

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 65 (2011)

Heft: 1

Artikel: The invisible interpreter

Autor: Bronkhorst, Johannes

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-154525>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 23.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE INVISIBLE INTERPRETER

Johannes Bronkhorst, Université de Lausanne

*Abstract*¹

This article argues that the interpreter of foreign Cultures should avoid falling into the trap of “domesticating” those Cultures more than is strictly necessary. Understanding a foreign Culture is situating its beliefs, customs etc. in their context, not in the context of the modern Western world. To think, for example, that classical India was populated by linguists, philosophers, and others like us is mistaken and misinterprets Indian Culture. The paper concludes with a general reflection on the relationship between individual culture and the Culture shared by many people, for example in a geographical region.

Indologists are not the only ones whose task consists, at least in part, in interpreting texts of a past Culture for a readership that has no or little acquaintance with that Culture. Like translators, they have to address the question whether and to what extent they are called upon to “domesticate” the foreign Culture. Must indologists try to present foreign material in a manner that it seems, to the extent possible, familiar to their modern readers? Or is it their task to show the “foreignness” of that material, emphasizing the different contextual factors that play a role, and the hidden presuppositions?

I assume that these are questions that all those who seriously study foreign Cultures have to face, and for which most of them have explicit or implicit answers. Authors wish to be understood. In order to accomplish that goal they must have an idea of who their readers will be and what these readers can easily understand. Too much contextual information will discourage the uninitiated.

And yet the danger is obvious. Historians have long been aware of the risks of what they sometimes call “Whiggish history”, the approach to history that sees an inevitable progression toward present circumstances. This approach can colour political history, but not only that. The history of science easily takes the form of a description of the various steps that supposedly lead to our present

1 This paper was read at the Fourth International Conference “Oriental Languages in Translation and Interpretation”, Institute of Oriental Philology, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, 18–20 October 2010.

scientific knowledge. The same applies to other disciplines, such as philosophy, or linguistics. Applied to the Indian situation, this means that we interpret the early Indian texts on science, or philosophy, or linguistics, as more or less successful attempts to get to the point where these disciplines are today. In theory methodically conscious indologists may feel critical about this approach, in practice it is the approach that many of them adopt.

Take Yāska's *Nirukta*, a text dealing with the etymologies of Vedic words. This text was discovered by modern scholarship in the nineteenth century, when Indo-European historical linguistics attracted much attention. Yāska's etymologies were assimilated to the etymologies of historical linguistics, almost as a matter of course. It took scholarship a long time to fully realize that Yāska's *Nirukta* and modern historical linguistics were doing altogether different things, and that Yāska's etymologies could not be judged by the yardstick of Indo-European studies. To find this out, Yāska's text had to be studied in its own context. Since we now know that the *Nirukta* has nothing to do with historical linguists, scholarly interest in it has dwindled.

Consider next the grammar of Pāṇini. It gained tremendously in appreciation when modern linguistics took a form that shared features with this ancient work. From relative disrespect in the 19th century (William Dwight Whitney's negative opinion about Pāṇini is often cited) it became "one of the greatest monuments of human intelligence" in the nineteen thirties (Bloomfield, 1933: 11). It goes without saying that it was the shared features that received, and still receive, all the praise. There is nothing wrong with this, except that Pāṇini's grammar has other features, too, that do not fit in so easily with modern linguistics. These other features receive a lot less attention.

To these observations about the modern study of Indian linguistics it is easy to add others about the modern study of Indian philosophy. There are aspects of Indian philosophy that are not dissimilar to what modern philosophers study. It will be clear that these are the aspects that receive almost all the attention in modern scholarship. It is equally clear that there are other aspects of Indian philosophy that receive almost none. And yet, the neglected aspects are often the ones without which Indian philosophy cannot be understood in its own right.

It is not necessary to limit this discussion to topics that are more or less close to modern academic disciplines. Much the same could be said about religious practices, such as those collectively referred to as Yoga. Yoga has become a household name in the modern world, but not because its main purpose – liberation from the cycle of rebirth – has been adopted by modern practitioners of Yoga; it has not. The uses of Yoga in the modern world attract a great deal of

attention nowadays, but it would be a major mistake to project these modern uses back onto the ancient Indian yogis.

