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YĀSKA'S USE OF KASMĀT

(1) The theme of this article is a technical detail in Yāśka's Nirukta, viz., the role played by the word kasmāt. This might seem a minor problem, however the prevailing interpretation of kasmāt is connected with a rather loaded and, in my opinion, undesired interpretation of the Nirukta in general. Some remarks on the matter seem therefore to be appropriate.

(2) Yāśka frequently makes use of kasmāt when introducing a word for analysis, e.g., (3.9): annam kasmāt. Lakshman Sarup (1921, p. 43) gives the following translation: “From what (root) is annam (food) derived?” According to this interpretation the word kasmāt is conceived as being ablative of kah (masculine gender), to be construed with a supplied dhātoḥ, ablative of dhāt- ‘verbal root’. Sarup (1921) consistently applies this interpretation of kasmāt in what is commonly regarded the standard translation of the Nirukta into a non-Indian language. Even Mehendale (1978, p. 78), from whose hand have come many a model article on Nirukta problems, interprets kasmāt as kasmād (dhātoḥ):

“The method of giving etymologies in the Nirukta is not uniform. One striking point is that a question is first raised about the etymology of a word with the use of kasmāt (dhātoḥ), as for example, nighantavah kasmāt (1.1), hiranyam kasmāt (2.10), antarikṣam kasmāt (2.10) etc. But this method of raising the question is not followed by Yāśka in the case of every word. In fact that would have made the work monotonous.”

This is thus the interpretation of kasmāt retained by most Nirukta scholars. Condemning the work done by some of the most outstanding indologists of the last 130 years does not produce a pleasant feeling. Still it should be pointed out that such an interpretation of kasmāt is apt to lead one astray. In fact it is founded upon (and promotes) nothing but the widespread general interpretation of the Nirukta reflecting the attitude of comparative philology or historical linguistics. But, as far as I can see, there is no explicit statement in the Nirukta supporting either the particular interpretation of kasmāt, or the general interpretation of the Nirukta along the lines of historical linguistics.

(3) Deeply immersed in the discoveries of comparative philology, Sanskrit scholars have for the most part approached the Nirukta with the ideas of this field in mind, disregarding completely the fact that an indigenous conceptual system should be approached through terms and thought patterns that are equally
indigenous, if a valid interpretation is to be arrived at. The view that Yāska should be a kind of predecessor in the field of historical linguistics, i.e., that the *Nirukta* should be a work mainly seeking the etymology or history of a given word, is indeed far-fetched. In fact this is an instance of a procedure unfortunately to be observed very frequently throughout the history of international indology, viz., that current ideas in Western ways of thinking are forced upon the Indian material when this is to be interpreted.² Such an approach naturally involves heavy presuppositions in the representations of the Indian strand of thought. In the particular case of the *Nirukta*, presuppositions of this kind have barred the way for an interpretation on its own terms ever since the text became accessible through the *editio princeps* established by Rudolph Roth (1852).

The *Nirukta* is not dealing with histories of words, and concepts like 'development' and 'linguistic change' involving the concept of time, were probably not active in Yāska’s mind. The language he studied was regarded as *daivī vāk* 'divine speech', as such timeless and, at least in some meanings of the term, eternal. Yāska’s intention was to analyse the semantic content of a given word, even with regard to context, by means of the linguistic insights of his time. When analysing a denotative item of the language, Yāska links it to an action regarded as related to the thing denoted. That this action in most cases reflects a verbal root is only natural, and does not imply that it was the sole purpose of Yāska to single this out when he took up a word for analysis. The kinds of relations sustained between the denotative item, the action and the thing denoted, however, is a question still to be settled, provided the historical interpretation is rejected. A more detailed discussion of these problems can be found in Kahrs (1980)³. To my mind the only scholars who have objected to an historical interpretation of the *Nirukta*, clearly expressing the view that Yāska was primarily interested in the semantic content of a word, are Kunjunni Raja (1971) and, more thoroughly, Bronkhorst (1981).

In order to arrive at a valid interpretation of the *Nirukta*, the intentions and technical methods of Yāska have to be investigated in detail on their own premises. This is a task even more fascinating bearing in mind that the methods of Yāska completely pervaded the Indian *ars interpretandi* throughout a long tradition, including the translations of Sanskrit texts into other languages of Asia.

(4) Returning, with this background, to the interpretation of *kasmāt* as *kasmād* (*dhātoḥ*) or ‘from what (root) is ... derived? ’, it is evident that this interpretation is an echo of historical linguistics. The word *kasmāt* is construed with the ablative *dhātoḥ* according to what would have been regarded as a normal syntactic pattern, if it were not for the fact that *dhātoḥ* is not read in the text itself, but supplied. Dismissing this tortuous interpretation, I suggest instead *kasmāt* to be rendered ‘why? ; for what reason? ’. The simplest may be the best.