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ADVICE FOR GRAMMARIANS

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Abstract

This article offers some reflections based on certain remarks contained in a recent message to an electronic discussion group. These remarks emphasize the need for critical editions of the main texts of indigenous Sanskrit grammar. The present article, while acknowledging the importance of such editions, wonders whether they will provide all that the author of the remarks expects from them. In the case of indigenous Sanskrit grammar, it can be shown that such editions, even if they were to exist, are not likely to shed additional light on questions such as those concerning the date of Panini and his relationship to Vedic literature. Critical editions do not provide miracle solutions to all problems. The article concludes with an appeal to scholars to think about what they can reasonably expect from critical editions.

In a recent message to an electronic discussion group,[1] Michael Witzel, Professor at Harvard University, sums up some reasons for the importance of the study of the grammarian Pāṇini and his school, and gives some advice to those who specialize in it. The following are extracts from his message:

> Why Pāṇini? [...] Pāṇini's work, the Aṣṭādhyāyī, is critical for the early history of S. Asia in several respects:
> – Pāṇini (c. 500/350 BCE?) marks the end of the Vedic period proper (he quotes some texts), and his correct dating would be of signal importance to fix the lower limit of the earliest S. Asian texts, the Vedas.
> – he obviously was a citizen of Gandhāra (NW Pakistan), a province of the Persian empire (at minimum, after 519 BCE); therefore his work, which mentions the Old Persian/Iranian word for script (lipi/libi), is of signal importance for the history of writing in S. Asia.
> – his text, though quasi-algebraically condensed and cryptic beyond any 'direct' way of reading, contains valuable data for the culture and geography of the Northwest (which is very little known from other Indian texts) and for S. Asia in general. [...]
> In consequence, we badly need to know when to date him. He is, in many ways, the sheet anchor of early (literary) Indian history.
>
> That said, we need a solid background on which to base our studies of the Aṣṭādhyāyī.
>
> This, however, does not exist, even after more than 150 years of modern studies. [...]

1 Indo-Eurasian_research <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Indo-Eurasian_research/> message 6303 of 19 March 2007.

Briefly:

– we only have Vulgate editions of his text. None of them is based on a critical edition (with stemma).

– worse, the various early testimonies of Pāṇini (Mahābhāṣya, Vārttika, Kāśikā), too, do not have critical editions.

As the nature of the Vulgate has been questioned even by specialists of Pāṇini, this question must finally be taken up and solved by studying available MSS, though nobody seems ready to do so, neither in India nor outside.

The same applies to the Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali (c. 150 BCE) that quotes many, but certainly not all of Pāṇini's rules. As mentioned, Kielhorn's 19th cent. edition is based only on "northern" (Maharastrian etc.) MSS. Southern, Nepalese, Kashmiri, etc. ones have not been used, nor have they been used in later editions. In sum: there is no critical Mbh. edition.

I have bemoaned that already in 1986, and A. Aklujkar has done the same in 1993. Nothing has been done about it.

(I leave aside the Aphorisms/Vārttikas of Kātyāyana that precede Patañjali as they are embedded in his text. – Of course, I also leave apart the complex issue of non-Pāṇinian grammatical traditions: Candra, Kātantra, Sārasvata, etc.)

The same is true of the Kāśikā (c. 700 CE), whose text presents the first complete external testimony of Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī. It does not have a critical edition either.

A. Sharma's 1969–85 Kāśikā edition makes use of some 8–9 MSS (C. & S. Indian), but it is not clear at all how consistently they have been used and quoted in the edition. In the end, we have to go back to the very MSS, which are not accessible easily, if at all, during a short visits to India. [...]

[...]

The same criticism applies to the *completely uncritical* editions of the commentaries on the Kāśikā such as the Nyāsa (ed. Ramachandrulu, Hyderabad 1985; not to speak others such as Raghuvir Vedalankar's, 1997). Ramachandrulu's book does not record the variants nor even indicate the MSS used, – except for very occasionally mentioning an/the unidentified 'mūlapāṭha' or [an]other printed edition[s]. This 'edition' is of MS value only.

The Nyāsa ed.s thus have just the value of any traditional (often badly written) MS. A Pāṇini specialist on this list wrote to me – typically, in private – that the Nyāsa commentary could be used as a testimony for the Kāśikā. This of course means: the blind leading the dumb and mute!

In sum, NONE of the Pāṇinian grammar texts can be relied on. We simply do not know where we can and where not.

At best, we can *assume* that a certain text is supported by later (sub)commentaries, but these too are unreliable.

Thus, I have to be direct and frank: what have Indologists been doing? And what are they doing now?

