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Lexical Ambiguities in the Buddhist Teachings, an Example & Methodology

Bryan Levman

Abstract

The actual words that the Buddha spoke are inaccessible to us; his teachings were orally preserved over time and either gradually evolved according to natural phonological rule and/or changed at the point they were committed to writing in local or artificially fabricated dialects, starting perhaps from the time of Aśoka, but certainly by the first century B.C. The phonological simplifications we see in the Aśokan edicts were also prevalent in the Buddhist oral tradition and often led to homonymic ambiguities and confusion on the part of translators. Language was arbitrary, changeable and imprecise according to the Buddha, and his teaching style reflects language’s inability to precisely express the Dharma he attained: one of the characteristic features of the Buddha’s oral style is synonymic or near-synonymic word repetition; another is a malleable, polysemic approach to key individual word meanings. This article examines one keyword—pramaññacalpa—from one of the gāthās in the story of the Buddha’s Great Hesitation, his initial decision not to teach the Dharma after his enlightenment out of concern that people would not understand him. The word was variously interpreted in four different Middle Indic traditions and the different interpretations can help identify an underlying homonymic oral source form. The ambiguity in the source form and the translators’ decisions as to its meaning led to various other rationalizing alterations in the surrounding lexicem and semantic structure. The article concludes that the original composer of the gāthās was likely aware of and comfortable with the polyvocal nature of the teachings, which added a richer and deeper dimension to the teaching.

Keywords: Early Buddhism language, phonology, Prakrit, Middle Indic, homonyms

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Introduction

We can probably never recover the actual words spoken by the Buddha. What has survived of his teachings was not written down for hundreds of years after his passing; Pāli is generally considered to be the oldest of the witness languages, and it was not recorded until the first century B.C. in Sri Lanka.\(^4\) After the Buddha’s passing his teachings were memorized orally and preserved through a bhāṣāka system and through oral recitation by the monks, a methodology which is well documented in the Pāli scriptures themselves.\(^5\) All the Sangha were expected to memorize and recite his rules and teachings at regular intervals—the pratiṃnakakti, or Vinaya rules, were recited every fortnight, for example, sayings of the Buddha like the Aṭṭhakavagga from the Sutta Nīpāta (Sn) were memorized and repeated by the monks, and several of the suttas—like Dīgha Nikāya (DN) 33 Sangittasutta and DN 34 Dasuttara Sutta—were part of the recitation liturgy in early life in the Sangha. I omit from this discussion the controversy over whether there was a single or multiple transmission, i.e., whether the Buddha’s teachings were translated into different dialects, as per the famous Vīriya passage Anūjānāṁ bhikkhave sakāyā niruttīyā buddhavacanam pariṭāpamānī “I allow Buddha teaching to be learned with my own names and terms”, as I have dealt with this issue elsewhere.\(^4\) When one studies all the usages of the word niruttī in the Pāli scriptures, it becomes clear that the Buddha is talking about his own terms and designations, i.e., his own Dharma terminology and it is also clear that the word niruttī does not have the meaning of “dialect.” He is in fact insisting that the Dharma be taught in his own niruttī, his own terms, designations and names.

Assuming that the Sangha did their best to preserve the actual teachings of the Buddha in his own words—i.e., verbatim—with his own terms and descriptions, there are three possibilities as to what happened to the teachings:

1) They were preserved verbatim by the bhāṣāka (with of course some human error), but when they were written down, because of language change over time, they had to be translated into the local dialect to be intelligible, whether a localizable dialect as in Gandhāri, or an artificial one, normalized for dissemination and ecclesiastical purposes, as Pāli is generally considered to be.\(^3\) These translations

