs it, it corresponds to what translators and researchers call *meaning*, the *signifié*. However, if this term should be understood as the “mental image”, the “concept”, the “impression that touches the individual when he is exposed to a word”, then *artha* is, according to Yāska, the instance of the “word” that works, in any form of communicative act, as a *reference value*, that which assures that the individual may link the sound sequences *dantin* and *hastin* to an elephant, for instance, and, on the other hand, may associate a serpent, a fish or a bird to the sound *aṇḍaja*. But Yāska’s analysis still goes further: he makes clear that *dantin* and *hastin* are “two [=not one] *śabda* that have the same [=one] *artha*” [*ekārthānekaśabda*]. But *dantin* designates the elephant as

“the one that has one tooth” and *hastin* as “the one that has one hand” – accurately stressing different *reference values* from different ways of naming the same object, and this depends exclusively on the observation and perception of different features. The “word sense”, its *reference value*, will only be understood if one resorts to extralinguistic, situational and contextual elements that are ever present, externally to the word: its sense will never be understood by the “word” itself. The same goes to the Sanskrit name for “bird”, “fish” and “serpent”, *aṇḍaja*, which bears the sense “born out of an egg” – and that asserts by itself that three objects (or meanings) are referred to by the same “word”. In this case, Yāska says it comes to “one *śabda* with a not-one *artha*” [*anekārthaikaśabda*]. In Sanskrit, “fish” is also named/meant *matsya*, *mīna*, *visāra*, *jalaja* etc. Each one of these terms, however, will be designating different senses (respectively, “the jolly small one”, “the one who does not move in straight line”, “the one that runs in several directions”, “the one born in water”) of the same thing/animal. As can be seen, this is not a matter of *synonymy* and *homonymy* in the elementary senses of these concepts.

4. In another explanatory shade or nuance, Yāska states that *duhitṛ* relates to DUH “to milk, to suck > to suckle” and to *ldūre hitāl* “the one which is good at distance”. In other words, the sense of “daughter” can be apprehended in two ways, both sifted or determined by culture. Anyway, he is not setting up two “etymological” mechanisms for the same “word”. In the first explanation, he is supported by the strict morphology (root DUH + *i* + agentive suffix *-tr*) – which does not mean he is proposing a “correct and acceptable etymology in face of grammar or comparative linguistic studies, when confronted with *daughter* in English, *Tochter* in German etc.” In the second one, he presents a sentence with which the Sanskrit speaker, by the occurrence of similar sounds in another words and with an ideological-cultural felicity that characterises the nice plays on words, is able to explain in another way the sense he gets in what is meant by the sound *duhitṛ*; also in this case, the explanation procedure does not mean that there is a change or evolution from an ancient form *ldūre hitāl* to an actual form *lduhitṛ* with an implication such as the occurrence of an assortment of figures such as apocopes, syncopes, metathesis, haplogies etc.; neither is he pro-

posing an “incorrect or unacceptable etymology, a popular *etym*”. He is not confronting correct or incorrect *forms* against each other, either scientifically valid or invalid – but, starting from the *signifiant* of a word and from the meaning attributed to it, he is attempting to present (or recover) possible senses inside a cultural net of reference values.