For those who do not aspire to understanding Indian linguistics or Indian philosophy in its own right, or to reaching liberation from the cycle of rebirths, those other aspects – the ones that have no parallels in or significance for modern linguistics and philosophy, or for maintaining health – are without interest.² It is the good right of these researchers to stick to the things they like. However, it would be inappropriate to call them scholars of Indian Culture. I assume that many of them would agree, for they often aspire to jobs in departments of linguistics, or philosophy, or to healthy and successful lives. They use the Indian material as a source of inspiration to be used for something that has in itself nothing to do with Indian Culture. They use it the way the chemist August Kekulé used his dream of a snake seizing its own tail to discover the ring shape of the benzene molecule.³ Kekulé was a chemist, not a dream specialist. The fact that he drew inspiration from a dream did not turn him into a dream specialist. Those who use Indian materials to make progress in their own respective fields find themselves in a similar situation: they are linguists, or philosophers, or whatever else, but *not* interpreters of Indian Culture.

I hope that it is clear what I am driving at. The linguist who convinces his readers that Pāṇini was a linguist like himself, the philosopher who describes the ideas of Indian thinkers exclusively in terms of the philosophy now taught at universities and who may engage in what is sometimes called “fusion philosophy”, both of them domesticate the Indian material to the extent that one may wonder what is Indian about it. And indeed, I would argue that these people are in danger of providing partial, if not completely incorrect knowledge about Indian Culture.

So what? Why should anyone care that the image presented of Indian linguistics, or of Indian philosophy, or indeed of Indian science or anything else Indian, is no more than a distorted reflection of the real thing? Why shouldn't we tap other Cultures, including Indian Culture, for ideas that may be of interest to us? In my opinion there is nothing wrong with that, on condition that we know

2 Silk (2009: 3) states: “I think it is obvious that we are primarily interested in learning about the past for what it can tell us about ourselves. This is why certain things about the past interest us more than others, and why what may appear to us as most significant may not have seemed so to those whose lives and ideas we study.” Perhaps so. But it should not exclude that we have an interest in what may have seemed most significant to those whose lives and ideas we study.

3 For further examples from chemistry, see Farber, 1966.

what we are doing. The moment we believe that ancient and classical India were really populated by linguists, philosophers, scientists and others like us, at that moment we lose sight of the richness and variety of human Cultures, even with regard to those Cultures that have left us ample testimonies to show the opposite.

There is another extreme, the complete opposite of the domestication of foreign Cultures, viz., cultural relativism.⁴ This is the position according to which the cognitive gap between Cultures is too wide to be bridged. This position, if correct, would show up all those who try to interpret foreign Cultures as wasting their time. Ernest Gellner (1992: 52) had some interesting things to say about the attraction of cultural relativism to Americans:

Americans, to this day, [are] inclined to absolutize their own culture, and to equate it with the human condition as such, and hence unconsciously to treat other cultures as perversions of the rightful human condition. Individualism, egalitarianism, freedom, sustained innovation – these traits are, in the comparative context of world history, unusual, not to say eccentric; but to Americans they are part of the air they breathe, and most of them have never experienced any other moral atmosphere. [...] No wonder that Americans tend to treat these principles as universal and inherent in the human condition. [...] It is *this* which gives the hermeneutic message its exciting flavour in America; when Middle America at long last grasps the message, it is liable to find it novel and intoxicating, in its total inversion of old habits of thought.

Gellner adds that outside America the appeal of relativism cannot but be less (p. 52–53):

There are parts of the world – e.g. Levantine ports – where every street peddler is at home in a number of languages, and is familiar with the idiosyncrasies of a number of cultures; in such an audience, the relativist message could only produce a yawn.

Gellner may or may not be right in thinking that relativism has most appeal to Americans. Whatever the truth in this matter, it will be clear that the belief that the gap between Cultures is so profound that it cannot be bridged is the opposite extreme of the total domestication discussed earlier. And it is an extreme that would force into early retirement all those who consider it their task to interpret other Cultures.