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5. Wilhelm Geiger, Pāli Literatur und Sprache (Strassburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trübner, 1916), 4, believed that Pāli was a lingua franca, or what he called Verkehrssprache (“interlanguage”), based on Magaddhi. Helmer Smith, “Le futur moyen indien,” Journal Asiatique, (1952), 178, called it a haie Gàngaïqé: Heinz Bechert, “Allgemeine Bemerkungen zum Thema Die Sprache der ältesten buddhistischen Überlieferung,” Die Sprache der ältesten buddhistischen Überlieferung, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Dritte Folge, Nr. 117, 34, postulated the existence of a “einige mittelindischen Dichtersprache nahe, die möglichweise überregional im Gebrauch und doch an bestimmten Stellen einem Angleichungsprozess einer örtliche Sprachformen unterworfen war, wie H. Smith vermutet hat” (a Middle Indic poetic language which was possibly trans-regional in use and in certain places was subject to an assimilation process as H. Smith had supposed). K. R. Norman, Pāli Literature (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), 4, maintains that Pāli was an attempt to make the buddhavacana more homogenous; Pāli was a normalized language and an “ecclesiastical” one, “being recited by monks who probably spoke a variety of languages or dialects, there is no necessity to assume that it coincided exactly with any one particular spoken language.” Étienne Lamotte, History of Indian Buddhism from the origins to the Śaka Era, translated from the French by Sara Webb-Boin (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain Institut Orientaliste, 1958, 1988), 563, gives several examples of the “composite nature” of Pāli and the “dialectical mixture” of its phonology. Oskar von Hinüber, “The Oldest Literary Language of Buddhism,” Saeculum 34 (1983), (1983), 2,
would have taken place when writing became popular, around the first century B.C., although a standardization of Pāli must have begun as early as the third century B.C. when Añākā sent his son Mahinda to Sri Lanka with the Buddha’s teachings.

2) The phonology changed over time—according to natural linguistic laws—and each dialect area in India preserved their own individual transmission according to their own phonological peculiarities, i.e. the local bhātṭokas adapted their memorized teachings to the local dialect. This process would be a gradual and continual one from the time of the Buddha until the teachings were written down each in their own dialect.

3) or an attempt was made to standardize the teachings by translating them into the only pan-Indian language available, i.e. Sanskrit, or a form thereof (Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit), for purposes of intelligibility, broad dissemination and increased prestige.

In fact, as Buddhism rapidly spread across India and beyond, probably all these transformations took place. Scholars have shown that indeed there is such a language which can be isolated, called by von Hinüber “Buddhist Middle Indic,” and from which Pāli, Gāndhāri, and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit = BHS (and

calls Pāli “the ecclesiastical language of southern Buddhism.” Underlying Pāli is a language which he calls “Buddhist Middle Indic,” the earliest language of Buddhism which is “not only a highly artificial, but also a composite language drawing from different natural languages of various regions.” (page 9). This article is also published in Selected Papers on Pāli Studies, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2005), 177-94.

Bechert, “Allgemeine Bemerkungen,” 26: “We can conclude that no text that we have contains the language of the Buddha or of the oldest Buddhist tradition and accordingly the texts lying before us in some way are based on older transitional stages in a divergent oral form, so that we must presume that there was a transference/transmittal/passing on (Übertragung) from one speech form to another — with or without stages, in the form of a consciously carried out translation (Übersetzung) or through a gradual conversion (Umsetzung) in oral transmission (Überlieferung).” (translated from German by the author) See K. R. Norman, “Pāli Philology and the Study of Buddhism,” in Tadeusz Skorupski, ed., The Buddhist Forum, Volume I (London, 1990), 34; also published in Collected Papers IV (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1993), 84: “... even if we establish the form of the Sanskrit version correctly, all it tells us is what the person or persons responsible for making that translation thought his Middle Indo-Aryan exponents meant. It cannot be emphasised too much that all the versions of canonical Hinayana Buddhist texts which we possess are translations, and even the earliest we possess are translations from some still earlier version, now lost.”

