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Semantic Etymology: An innovative approach to Historical Linguistics

Dr. V N Bhattathiri

Bronkhorst, the eminent Indologist and Sanskrit scholar, has very aptly divided etymology to two: Historical and Semantic. Historical etymology presents the origin or early history of a word, identifies and gives the information as to the word, belonging to an earlier language (along with the route through other languages, if any) or to an earlier stage of the same language, from which that particular word is derived. On the other hand, semantic etymology attempts to elucidate the meaning of the word and gain information thence. In effect, semantic etymology would cover a deeper and wider area than historical. Moreover, since word meanings are involved, semantic etymologising needs to be done with actual words that existed and meaningfully used in a language and not hypothetical ones belonging to any 'Proto-language'

The difference between historical and semantic etymologies can be understood by an examination of the etymology of the word 'etymology'. According to the online etymology dictionary (OED), the word etymology entered English in 14th century AD, as *ethimologia*, meaning "facts of the origin and development of a word," from Old French *etimologie*, *ethimologie* (14th century, Modern French *étymologie*), from Latin *etymologia*, from Greek *etymologia* "analysis of a

word to find its true origin," properly "study of the true sense (of a word)," with *-logia* "study of, a speaking of"+ *etymon* "true sense," neuter of *etymos* "true, real, actual," related to *eteos* "true," which perhaps is cognate with Sanskrit *satyah*, Gothic *sunjis*, Old English *sod* "true." Here, the language of origin, the 'route' taken to reach English, as well as its relevant meaning in the originating language is given in detail. Moreover, a possible cognate in Sanskrit, another PIE language, increases the authority. A historical etymologist would be satisfied with the above. On the other hand, a semantic etymologist would not be. To him would occur the questions as to why and how *eteos* should mean true, as well as additional questions like whether the Sanskrit cognate can be *asatya* (not true), or *sat* (essence; check) or even *asat* which are all phonologically similar to *eteos* as much as *satyah*. It would also occur to him whether the word of origin could be a more meaningful Dravidian word, because Europeans could have had contact with Dravidians in ancient times.

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could be a more meaningful Dravidian word, because Europeans could have had contact with Dravidians in ancient times.

According to Bronkhorst, semantic etymologising was wide-spread in all pre-modern cultures; more so in ancient Greece and ancient and classical India, in Plato's 'Cratylus' and particularly in *Yāska's Nirukta*. He is of the opinion that semantic etymologising has largely gone out of fashion these days because of serious doubts about the possibility of finding the meaning of just any word by comparing it with other, more or less similar words, which was the way it had been done. According to OED, "Classical etymologists, Christian and pagan, based their explanations on allegory and guesswork, lacking historical records as well as the scientific method to analyse them", with Flaubert sarcastically commenting that the general view was that etymology was "the easiest thing in the world with the help of Latin and a little ingenuity."

Semantic etymologising in the Vedic times, Bronkhorst observes, almost without exception relied on myths for the explanation of meanings; in fact it appears that etymologies have given rise to myths occasionally. The association between Vedic, and naturally most of the Sanskrit, words and religion exists to every Sanskrit scholar, whether belonging to the east or the west, and not to *Yāska* or the ancient scholars alone. The technique used by semantic etymologists is to connect one word with one or more others, by bringing to light connections between objects that are normally hidden. Similarities between words can reveal these connections, even though many seriously doubt the possibility of finding the meaning of just any word by comparing it with other, more or less similar words.

Bronkhorst asserts that it is *Yāska's Nirukta* that made sense of and brought order into the semantic etymologizing common in the Vedic Brāhmanās, thereby secularizing and rationalizing this practice. *Yāska* formulated the general rules for etymologising, without recourse to any religious association. He

propounded that a word should be examined being intent upon its meaning, with the help of some similarity in function with other words. When not even such a similarity is present one should explain on the basis of similarity in a syllable or in a single sound, professing that etymologizing should, first of all, be guided by the meaning of the word concerned; phonetic considerations play a less important role.