Now, luckily, the Paris-Pune-Roma team is preparing a new 'critical' edition of the Kāśikā, based on ten times more MSS than Sharma's. But, I see some dangers lurking there too (see next message).

> Again, Pāṇini specialists, wake up! Do the basic, preliminary work, instead of relying on 19th cent. pioneer editions. Get into the libraries and start checking out a small disputed section *across the board.* After conducting such a pilot project, expand, if and where necessary.
>
> If this is not done, Pāṇinīyas must face the fact (and criticism) that their conclusions, especially in disputed sections, can no longer be taken for granted.
>
> They have merely been discussing the Vulgate with the help of ... the Vulgate tradition [...]
>
> Now is the time for the Pāṇinīyas to finally wake up and act!

I have cited this long extract because it is a good starting point for some methodological reflections.

Almost everyone will agree, I guess, that the task to prepare critical editions of the most important texts in this domain is urgent. Manuscripts decay or disappear for other reasons, and one of the tasks which Indology, or any of its sub-branches, owes to future generations is to study and analyze, to the extent possible, the collective evidence of the manuscripts as long as they are still available.

The above extract does more than urging Pāṇinīyas to turn to this task. It suggests that this task, once carried out, will answer a number of questions which remain unanswered today. Witzel singles out some of these, among them the following: Pāṇini's "correct dating would be of signal importance to fix the lower limit of the earliest S[outh] Asian texts, the Vedas"; "his work, which mentions the Old Persian/Iranian word for script (*lipi/libi*), is of signal importance for the history of writing in S[outh] Asia". The question I wish to discuss here is whether and to what extent critical editions of the key texts are likely to solve these issues.

We can begin with Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya, the oldest surviving text in the Pāṇinian tradition (with the exception of Pāṇini's sūtras, and of the vārttikas that are embedded in the Mahābhāṣya). Witzel himself has rendered great service in an earlier publication by showing that all the manuscripts used by Kielhorn in his classical edition of this text derive from a common archetype which is about a millennium *younger* than Patañjali's autograph.[2] *Other* manuscripts, not used by Kielhorn and others, may *not* derive from this archetype, and take us back to an earlier period, perhaps even to the earliest period. Finding such manuscripts would be of the greatest interest, and until and unless all available manuscripts have been inspected (and preferably used in the constitution of a critical edition) it will be impossible to deny that they may exist. (Strictly speaking, this cannot

2 WITZEL, 1986.

be denied even if and when such a critical edition has brought to light that no such manuscripts have been found. Who knows what further manuscripts may be discovered in the future? Who could have predicted the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, or that of the Buddhist manuscripts from Afghanistan that are now being edited in different centers around the world?)

Personally I do not expect that such manuscripts will be found. The reason is that there are good grounds for believing that the archetype underlying the Mahābhāṣya manuscripts used by Kielhorn was the text utilized and "canonized" by Kaiyaṭa, Patañjali's most popular commentator.[3] Kaiyaṭa has been used and commented upon for some thousand years, and it is plausible that during these many centuries *his* Mahābhāṣya has been able to impose itself throughout the subcontinent.

Manuscripts, then, may not take us further back than Kaiyaṭa's text of the Mahābhāṣya. If so, the single and incomplete manuscript of Bhartṛhari's commentary on the Mahābhāṣya may be our main hope to get back beyond this. As a matter of fact, Bhartṛhari's commentary helps a bit, but not all that much. The reason is, presumably, that Kaiyaṭa closely followed Bhartṛhari in his commentary, but also in his readings of Patañjali's text. It seems, for example, that Kaiyaṭa only records variant readings of the Mahābhāṣya where Bhartṛhari does so, too. This can be confirmed for the portions of the text for which Bhartṛhari's commentary has been preserved; it can be inferred, with a certain amount of plausibility, for the remainder of the Mahābhāṣya.[4] Kaiyaṭa's Mahābhāṣya may therefore be identical, or almost identical, with Bhartṛhari's Mahābhāṣya (or rather with what Kaiyaṭa thought Bhartṛhari's Mahābhāṣya had been like).

Where does all this leave us with regard to the need of a critical edition of the Mahābhāṣya? Strictly speaking there is little one can say, because no one knows what new manuscripts may be found. But it is a reasonable guess to think that it will not get us much closer to Patañjali's original text. This is not to deny the obvious advantages which a critical edition would offer in presenting us the full evidence of all (or most) surviving manuscripts. One of these advantages, however, might be the certainty that the hope of finding Patañjali's text through a thorough inspection of all surviving manuscripts was after all an illusion. In the absence of a critical edition we are allowed to dream on.