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other lost dialects) flow. How much it changed over time between the Buddha’s teachings and its later transcription is impossible to tell; however we can isolate what form some of the earlier words must have taken, for we often find conflicting phonological variations pointing to the existence of an underlying proto-form which accounts for these anomalies. We know, from the Añākā edicts,—the earliest surviving record of Middle Indic—that these forms were often homophonic, i.e. because of weakening or loss of intervocalic consonants, loss of intervocalic aspirated stops, disappearance of most word-initial and internal conjunct consonants and interchange of various glides and sibilants—all phenomena observable in the edicts—a single phoneme often had several possible meanings associated with it, which had to be clarified in context. The translator had to make decisions as to meaning which were not always appropriate. A famous example is the Middle Indic (MI) word bodhisattā. When it was re-Sanskritised into BHS, translators had to make a decision as to what the word actually meant. Most picked bodhisatvā (“a being who is awakened” or “a being on the way to awakening”), while some (the Tibetan tradition) picked bodhisatvan (“a hero of awakening”). But bodhisatva (“devoted to awakening”) and bodhisatvat (“capable of awakening”) were also equally possible as was bodhisattā (“the one who has excellence is awakening”) and bodhisatto (“the one whose power is awakening”). Each compound highlights a different aspect of the path; one must assume that the Buddha was well aware of the different aspects of meanings and was not averse to the polyvalency contained therein.

7 von Hinüber, Überblick, §40; See also Lévi, M. S. “Sur Une Langue Précanonique du Bouddhisme.” Journal Asiatique Dixième Série, Tome XX (1912):511, who was the first to isolate this linguistic stratum: “The sterile debates about the authenticity of the Pāli canon or the Sanskrit canon are eliminated. Both of these are only the late inheritors of a previous tradition, rectified or drawn up in a dialect which has disappeared and which had attained already a stage of advanced phonetic wearing down (‘sauve phonétique’).” Translated by the author. See also Lamotte, History, 587.


The Buddha’s View of Language

In contrast to Brahmanism, for which the Vedic texts represented the immortal word of God—they were permanent and had existed since the beginning of time,10—words for the Buddha were not eternal, but changeable; they were conventional and arbitrary with the sonic element of the word having no essential connection to the meaning. What was important was the understanding and use of words for liberation, not only their ritualistic repetition. The Buddha did not believe that words could express the truth of enlightenment which was *aatadāvācara* ("not within the realm of reasoning or thought"). Words therefore could only be an approximation of the truth, they are merely “names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Taḥāgata uses without misapprehending them.”11 Ultimately the monk is liberated from language by *abhiññā*, superknowledge.12 If language cannot express the inexpressible, how does one communicate it, in that case? One of the characteristic features of the Buddha’s oral style is synonimic or near-synonimic word repetition; another is a malleable, polysemic approach to key individual word meanings. To give one famous example of the former, recall the passage where the Buddha tries to express the insights he has experienced just after his awakening: “I thought: ‘This Dharma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful and excellent, unattainable by mere reasoning/difficult to know/beyond logic, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.’”13 In this

12 See, for example the Mahāniddānasutta, DN 15, 68: “As far, Ānanda, as designation and the range of designation reaches, as far as language and the range of language reaches, as far as concepts and the range of concepts reaches, as far as understanding and the range of understanding reaches, as far as the cycle reaches and revoloves—that monk is liberated from all that by super-knowledge, and to maintain that such a liberated monk does not know and see would be a wrong view and incorrect.” Trans. Walshe, Long Discourses, 228.
13 Ariyapariyiyansasutta, MN 1 167: Tassa mayham bhikkhave etadassato: adhīgato kho nissakto dhammo gambhīrā dhammadurānubaddho santo paṭṭito atakāvācaro niyugo patipitavedanīyo.