It is the observation of Bronkhorst that classical Greek scholars, most notably Plato, also had indulged in Semantic etymologising, with one notable exception in approach: classical Indian scholars could believe in the existence of one 'real' language (namely Sanskrit), all other languages being, at best, imperfect reflections of it, whereas the Greek scholars did not look upon their language as the only true language. According to Bronkhorst, this complicated matters considerably, and it is not impossible that this fact is partly responsible for the relatively suspicious way in which the problem was often approached in the Western tradition.

Another important difference between Greek and Sanskrit scholars was, according to Bronkhorst, that the Greeks, epitomized by Plato's saying in *Cratylus*, believed words as having been created by one or several lawgivers ("with the dialectician as his supervisor") who were no ordinary persons, but were more than human, whereas the Sanskrit scholars evidently did not think so; the idea of words being made by anyone, human or superhuman, was totally unacceptable for them.

Semantic etymologising is not acceptable to modern researchers, Bronkhorst suggests, despite it having been practiced extensively in ancient times, for the simple reason that they are considered as invalid. But the fact remains that it *was* accepted as valid, and this has to be explained, Bronkhorst feels. One way to do this is to understand semantic etymologies against the background of their respective cultures, and another one is to see semantic etymologising as a universal phenomenon, not inherently linked to any particular culture, and therefore look for a universal explanation. He has taken an effort to move in this

direction and is of the opinion that the link exists as a common belief in magical acts which are of almost universal occurrence in human societies. Both semantic etymologising and acts of magic can be considered as expressions of analogical mode of thought and share an element of similarity which play a major role in both.

The present paper attempts to introduce a new, innovative approach to semantic etymologising of Sanskrit words, without recourse to any sort of mythology or thoughts of magic, but firmly rooted on modern science. Naturally, this will call for a radical attitudinal change of modern day linguists and semanticists towards the formation of words by the ancients. Before going into this, a few factors that accompany semantic etymologising, especially of Vedic Sanskrit words, needs to be considered.

It is worthwhile here to recall the words of Leonard Bloomfield “...in order to give a scientifically accurate definition of meaning for every form of a language, a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speaker’s world is required. In areas where this knowledge is accurate, accurate meanings can be given, but in a majority of situations, this is not possible. Therefore, the statement of meanings is the weak point in study of language and it will remain so until human knowledge advances far beyond its present state”. This clearly shows that whether ancient or modern, a broad, if not in-depth, knowledge is crucial for the correct identification of meanings of words. Knowledge in all fields has advanced a lot since the time of Bloomfield, and the modern linguist should be better equipped to tackle semantics and semantic etymology, with or without the help of ‘non-linguists’, provided they have the inclination.

Another factor to be taken into consideration is the presumption, of the ancients, that Sanskrit is the one ‘real’ language, all other languages being, at best, imperfect reflections of it. This prevented them from thoughts of there being ‘borrowing’ from other languages. In a way, as far as the Indic languages are considered, the modern etymologists also hold the same view, in a roundabout way: i.e., since the *R̥gVeda*, dated to 1500 BC is the oldest literary creation in the world, Sanskrit would not have words from other languages, except for cognates from other Indo-European languages. And the etymologist is content when such a presumed cognate is found which gives more credence to the meaning and etymology obtained for that word.

Yet another factor could be the tacit assumption that the Vedic literature and words essentially identify with religion, mythology and magic. The hidden presumption seems that the ancients, especially the ‘pagans’, would not have been very knowledgeable in modern science; nor could they have used such a knowledge efficiently for word formation.

Flaubert's statement (*vide supra*) ridicules ingenuity, but it cannot be gainsaid that etymologising, especially semantic, is a sort of detective work, a hunt for the mystery of the real meaning, that sometimes demands the ingenuity of a Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot.