The situation of the Kāśikā may or may not be similar to that of the Mahābhāṣya. Since efforts are being made to create a critical edition of this text,

3 BRONKHORST, 1987; forthcoming a.

4 BRONKHORST, 1987.

there is no need to speculate. Let us therefore assume, for argument's sake, that a fully critical edition of the Kāśikā, with stemma, can and will be made, and that the archetype it reconstructs is identical with the original autograph. The Kāśikā is the first surviving commentary that contains the whole of Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī. How much closer would this hypothetical reconstruction take us to Pāṇini?

The answer is: not all that much. Comparative studies of Kāśikā and Mahābhāṣya have shown that the Sūtra text contained in the Kāśikā is not identical with the one known to Patañjali in a number of places. This concerns sūtras that occur both in the Kāśikā and in the Mahābhāṣya.[5] These comparative studies do *not* allow us to draw conclusions that concern sūtras that do *not* occur in the Mahābhāṣya. All we can say, therefore, is that Pāṇini's text as known from the Kāśikā differs in an unknown number of places from the text as it was known to Patañjali.

We may not know for sure *where* exactly the Sūtra text accepted in the Kāśikā deviates from the text that was known to Patañjali, but we have some ideas as to *why* it does so. The reason is that a different, "unorthodox", tradition of interpretation prevailed in the interval. It is certainly not correct to think that the authors of the Kāśikā, consciously and voluntarily, changed some of Pāṇini's sūtras. The text of Pāṇini's grammar had, as a matter of fact, not survived the preceding period unscathed, and we know from the concluding verses of the Vṛtti on Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya that the "tradition" of the Mahābhāṣya had been imperiled, too. (There is a debate about what these remarks mean exactly, but there is no need to enter into details here.) Information about this "unorthodox" tradition, which survived at least until the end of the first millennium, can only be obtained through the patient analysis of a variety of text, not all of them grammatical, and some of them preserved in only one or in very few manuscripts.[6] The information derived from these other texts is as important as, and in some respects more important than, the information that might be obtained from a critical edition of the Kāśikā. This is especially true if one wishes to get closer to Pāṇini's time (or at least closer to an understanding why this is not always possible). Once again we have to face the conclusion that, however desirable critical editions of the main texts are, the mere preparation of such editions may help us less than some scholars seem to think. Beside critical editions, we need critical thought that takes all the available evidence into consideration.

5 KIELHORN, 1887.

6 BRONKHORST, 1983; 2002; 2004; forthcoming; 2008.

What about a critical edition of Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī? I am not at present in a position to verify what I heard in India long ago, viz., that the text of the Aṣṭādhyāyī recited by Vedic scholars is identical to the text accepted in the Kāśikā. If this is true, the oral tradition of the Aṣṭādhyāyī does not take us back to a time earlier than the Kāśikā. I would expect that the same is true for the surviving manuscripts.[7] Scholars should of course be encouraged to collect and study as many manuscripts of the Aṣṭādhyāyī as they can, but it is far from certain that they will find among these some that derive from an archetype that contained a text different from, and older than, that found in the Kāśikā. Here too, critical editions are welcome, but we should not pin unrealistic expectations onto them.

Does it follow from the above that the text of Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī is totally unreliable and useless for historical research? I do not think so. Every beginning student of Pāṇini learns very soon that this text presents a *system* of interrelated rules. Even simple derivations of words require a multitude of rules that implicitly refer to and depend on each other. This systematic nature of the grammar, along with some other features, make it hard to insert new rules. This does not exclude that occasionally a minor rule may have been added here or there, especially during the period in which the "unorthodox" tradition held sway. It is even conceivable that one or two larger internally coherent chunks were added; this is S. D. Joshi's opinion, which may be correct but is not generally shared by specialists in the field. The internal coherence of the system presented in Pāṇini's grammar convinces most that a single mind conceived of the whole (with the possible exception of a few rules whose removal does not affect that whole). Disagreements about this can only be resolved, if at all, through a study of the

7 Professor Madhav Deshpande was kind enough to send me a message which he posted some years ago on the Indology discussion group: "A few years ago, one of these Maharashtrian Veda reciters, Shri. Madhav Ganesh Joshi, from NIpani, published a book 'Svarayuktaa Ashtaadhyaayii', 1992 (Sadhakashram, Alandi, Pune). I met him in Pune and got a copy of his book from him. The book presents an accented text of the Ashtadhyayi based on a manuscript, evidently used by the Vaidikas. Interestingly, the book has a preface by Professor S.D. Joshi in English, where S.D. Joshi analyses the accent markings on this text, and concludes: "The conclusion I draw from what I have noted is that the manuscript which is obviously meant as a help for pandits during recitation does not strictly follow the paninian rules of accentuation, both as regards word-or-sentence accent, and as regards technical accent. But from what I heard from Mr. Nipanikar Shastri I understand that Vaidika Dashagranthi pandits like Vedamurti Ghaisas Shastri from Poona have assured Mr. Nipanikar Shastri that the accentuation given by the manuscript is exactly that which they have learnt for purposes of recitation."

system of the Aṣṭādhyāyī, not by collecting manuscripts and making a critical edition.