14 Three other lesser known examples: 1) pahīsutta is a very common expression in Pāli generally taken to mean “focused self,” but to an average Middle Indic audience also meant “abandoned self” and was so understood by the Tibetan translators; see F. Edgerton, Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Lexicon (Dheli: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1953, 1998), s.v. pahīsutta; see Laliāvītaka 18.111 where the BHS reflex pahītātapārāṇa is translated in Tibetan as spungs pa nyid (“abandoned self”) (http://www.asianclassics.org/releases/flat/KD0095M.TXT) accessed November 2011; both meanings are explicit in the compound. 2) The phrase *pacekkabuddha* means a buddha enlightened by himself, but it also carries the implicit meaning of *pratistabhuddha* (as it was so understood in the Mahāyāna sutras), meaning a buddha enlightened through understanding causes and conditions. Derivation is *pratistha* > *pacekkha* > (palatalization → → in the presence of [-ANT] cons. → ) > *pacekkha* > (re-Sanskritized in Pāli to pacekka—supposedly from Skt. pratyek, “each single one”). The -sṛ -sṛ -sṛ -sṛ “weakened” weakly articulated intervocalic glide which replaced consonants in intervocalic position, per R. Pischel, Comparative Grammar of the Prakrit Languages, translated from the German by Subhadra Jī (Dheli: Motilal Banarsidas, 1981), 187. For the Mahāyāna derivation see Edgerton, BHSD, s.v. pratistha. From the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra: anve satva anācāryakam jñānamadamasatamah ātāpamāryavat attho heta-pratistabhuddho tathāgataśaṁjane bhuyojane (contrast with the earlier appearance of the Hinayāna pratistabuddhas, who seek to understand only the four noble truths), “Other beings [aspiring to the Mahāyāna path], desiring tranquility, taming, wisdom and a state that needs no teacher, apply themselves to the teaching of the Taḥāgata in order to awaken to causes and conditions, which is the cause of the complete extinction of the ego.” This passage may be found in H. Kern and Nasjio B., Saddharmapuṇḍarīka or The Lotus of the True Law (St. Petersburg: L’Academie Impériale des Sciences, 1908–12), 80.3. The key Buddhist word nirvāṇa/nibbāna also contains two or three meanings within it, stemming from the root nir + v (to blow out), ni + v (to cover over or extinguish, as in the case of a fire) and nir + v (without motion, calm). See PED s.v. nibbāna, nibbuta.
Methodology

The discipline of historical linguistics shows us the laws by which language changes over time, according to standard phonological patterns. In the case of Old Indic’s change into the Middle Indic Prakrits, this was largely in the direction of simplification, with the result that, as stated above, many homonyms evolved. Using standard comparative linguistics techniques we can reconstruct these source forms, clarify ambiguities in the original transmission and identify translator decisions and/or mistakes. In the case where we have more than one version of corresponding passages in different Prakrits, variations in the interpretation of the source form are often exposed by the different translators.15 This is a case in point, comparing corresponding gāhās which have come down to us in the Pāli and BHS traditions about a famous incident in the life of the Buddha; the gāhās are particularly useful because the inane conservatism of the metrical and poetical form gives us some confidence of the authenticity of the tradition.16

The Great Hesitation

In the Buddhist writings, a series of verses occur in the context of the Buddha’s decision not to teach the Dharma and Brahma’s supplication to him to change his mind, called “The Great Hesitation” by Horner17 or “Brahma’s Request” (Brahmāyaśana in the Pāli) or “The Exhortation” (Adhiṣṭaya in the Lalitavistaraśūra). The story appears in several places in the canon including the Mahākhandhaka (biography of the Buddha) which is the first section of the

15 For a good example where we can uncover an underlying form vinaya, vira or virañjo, see K. R. Norman, “Four Etymologies from the Sāhiya-sutta,” in Somaratna Balasooriya (et al.), ed., Buddhist Studies in honour of Wijepala Ruella (London, 1980), 175. Also published in Collected Papers Volume II (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1991), 151. In the Saññāsutta of the Suttanipāta we find the Pāli word virañjo, “free from passion” and in a close parallel version of the Mahāvastu, the word virañjo, “ceased.” The underlying form would show the intervocalic glide, as noted.