5. Yāska states that “words” can express their senses “by themselves” – or, as it has also been suggested, “by their own nature”. This concept is Yāska’s and this condition must be explained at this point. It does not mean that words have any natural disposition or any divine nature; neither that there is something unexplainable or mysterious linking their contents. Affirming that the *artha* of a *śabda* presents itself *svabhāvatas* [the concept is referred to as an adverb of manner] to the speaker, Yāska means that words present themselves *as a way of turning to/becoming* the expression of something. In the same manner that a stone presents itself to the individual as (=in the state of) a stone, the air as air, the “word” is presented to him as a “word”, and not as something else. In other terms, as the stone “stones itself” along the way, in the same manner the word “words itself” in communication. Or still, and better, in a semiological perspective: the sense of stone is grasped at the very moment the walker notices that he must keep clear of it, or leap over it, as a consequence of his experience with the stone – and anyway he will act acknowledging that the stone is not a triangle or a chicken, but “by being a stone”, and presenting itself along the way “self-convertible” as a stone. This “stone experience” is to the individual a rationalised piece of information he has about someone else tumbling down or the memory of his own hurt sensitivity in a violent clash against his toe, etc. Similarly, in a communication, the “word” shows itself to the individual as such, integral and total, multivocal or univocal, and this belongs to the way of being of each “word”. Yāska points thus that the acknowledge of the sense(s) of whatever is *signifié* (or referred to) by a “word” constitutes the bases of the comprehension of what is communicated, admitting, between the lines, the issues of conventionality and/or proximity or adjustment of the interlocutors’ linguistic repertoires (more properly, *semantic* repertoires), and several other issues being inferred, such as the issue of what could be a noise in communication, the notion of error in the understanding of a state-

ment, the perception of the opening of signification or ambiguity present in a communication act or literary work.

6. Up to this point, the term “word” has always been purposely written between inverted commas. What is commonly translated in Yāska's text as “word” actually corresponds to two terms that are consistently used by him. They are *śabda* and *pada*, and they are now explained. For the sake of clarity, one may say that they are either two different names for two sides of the same element, or for only one element that comes into being in two different ways, in two different instances of existence. The first one, *śabda*, is for the sound, the auditive material (that is, the *signifiant*), the syllable as a sound, the phrase as a sound. However it is its second meaning that is the interest here, which is more exactly the use Yāska makes of the term: “word” as a constituting not-spoken element of the *brahman*, term/definition corresponding to the “system”, to the “language” – i.e., the “sign”. On the other hand, the second term *pada* designates the systemic element *śabda* when used in an enunciate. That's why the *pada*, for Yāska, and not the *śabda*, is bound to be distributed into four classes: going from the abstractness of language to its concreteness, they mark human discourse in different ways or intentions, being *nāman* (“name”), *ākhyāta* (“verb”), *upasarga* (“preposition”, but also “prefix” and “preverb”) and *nipāta* (“particle”, a class that includes conjunctions, adverbs, interjections and expletive terms). In other words, we have the *śabda/sound form*, usually said to be the “word” in common sense, and the *śabda/sign*, the “word” in its strictly technical sense; on the other side, we have the *pada*, the “word” in the concrete usage. It must be remembered that even us, in our languages, when we speak a rough metalinguistics, we use to confound the *śabda/sound form* and the *śabda/sign* with the *pada* – but these instances must be put in their own and specific places: as *śabda* (*sound form* or *sign*) the “word” is a system element and the *artha* attached to it is its *meaning*; as *pada* it is a speech element and its *artha* is its *reference value*, its sense.

7. It should be remembered that Yāska has elaborated his treatise in Sanskrit and deals with Sanskrit words. Although this statement may be as naive as it is obvious, there is an important and fundamental reason for

it to be made. The fact is that studies already completed on *Nirukta* – that is a metalinguistic text, this must not be forgotten – are indelibly imprinted by the language in charge of intermediating the transmission of the knowledge it contains. In our specific case, the main language has been the English language, but the problems arising from this process would be the same in case the translation language were any other. Towards this question converges the lack of perspective between *meaning* and *sense* that was cited above. And further problems arise out of the generalised belief that in a bilingual dictionary, for instance, “house” means “casa” [in Portuguese and Italian, like “maison” in French, etc.], when these terms are only equivalent: either the term “house” and the other terms will have their meaning and sense given within the respective series in English and Portuguese, Italian, French etc. and to which they will be linked by the speakers of those languages. If it is correct to think, as would seem to be consensual, that words only mean inasmuch as they “relate to”, the area of verification should always be in the language to which the word belongs. In this way, Yāska’s text is distorted when it is claimed that “*duhitṛ* means the one that is good at distance” and that “*duhitṛ* means *dūre hitā*”, which are proposed translations of the original enunciate */duhitā dūre hitā/*. Here there is a serious problem of concept enunciation: Yāska just says in Sanskrit that, in Sanskrit, one *sense* of *duhitṛ* may be perceived [= is, according to usage] when resorting to the expression */dūre hitā/*. The same goes with the expression */durhitā/* (“whose welfare is hard to achieve”) or to the expression of action *dogdhi* (“she suckles”). In the original text, the relation between the subject and the predicatives of Yāska’s sentences does not point out to the meaning: the Indian Sanskrit speaker known by Yāska obviously knew about the *meaning* of *duhitṛ*: to them, Yāska and their Sanskrit speakers, “*duhitṛ is duhitṛ*”: Yāska’s contributions deal with the mapping of the senses in which a word was used by Indians in their statements. It means that *Nirukta*’s translation (even if it is only a form of comprehending the text) is a complicated, risky undertaking, subject to several hindrances. Its metalinguistic nature must be preserved at all times.