It would seem, then, that the text of the Aṣṭādhyāyī as we can extract it from the Kāśikā, modified where necessary in the light of the Mahābhāṣya, is as good a text as we will ever get. Critical editions are not likely to change it (even though one is never quite sure until the work has been done). This reconstructed text may differ in details from the one composed by Pāṇini. The fact that it presents an internally coherent system, however, may be the best guarantee – as good as if not better than the presumed reliability of its written or oral tradition – that this reconstructed text remains close to Pāṇini's original version.

After these remarks about what we may reasonably expect from critical editions, it is time to return to Witzel's remarks. We have seen that the encouragement which he offers to scholars of the Pāṇinian tradition (viz., to make more critical editions) may not lead to the answers he is looking for. A closer look brings to light that his encouragement is made against the background of certain assumptions. These assumptions are of the kind that may prevent the Pāṇinīyas from contributing there where they might make real and useful contributions, because they are almost certainly wrong. Take his statement that Pāṇini's correct dating would be of signal importance to fix the lower limit of the Vedas. Why the lower limit of the Vedas? Because Pāṇini "marks the end of the Vedic period proper". How does Witzel know? Because Pāṇini "quotes some texts". This sounds rather vague, and it is. Research has shown, among other things, that the text whose language is closest to the one described by Pāṇini is the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa,[8] a text which few scholars consider as constituting "the lower limit of the Vedas". It would make sense to urge Pāṇinīyas to question old and baseless presuppositions, rather than repeating them as "known" truths.

Witzel assigns Pāṇini's date to "c. 500/350 BCE?". Why this strange combination? The answer is straightforward. The latter of these two (350 BCE) is the only one that can claim to be based on some serious historical evidence.[9] The former (500 BCE) is one of a set of dates that used to be given to Pāṇini on the basis of a network of speculations, none of which was supported by evidence worth the name. Only the second date (350 BCE) should be retained until and unless other serious reasons are found to date Pāṇini differently.

8 LIEBICH, 1886a; 1886b; 1891; BHANDARKAR, 1868; CARDONA, 1999:215–216; BRONKHORST, 1991; 2007:180.

9 HINÜBER, 1990:34; FALK, 1993:304; 1994:327 n. 45.

The preceding discussion may have made it clear that there are no easy answers as to what scholars must necessarily do in order to find solution to specific problems. Editing texts is important, but it is no miracle method that will lead to the solution of all, or most, problems in the field. Editing texts – especially voluminous texts of which many manuscripts have survived, such as the Kāśikā and the Mahābhāṣya – is also very time-consuming, and may occupy a major part of a scholar's active life-span. Scholars may therefore be excused for wondering whether this way of spending their life is the one most appropriate to find answers to the specific questions they would like to see answered. Witzel's remarks are useful in that they remind us that scholarship aims at resolving questions, at arriving at a better understanding of certain historical periods and regions. They would have been even more useful if they had encouraged scholars to think about what are the most efficient ways to reach those scholarly aims. Instead he tells scholars to go and make critical editions. Critical editions are good, useful and necessary. They may not be the most appropriate means to find answers to all questions.

The situation is reminiscent (in spite of the difference of scale) of the ever larger (and ever more expensive) particle accelerators which physicists demand for their research. Those responsible for the funding may not be satisfied with general observations about the need of particle accelerators. They will wish to know what exactly these astronomically expensive machines are likely to be good for. Physicists will have to justify their demands on the basis of their theoretical reflections and expectations.

Critical editions are not particle accelerators. There is also a way in which one might argue that we need critical editions irrespective of concrete expectations. This is not Witzel's point. He claims that we need critical editions in order to find answers to the questions that interest him. Here he may be wrong. As in the case of a particle accelerator, it will never be possible to predict what a critical edition will bring to light. But as in the case of a particle accelerator, it is important to think about what one can reasonably expect from it. My expectation is that, even if all Pāṇinīyas were to mend their ways and spend their time making critical editions, and even if Witzel were to live to see the result, he might not find in (or through) these editions the answers he is looking for. To find these answers, other ways may have to be explored. As in all branches of science, there is no standard method that will automatically yield all answers. In order to make progress, we may have to think, whether we like it or not.

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