Khandhaka, the first portion of the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya.18 We have BHS recensions available in the Mahāvastu (Mv),19 a work of the Lokottaravāda School; in the Saññādhammadhavavastu (SBV),20 a work of the Mūlasārvasvādīṇḍas, in the Sarvāstivādin Catapurṣaṭīṣaṭāra (CPS),21 and in the Lalitavistaraśūra (LV).22 Numerous Chinese versions are also available,23 plus a version in the Tibetan Vinaya (TV). Four weeks after the Buddha’s enlightenment, he contemplates the abstruseness of his insights and despairs of mankind ever understanding him. So he decides to become a recluse and spare himself the aggravation of teaching. Brahma know what is going on in the Buddha’s mind and immediately appears to exhort him to turn the wheel of Dharma. Eventually Buddha’s overpowering compassion yields to Brahma’s request.

Different Recensions

The popularity of this particular section of Buddha’s biography is reflected in the many different versions which have come down to us. In the Pāli alone, in addition to the Vinaya, there are three others: the Ādīcana Sutta in the Sāmyutta Nikāya (SN), which has been transmitted as a separate work, the Ariyapasāyaṇa Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya (MN) and Mahāpādana Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya (DN) which both incorporate the story and gāhās. In the Pāli all the stories are very similar and the gāhās, with minor modifications, are identical. The Mv has four different versions of the story and the LV

18 The Vinaya version may be found at Vin I, 0044f; other versions include the Brahmadhacanasattam SN I, 0136f; the Mahāpādanaasattam DN II, 0036f; and the Ariyapasāyaṇaasattam MN I, 0167f.


20 In Raniero Gnoli, The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saññādhammadhavavastu, being the 17th and last section of the Vinaya of the Mūlasārvasvādīṇḍas, I (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1977), 129f.


23 Étienne Lamotte, Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra), (Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1944), 57-63.
has the longest version and probably the latest, as it is the most amplified and most different. While the Mūlūvāna is probably not earlier than the second century B.C.," Frauwaldner believed that the Khandaṅkana was composed within 100 years of the Buddha's death," and some maintain that the Ariyapariyesāsīsāsataṃ contains the oldest biographical information available to us. As for the SBV and CPS, opinions of their provenance vary: Frauwaldner considers them old, originating from the Vījñava of Matharā, an ancient Buddhist community with roots going back to the council of Vāsāli (second Buddhist council about 100 years after Buddha's death), while Lamotte disagrees, believing the works to be much later and post-dating the accession of Kanika (2nd century A.D.).

The Gāthās

The Great Hesitation story contains three sets of gāthās: 1) the first set of two gāthās spoken by the Buddha, expressing his reluctance to teach lest others not understand him; 2) the second group of gāthās spoken by Brahma, warning Buddha of the impure dharmas which has arisen in Magadha and entreat him to teach out of compassion for Magadhan's afflictions; 3) a final gāthā where the Buddha agrees to teach. It is this final gāthā which we are concerned with here:

apīvattā teṣaṃ amatasa dūrā, ye savanto punadocantu sādham, viññanaśālī pūgasāna na bhūtā, dhamman pāpiṣṭa manujeṇu brahmaḥ.

"Open is the door of the deathless; those who desire to hear, let them put forth

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27 Jones, Mahāvastu, vol 1, xi.
28 Frauwaldner, Earliest Vinaya, 65; see also Hirakawa Akira, A History of Indian Buddhism (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 70.
30 See discussion in Grolli, SBV, xvii-xix; Frauwaldner, Earliest Vinaya, 24f and Lamotte, History, 174-179.
31 Mahāpāṇḍavaṇsūta, DN II, 39; Ariyapariyesaṇsūtta, MN I, 169; the latter quoted verbatim in the Buddhaśakukumārāsūta MN II; Brahmāyūcanaṇsūta, SN I, 138; Vinaya I, 7 (Mahākhandhaka, Brahmāyūcanaṇkathā).
33 The gāthā reads bhud rdi'i tgo ma dag ni dbye bur byas/ rgyen par su 'dod som nyi vol eig don/ zhang po ni mdo las ni gnyen nom chos/ klan ka ni bsal ndo tsam bshad par byas/ "I have opened the gates of the immortal. Those wishing to hear should abolish their doubts. O Brahma! Not seeing fault, I will succinctly explain the sublime Dharma to people." The word klan ka means "blame," "fault," "criticism," "reproach."
their doubts. Seeing harm, I did not speak much of the excellent Dharma to mankind, O Brahma!” The Tibetan Vinaya (TV) version apparently had a similar source text, translating with som ngyi sol cig for “abolish their doubts”.34