The task of those who study other Cultures, then, is to show that the truth lies in between these two extremes. The linguists, philosophers, and others I have talked about so far run the risk of creating an image that is close to the

4 For a critique of cognitive relativism, see, e.g., Sokal, 2008.

former extreme: people in other Cultures are, or were, in all essentials like us; they did pretty much the same as what we do, even though they were perhaps dressed differently and ate their steak with a different sauce (or not at all). Interestingly and paradoxically, these linguists, philosophers etc. may feel close to the latter extreme, that of relativism, thinking that the gap between Cultures is really unbridgeable; the best we can do in that case is make our pick and use bits of it for our purposes, for any deeper understanding is impossible.

I repeat that the task of seriously studying other Cultures is to avoid these extremes. We *can* understand Indian linguists, philosophers or scientists on their own terms, but this requires extra effort. This extra effort consists in situating the Indian ideas in *their* context rather than ours. This in its turn means that interpreters of another Culture – whether they are indologists, sinologists, or something else – have to make themselves visible and explain that an understanding of this additional material is necessary, that without it a distorted image arises of the Culture concerned.

It is possible to give some more depth to this discussion by delving a bit into the question what is culture. We can take as point of departure a dictionary definition, such as the following: “The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.” For our present purposes we may leave material products out of consideration.

Culture, as I see it, is borne by individuals, even though I admit, as I must, that these individuals interact with others. Many individuals may bear individual cultures that are similar; in such cases it becomes possible to speak of, say, Indian Culture, the Culture of the Bushmen, etc. But ultimately culture is something that belongs to individuals, and only metaphorically to groups of people.

I know that not everyone will agree with this position. Certain scholars rather attribute intersubjective reality to culture, and deny, or at any rate play down, its connection with individuals. I’ll quote a passage from Jeppe Sinding Jensen’s book *The Study of Religion in a New Key* (2003), which bases its view of religion on the “linguistic turn” in philosophy. What it says about religion might equally be applied, some would say, to culture in general (p. 421):

Just as linguistic grammars are normative, idealized descriptions of speakers’ behaviour, so is the description of any one religion as a system of action and thought: we should not mistake the description for that which it describes. The fact that I may describe Roman religion at some level of generality does not involve the claim that such a thing ever was in any particular Roman’s mind, but only that if I were to study Roman religious represent-

tations, then the description of that purported ‘system’ would help me make sense of the representations in question.

Jensen admits “the fact that individual minds are needed to process any social material” but thinks that this “does not invalidate the social and symbolic point of view” (p. 418–419). He refers to Terrence Deacon’s book *The Symbolic Species* (1997) in support of “the importance of the social and symbolic interaction in human evolution” (p. 419), and concludes: “[...] there is plenty of religion not only in believers’ minds but similarly in the ‘space-time’ worlds of discursive systems and ideologies as social and cultural constructs.” He fears that we may “see the study of religion ‘swing’ back to the individualist perspective before a more thorough examination of the consequences of the ‘linguistic turn’ has even been undertaken” (p. 420).

As it so happens, I, too, have been influenced by Deacon’s book in my understanding of culture and religion. I have argued at some length that the best way to come to grips with culture and religion is through an understanding of the use by human beings of ‘symbols’ (in the Peircian sense in which Deacon uses it) and of language. It is true that ‘symbols’ and language cannot exist without social interaction. I have not, however, felt the need to postulate the existence of non-reducible social collectivities and social properties, as Jensen seems to do. Without such non-reducible social collectivities and social properties, we have to situate religion, and culture in general, in individual human beings, even though we have to be aware of the unique and complex ways in which these individual human beings interact. Much of the complexity of this interaction is due precisely to the ‘symbols’ and languages used, which have not been invented by an individual and which the individual acquires from his or her social surroundings.

Culture, then, belongs to individuals, and can be thought of as a web of signs, or even as an accumulation of webs of signs, both linguistic and non-linguistic.⁵ No parts of this web can be removed without destroying it.