Semantics of some Sanskrit words

Nirukta is explained as semantic etymologising; this aspect of the word *nirukta* can be studied in detail. As per Sir Monier-William's Sanskrit English Dictionary (MWD), the meaning of *nirukta* relevant to etymology is 'explanation or etymological interpretation of a word' as well as 'interpreted', i.e. become manifest, fulfilled and accomplished (as a word). But it also means uttered, pronounced, expressed, explained, defined, etc. The word *nirukta* can be partitioned as *nir+ukta*. The word *nir* is a prefix, a modification of *niṣ* before vowels and soft consonants, and *niṣ* means out of, away from, or that of a privative or negative adverb, meaning without, destitute of, free from, etc., similar to the 'un-' in English. The word *ukta* itself essentially means uttered, said, spoken, etc., which are the same as that of *nirukta*. Thus, surprisingly, *ukta* and 'un'-*ukta* appears to have about the same meaning, and this calls for an explanation. Of course it can be argued that since *niṣ* and *nir* has property of strengthening particle, acting as thoroughly, entirely, very, etc., (as in *muṇḍa*=bald, hairless and *nir-muṇḍa*=completely, totally hairless). Even if it is so, the question of why *nirukta* should mean totally, completely uttered, pronounced, expressed, explained, defined, etc., remains.

Before trying to explain this, another word may be semantically analysed. *Aniruddha* is a well-known *purāṇic* name, that of the grandson of *Kṛṣṇa*. He was an extremely handsome youth. *Uṣa*, the daughter of an *asura* (demon) named *Bāṇa*, was so enchanted with him that she used a secret emissary to bring him, while asleep, to her. They co-habited for a few days. When *Bāṇa* came to know of this, he attacked *Aniruddha*. The youth fought valiantly and *Bāṇa* could not defeat him. Finally he had to use his magic powers and thus bind him up, probably by making him asleep. Later

Kṛṣṇa appeared, defeated *Bāṇa* in a fierce battle and rescued *Aniruddha*. Then he was woken up and married to *Uṣa*. The name/word *aniruddha* means unobstructed, ungovernable, self-willed, etc. An analysis of its meaning can be done now to see if it connects well with the mythological character. It can first be broken to *a+nir+uddha*. The word *uddha*, used in Ṛg Vēda, means (as relevant here) to be erect, to go upwards, move upwards, rise up, etc. In case of a warrior, it can be taken as denoting one who stays erect, become raised up, moves upwards, etc. Since *nir* denotes un-, *nir-uddha* indicates one who is un-erect, not- raised up, etc., i.e. in the case of a warrior it denotes one who has fallen. The prefix ‘*a*’ indicates ‘not’, same as the prefixes ab- and an-, in English. Thus *aniruddha* indicates one who is ‘not un-erect’, i.e. not fallen. This is a more rightful epitomisation of *Aniruddha*’s valour than simply saying that he is unobstructed, ungovernable, etc. He is none of these, but is one who never falls in a battle; *Bāṇa* had to use magic to subdue him. This sort of double-negative word constructions involving *a-nir* are not uncommon, other examples being *a-nir-daya* (not-un-compassionate), *a-nir-mala* (not-un-sullied), etc.

It may be noted that the analysis was done in the reverse way, from *uddha* to *aniruddha*. It takes two divisions to reach *uddha* if starting from *aniruddha*, i.e. *aniruddha*->*a+nir+uddha*->*a+nir+uddha*. At each step of division, the words, *aniruddha*, *aniruddha* and *uddha* can metaphorically be seen to ‘utter (its own) meaning’, i.e. do an ‘*ukta*’, until a stage is reached when further divisions fail to give a meaning; at this stage it can be thought of as having become *nir-ukta* too’, i.e. ‘not uttering’ any meaning, becoming just a jumble of meaningless letters (the possibility of individual sounds and letters having a meaning is not considered here). This essentially is the difference between *nirukta* and *ukta*. This explanation aptly indicates the process and meaning of semantic etymologising in Sanskrit.