The Cānapariṇātāsūtra reads:

avatārite amāṇḍasya avāram
ye tretākāmyā pramodanta śrīdāthāḥ ||
śvēthāpiṇḍikī pravacana na bhāte
dharmam popiṇāma mānasiṣyta brahmaṇa ||

“I will open the door of the deathless. Those who wish to hear, let them rejoice in their faith. O Brahma, seeing harm, I did not speak much of the excellent Dharma to mankind.”

These four versions are clearly related, especially as regards the key word ānuṣṭhācantu (P) / ānuṣṭhācanta (Mv) / āpanṭaṇa (SBV) / āpanḍanta (CPS), all phonologically similar, on which the meaning of the entire gāthā turns. The Lalitavistāra version, is quite different with the verb praviśanti unrelated to the others:

apuṭikāstejāmanyāṣaya doṇā
dharmam ti satasaṃ ye svatanvamā /
praviśanti śrīdāthā navēthasamāyañā
drīpani dhammaḥ mahatāya satvayah ||

Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1993), 87). Note how the Tibetan has changed the meaning of line 3 of the SBV from “Seeing harm, I do not speak much of the excellent Dharma to mankind” to “Not seeing fault, I will teach…” the two meanings opposing each other. See discussion below.

śrīdāthāḥ with long a because of the metre (trīṣṭhāḥ).
36 Waldschmidt, CPS, Teil II, 118.
37 Vaidya, LV, 293. Lal, 25.34. The Tibetan is similar, but in a different order. It reads

īṣhag pu ma ga dha yi sem can gong/
ma ba laman zong dag dang ladan gyur la/
mi ‘she da shes rtag tu chos nyan pas/
de dog la ni bhad rtsi’i sgo phyur/’

“Brahma! For those beings of Magadha, who have ears and faith, because they always listen to the Dharma with no thought of harming, the gate of immortality is open to them.” Available at http://dmes.org/releases/flat/KD0095M_TTXT/Pecha 312A (accessed November 2011). Note how the word Magadha has gone from a negative connotation (in the Pāli and Mv) to a positive one.

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“Open are the doors of the deathless for them. O Brahma! Those who have ears to hear always resort to their faith, with no thought of harm. These beings of Magadha listen to the Dharma.”

This last gāthā spoken when Buddha accedes to Brahma’s request and agrees to turn the wheel of Dharma, is quite ambiguous and has been subject to opposite interpretations of the second and third pūdās. What does the second pūdā mean? Are those with ears to put forth their faith (as in Pāli)? Celebrate it (CPS)? Renounce their (former) faith as in the Mv? Or abolish their doubts (SBV, Tibetan Vinaya)? Lamotte takes it in the Mv sense of renouncing,38 citing Buddhaghosa’s fifth century commentary on the Ariyapasiryasansāsana.39 But Buddhaghosa’s gloss is not clear: Panganīcanta saddham ti sabbe attano saddham panganīcanta, vissajjita.40 He equates vissajjita with panganīcanta. Vissajjita is the causative of vissajjati and, like panganīcanta is ambiguous. It can mean, “send forth or away, emit, discharge, dismiss,” but can also mean “let loose, cause to set free,” etc. The Skt. root vi + stī is equally ambiguous with meanings of “set free, release” and meanings of “dismiss and repudiate.”