8. Another issue about which considerations must be made are Yāska’s sources for his explanations. To affirm that his analyses fall upon “Sanskrit” words does not say it all; and saying that these are

“Vedic” words masks the nature of the analysed material. Actually, they amount to a little more than one thousand words, and constitute a *nighaṇṭu*, a list of words that were traditionally pronounced aloud by students and teachers of Sanskrit. The reason why these and not other words were chosen and the reason of why the list exists do not contribute to *Nirukta*'s comprehension. The point is that these words are usually said to be both Sanskrit and Vedic, as if what was Vedic wasn't Sanskrit either. There are two historical moments of the Indian language in its literate form implied here, but they were both coexistent at Yāska's time. There is no magic and no paradox in this statement: the words of the list analysed by Yāska indeed belonged to the lexicon of the Vedic Sanskrit, but from the fact that the texts in which they were used and which are cited by Yāska as authoritative arguments were still alive under the form of recitation and mainly from the fact that these words still were part of the Sanskrit lexicon of Yāska's time, one must check out whether there is not a difference between the form of the word in one period and in the other. That means they existed and still exist as *śabda*, signs of the system. What has been puzzling the researchers is that Yāska considers the analysed words as *nigama* (or *naigama*), a concept that relates to a “usage inherited from tradition” (note: usage), a still current usage, that is. But when it comes down to usage – to *pada*, using a distinction made above – differences may occur, and Yāska is attentive to them. He calls the “old-fashioned” usage (the so-called Vedic) *anvadhyaṃ*, and the usage “typical of current norm” (the so-called Sanskrit) *bhāṣāyām*. In the perspective of this paper, we could say that a *śabda* could have had, or not, in his history a change of meaning (a change in the thing meant that accompanies it), and thus a change in its sense – as is the case of the *nipāta na*, that indicated *anvadhyaṃ* either a comparison and a negation and nowadays, *bhāṣāyām*, it indicates only a negation; on the other hand, *iva* used to, and still indicates a comparison. Still, the senses to which the word *duhitṛ* points in the text have always or not been the same, this depending upon the historical form of the language in which this term occurs. Besides all that, Yāska sporadically refers to regional usages different from those of his region, thus pointing to regional norms of the same literate (or not?) language form.

9. As I said in the beginning of my exposition, this translation is still in progress, and I think I have still more one year of hard work. In the strict limits of this paper, these are some of the points that must be considered if one tries to make a linguistic translation/ reading/ interpretation of Yāska's *Nirukta*. I summarize these points: a) Yāska, definitely, must be considered a semanticist, not an etymologist; b) Yāska shows very clearly two instances of the *śabda*: as a material form, but still abstract, not made concrete in an enunciate, a material form associated to a meaning, a mental image; and, presented this way, the *śabda* constitutes the system, the language in abstract, the Saussurean concept of *langue*; c) as for the *pada*, it is the employment of the *śabda* in an enunciate, and, presented this way, the *pada* constitutes the speech, the language in its concrete usage, the Saussurean concept of *parole*; besides that, the *artha* associated to it is a reference value.