Semantic Etymology of two Sanskrit words

The word, *dakṣiṇa*, may be analysed to understand how to undertake and how much Semantic etymology can be helpful to historical linguistics. MWD gives it's meanings as relative position of right side or southern (as being on the right side of a person looking eastward), right (not left), situated to the south, turned or directed southwards, coming from the south and the right hand. It also has the meaning of able, clever, dexterous, etc. as well as straightforward, candid, sincere, pleasing, compliant. *Dakṣiṇa* also means a milch cow as well as the fee or present to the officiating priest. *Dakṣiṇa* means fee apparently because it was originally such a cow that was given as fee; but this does not explain why a milch or to-be-milch cow should be called a *dakṣiṇa*. It is obvious that the reasons for the various meanings are not clear and the links connecting the various meanings are lacking. They cannot be linked to the meanings of right or Southern, unless one accepts that southerners are more able, clever, etc. The word *dakṣiṇa* is present in very old literature such as *Ṛg Vēda*, *Athara Vēda*, *Vājasanēyi Samhita*, *Mahābhārata*, etc.

Dakṣiṇa can be considered as a compound of two words, namely *dakṣ/dakṣa* and *iṇa*. *Dakṣ* is a Sanskrit word which means to be able or strong, to grow, increase and to make able or strong. *Dakṣa* means able, clever, dexterous, industrious and right as opposed to left. The word *iṇa* is not seen in Sanskrit, and the substring *iṇa* is present only in *dakṣiṇa*, *pradakṣiṇa* (circumambulation) and *abhyamitriṇa* (advancing against or attacking). In the case of *abhyamitriṇa*, MWD suggests that it is apparently derived from *abhyamitram*, making it obvious that the origin of *iṇa* is unknown.

The word, *iṇa* is present in the Dravidian languages Malayalam and Tamil (as *iṇai* in Tamil). In Kannada it is present as *eṇa* and in Telugu as *ena*. *Iṇa* means pair, couple as well as union, conjunction, likeness, similitude, resemblance, analogy, two things of a kind, mate, husband/wife, pair, couple, brace, aid, help, support; woman's locks; limit and boundary.

With the above meanings of Sanskrit *dakṣ* and Dravidian *iṇa* in mind, the semantic etymologisation of *dakṣiṇa* can be pursued. The human body, like that of almost all animals, may be seen as the conjunction or union, in the midline, of two symmetrical halves, or a pair, namely the right and the left. Externally they are very much alike, analogous to each other and internally too most of the organs are paired, except the midline ones. Consequently, the two halves can be legitimately considered as two pairs, resembling and analogous to each other, braced together, supporting and aiding each other, each forming the boundary of and limiting the other. Since all these are the meanings of *iṇa*, the right and left halves can be legitimately considered as two *iṇas*.

Among these two *iṇas*, the right one (i.e. the right half of the body), especially the musculature, is larger, thicker and stronger in more than 80% of the human beings. This is because these people are right handed and use their right limbs for all heavy work, the constant use making them grow larger and stronger. In these people, the right side is also used for doing work that needs skilfulness, ability, cleverness, dexterity, industriousness, etc. It can be noted here that these are the meanings of *dakṣ/dakṣa*. Therefore, of the two *iṇas* or pairs that form the body, the right one is *dakṣ*. To put it in another way, of the two *iṇas* of the body, the right-side one is the *iṇa* that is *dakṣa*, thereby making it the *dakṣiṇa*. This is why *dakṣiṇa* has the meaning of right arm or hand in *Ṛg Vēda*, and this may be considered as the fundamental meaning. Now, when facing east in the morning, the right *iṇa*, i.e. the *dakṣiṇa* side, points to the southern direction and naturally South was given the name *dakṣiṇa*.

Pairs can appear together; metaphorically, any two objects or occurrences that appear together, which may be cause and effect or merely association, may be thought of as being pairs. When a person receives a fee, this fee naturally aids the growth, *dakṣ*, of the recipient, making the *dakṣ* (i.e. the growth) an *iṇa* of the fee (the giver also becomes *dakṣ*, at least psychologically as well as socially) giving a more realistic explanation as to why *dakṣiṇa* means fee. A cow given as *dakṣiṇa* became so because it is the fee, and not the reverse. But it may be noted that as a food item, the milk of a cow is an important *iṇa* of *dakṣ*, thereby making a milch cow a *dakṣiṇa*.