Buddhaghosa then goes on to explain the meaning of the last two pūdās:

aham hi attano pascuṣṭan suppaṭavatīm pi imām pāpiṭat anattamānaṃ
caryavācaśīlāṃ hasagati hūvā na bhātāṃ; idāna pana sabbe jīva saddhamāsānaṃ
apupannā; pārisaṃi tesām sakāpattāni.

“I have not spoken of my own learned, well-recited, excellent, highest Dharma, having been conscious of weariness of body and speech. Now may all people be brought to participating in the faith; I will fill my mind/purpose/intention with them.”41

It seems clear then that Buddhaghosa is taking panganīcanta in a positive sense of having faith in the Dharma; however some ambiguity remains and Lamotte points out that no one is quite sure what the pūdā actually means. On

38 Lamotte, Le Traité de la Grande Vertu, 61
40 panganīcanta saddham means: Let all put forth faith of their own, they (should) send it forth/let it loose.
41 Woods & Kosambi Papanīcandani, 181. The commentary is repeated with minor changes in the commentary on the Dīghanīkāya, Mahāpañcānasutta, in Mahesh Tiwary, The Samkhya-Vātsayī Dighanikāya-yaṭhakāya (Nālandā: Nava Nālandā Mahāvihāra, 1975), 164. The latter versions has sabbe jīna...tesām sakāpattāni ti.
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changing the word to “abolish” (prapadaṇa), and even going so far as to change “faith” (śraddhā) to “doubts,” (kākṣāḥ) as prapadaṇa is by itself ambiguous and could be either positive (“excite,” “propel”) or negative (“push or thrust away”) if used with śraddhā. The Tibetan Vajravyu was unsure of the meaning of its source text vihētha-prêkṣā... na bhūte (“seeing harm I did not teach”) in the SBV and changed it to klān kā mi bhaṣā...bhūte paḥ bhaya (“seeing no blame I will teach”). In the CPS yet another version is introduced: it restores śraddhā but changes the verb to pramodana and the pāda can only be taken in a positive form “rejoice in one’s faith.” The LV negates the vihētha-saṃyāṭa and qualifies those “without thought of doing harm (na-viheṭha-saṃyāṭa)” it leaves out entirely the imperative structure. And the Chinese simplify the gāthā and at least make the translators’ interpretation clear—that one should have faith in the Buddha, who up until now did not teach fear of vexing and confusing his listeners.

How could one original gāthā produce so many different interpretations?

The answer must lie in the ambiguity of the underlying source transmission, which the three similar forms panaṃcatura/prapaṇḍaṇa/pramaṇadana point to. The most likely underlying “proco-canonical” form is “pavaṇāntaraṃ” where the initial conjunct consonant has disappeared (pra- → pā-), the intervocalic consonant –c- or –d- has dropped out and is replaced by a glide or nothing at all (“pavaṇāntara”), and the nasal (N) → m- or –r- was either a consonant or nasization of the initial –a- vowel (paṇvanta, or associated with the common Prakrit alternation of m- → n- has originated as an allophone of –v- in nasalized contexts,48 suggesting that the “original form” was “pavaṇāntara > pavaṇāntara > paṇmanta, with the –v- nasalized because of the –antu ending and the –a- labialized to –u- under the influence of the labial –a- or –u-. The form would then be prapaṇadaṇa or

44 Lamotte, Le Traité de la Grande Vertu, 62, footnote B.
46 Pischel, Grammar, §268.
47 Alfred C. Woolner, Introduction to Prakrit (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1928, 1996), §9: “mediāl or intervocal k, g, c, j, t, d, are generally dropped.” See also Pischel, Grammar, §186.
49 Pischel, Grammar, §104, 564.