This way of representing individual culture has the advantage of both showing its social origin and at the same time that there is no way to fully pass it on from one individual to another: each person has his or her own web, created by innumerable individual experiences that we do not share with anyone else. Strictly speaking, therefore, individual cultures are unsharable, and the gaps between them cannot be fully bridged. Recognizing the individual anchorage of

5 Bronkhorst, 2010: 180 ff. Cp. Donald, 2001: xiv: “[...] on a deeper level, any given culture is a gigantic cognitive web, defining and constraining the parameters of memory, knowledge, and thought in its members, both as individuals and as a group.”

culture prevents us from theorizing that cultures are, in the end, independent of individuals.

This prepares us for a discussion of Cultures with a big C. If we consider that such Cultures, say classical Indian Culture or modern Western Culture, are, so to say, constituted of innumerable cultures with a small c, the conclusion is obvious that full communication between cultures is impossible. This is true for individual cultures, even of people who are members of the same family, and all the more for Cultures with a capital C. There is no way for a modern scholar from Europe to get under the skin of an Indian who lived two thousand years ago. But neither can he get under the skin of people with whom he grew up and shares his life. There is here a difference of scale, not of principle.⁶ In both cases, enough can yet be communicated to make the effort worthwhile. The requirement in both cases is to convey as much context as is feasible. Don't tear the web more than is necessary by taking elements out of their context. There are obvious limits to this procedure (one can never provide the full context of any element), but the more one provides, the better one will succeed in conveying the distinguishing features of a Culture.

Let us consider a concrete yet non-technical example: the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. It is easy to take this belief out of its Indian context and discuss its merits and demerits. One may even adopt this belief without being interested in Indian Culture. Indeed, one may believe that scientific evidence supports it, in which case Indian Culture does not enter into the picture at all. In this last case, no help from a professional indologist is required to learn more about it.

However, if one wishes to understand the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution as it existed in Indian Culture, it becomes necessary to provide contextual elements. In that case it is important to specify that all religious and intellectual currents that accepted this belief had as highest aim to put an end to rebirth, and were willing to go to incredible lengths to bring this about. There are other contextual factors that would have to be mentioned, such as the circumstance that for a long time the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution was not accompanied by a belief in a God who oversees the process; this notion came later. In fact, the more one is able to situate the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution in its Indian context, the closer we come to an understanding of this belief as it was held by Indians. In practice, there is a limit to the amount of context one can pro-

6 This is not to deny that there can be discontinuities between Cultures, just as there are between languages and between religions.

vide, for reasons of time and space, but also because of the limited information provided by our sources. The general rule should however be clear: the more contextual information we provide, the less we domesticate the foreign culture by adapting it to our own.⁷

References

BLOOMFIELD, Leonard

1933 *Language*. New York. Revised and reprinted: George Allen & Unwin, London, 1969.

BRONKHORST, Johannes

2009 *Absorption: Two Studies of Human Nature*. <<http://www.bronkhorst-absorption.info>> (last visited: March 28 2011).

2010 "Ritual, holophrastic utterances, and the symbolic mind." *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual. Volume I: Grammar and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia*. Ed. Axel Michaels and Anand Mishra. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. Pp. 159–202 (Reprint: Bronkhorst, 2009: 1–39).

forthc. *Karma*. Hawai'i University Press.

DEACON, Terrence

1997 *The Symbolic Species. The Co-evolution of Language and the Human Brain*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

DONALD, Merlin

2001 *A Mind So Rare. The Evolution of Human Consciousness*. New York, London: W. W. Norton.

FARBER, Eduard

1966 "Dreams and visions in a century of chemistry." *Kekulé Centennial*. Ed. O. Theodor Benfey. Washington: American Chemical Society. (Advances in Chemistry Series, 61.) Pp. 129–137.

GELLNER, Ernest

1992 *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. London & New York: Routledge.

7 I have prepared a small volume on *Karma* that should soon come out (Bronkhorst, forthcoming).

JENSEN, Jeppe Sinding

2003 *The Study of Religion in a New Key. Theoretical and Philosophical Soundings in the Comparative and General Study of Religion.* Aarhus University Press (Studies in Religion, 3).

SILK, Jonathan A.

2009 *Riven by Lust. Incest and Schism in Indian Buddhist Legend and Historiography.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

SOKAL, Alan

2008 *Beyond the Hoax. Science, Philosophy and Culture.* Oxford University Press.