Dākṣiṇya means belonging to or worthy of a sacrificial fee (i.e. denotes worthiness), dexterity, skill, officiousness which are all meanings associated with *dakṣ*, explained earlier. But it also means gallantry, kindness, consideration, piety, etc., as well as a ritual of the right hand. The reason for these meanings are not apparent. *Dākṣiṇya* means a person with *dakṣ*. Since *dakṣ* means growth, etc., such a person will be more mature in age, physically as well as psychologically. More importantly, gallantry, kindness, consideration, piety etc., denotes psychological qualities and can be seen to imply that a person with *dākṣiṇya* has a mature, aged, expanded, widened mind with a broad outlook and will not be narrow or small minded. It is obvious that the meaning of *dākṣiṇya* correlates well with the meaning of *dakṣiṇa* described above.

The validity of the conclusion that the Sanskrit word for right side is related to growth, i.e. *dakṣa*, would be strengthened if it can be shown that the word for the left side is related to debility, decline, decrease or defect in growth. The word *vāma* means left, not right, being or situated on the left side, etc. It also means the act of vomiting, which, as everyone knows, is a debilitating event which can lessen growth, making *vāma* the antonym of *dakṣa*, in that sense. *Vāma* also means any woman or wife, as well as a mare, she-ass, female camel, young female elephant, the female of the jackal, etc., all these obviously reflecting the generally smaller size of the female sex. *Vāmana*, an *avatār* of *Viṣṇu*, was a dwarf. In short, *vāma*, the antonym of *dakṣa* denotes smallness and defects/debilities in growth which are opposite to the meanings of *dakṣa*. This validates the semantic etymological derivation of *dakṣiṇa* presented.

Another approach, similar to the use of linked words, is the use of ‘same sound clusters’ occurring in words which apparently do not have linked meanings. These have been termed as quasi-morphemes when they give some suggestion of meaning; even those without any apparent meaning may also be quasi-morphemes. Analysis of quasi-morphemes can be very fruitful in semantic etymologising as detailed earlier (Bhattathiri, 2016).

It is possible that someone may argue, on the basis of some obscure *Pāṇinian sandhi* rule, that *dakṣiṇa* should not be divided to *dakṣ+iṇa*. But it should be borne in mind that the *Ṛg Vēda* was composed centuries before Panini, and nothing enough is known about the *sandhi* rules of that period so as to dispute such a partitioning.

The approach to semantic etymologising presented here needs: i). ingenuity, ii). A firm belief that there may be links to something more than mere mythology or religion hidden in the word meanings, which would be scientific even according to modern standard, iii). Reasonably good knowledge of other natural science, and iv). The awareness that there can be ‘borrowing’ even in ancient Sanskrit. This is nearer to Plato’s concepts rather than *Yāska*’s. Plato could develop such a concept may be because he lived, in Europe, nearly 200 years earlier than *Yāska* (Bronkhorst suggests that *Yāska* lived around 250 BC) and was therefore nearer to the happenings than *Yāska*.

Semantic etymologising can give pointers to linguists, especially historical etymologists. For example, the Dravidian word *iṇa* forms an integral part of the word *dakṣiṇa* contributing significantly to the word meaning. This would arouse the curiosity as to when, where and how a Dravidian word entered Sanskrit, an IE language family member, way back in the ancient times. It may be argued that it is just only a single word; but it should be remembered that there are 145 words starting with *dakṣin* (including a few with *dākṣiṇy-*) in Sanskrit. A related frontier of research is whether other IE languages contain the Dravidian *iṇa*. The feminine suffix *-ina* used in various European languages (regina, czarina) is an obvious candidate for further research, especially since it is also used to denote diminutiveness (sonatina, concertina, etc.), and is from the Latin suffix *-inus/-ina/-inum* which means ‘like’, which is very similar to the meaning of the Dravidian *iṇa*. Research is also needed to find other Dravidian words possibly present in Sanskrit.

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