As for example in the Mahāpāpadānasutta: not to speak of the preceding, I didn’t [previously] teach for those for whom it would cause trouble and not be advantageous.” T01n0001, p0008c21-22.
But in his explication of pāda 3 and 4, Buddhaghosa seems to suggest a positive meaning for pamañcatura, i.e. sabho jana sādhuḥbhujanam upasantu (“May all people be brought to enjoyment of the faith”).
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nuc, which as we have seen has both meanings inherent in it (although the Mvu takes it in only the negative sense); pra + nud requires the change of the object śraddhā to make sense; and pra + mud leads to a semantic narrowing which is unnecessary. For it appears from all the different interpretations of this tradition that we have before us, that those ears with ears to hear are both to put forth faith in the Buddha's teachings and renounce their old, incorrect beliefs (the subject of the second set of gīthās in the Great Hesitation story); and further the Buddha's concern about harm refers not only to his own frustration in teaching, but also that of his potential students in understanding the teachings (and possibly even to the harmful effects of incorrect teachings prevalent in those times, as the Mvu suggests). The fact that this was not understood by the translators has led to much confusion with unnecessary semantic narrowing in all versions but the Pālī.

Conclusions

To return to what we said at the beginning: can we recover the actual words of the Buddha? Probably not; however, in cases of semantic confusion, like the story of the Great Hesitation, we can recover with some degree of certainty what the source transmission must have been that led to the ambiguities in the target forms. And sometimes the source form was deliberately ambiguous, i.e. the composer of the text was probably well aware of the polysynthetic nature of the words he/she was using and so intended it. This multivalency was completely consistent with the Buddha's view of language: words were an imprecise tool which could only point to the truth of his insights, but could not accurately capture it. Therefore words with added levels of meaning, where both were applicable and—even if sometimes contradictory—illuminated the message, were often appropriate, adding a new, richer dimension to the teaching. Attempts by translators to artificially fix the meaning in only one direction were a misunderstanding of the source transmission.

**Abbreviations**

BHS=Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit
BHSID=Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary (Edgerton, 1953)
CPSS=Casaguptaśrutavāra
DN=Diṭṭha Nikāya
IV=Lahitavivaranāraṇa
MI=Middle Indic
MN=Majjhima Nikāya
Mvu=Mahāvastu
N=nasal consonant or nasalization
P=Pālī

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50 With the second -ār- or -ār- added in for vowel harmony (ā and ā being phonetically very similar) and because it was required by the derived form nuc, muitari (muitari is the passive form of the verb).

51 Although víhāra and víhētra are different words, they mean the same and are etymologically related.
Bibliography


佛教教義中的詞性多義性：例証與方法論

Bryan Levman

摘要

佛陀世尊究竟說過甚麼話，我們已無從稽考。佛陀的說法曾被口耳相傳地保留下來，大概從阿育王時代開始，但不遲於公元前一世紀，這些教法內容基於自然的語音演變規則，又或在譯寫為當地的或雅純的方言的過程中，逐漸發生了變化。反映在阿育王敕令裏的語音簡化現象，亦常見於佛教的口述傳統，緣此而有同音異義詞造成的複雜而可，譯意含混等問題，皆需有研究人士增添了難度。在佛陀世尊，語言原無定法，既變化多端，亦非純粹無常。佛陀說法的風格，印證了語言無法現實呈現其證悟境界的事實，因之，利用同義詞或近義詞，進行反覆詮述，乃其教學特色之一；此外，又藉觀機遣教、一言多義等方法，對個別詞義予以開示。本文將考察一個關鍵詞——pramāṇacandras。此詞出自一個佛頂，它記載佛陀初成道時，考慮到眾生迷惑，難以了解教法，決定不住世說法的故事。在四種種類印度語的記述系統中，對於此詞各持不同解釋，這些釋義將有助於追溯同音異義詞背後的口語語源形態。由於語源形態模糊難辨，再加上譯寫者對語義的裁定，以致將周邊的詞彙與語義結構內的一些改動合理化。本文的結論是，原始的梵語編譯者不但已注意到教義的多義性，並且將此處之，這無疑流傳和深化了佛教教義。

關鍵詞：早期佛語言語、音義學、普拉克利特語、中期印度語、同音異義詞