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The literary commentary in Sanskrit as metalinguistic communication

Abstract: Although discernible, if only impressionistically, to most who have read commentaries along with Sanskrit *kāvya*, links between features of everyday communication and the commentarial format merit an explicit highlighting, especially with respect to their mutual utilization of metalanguage to effectively convey intended messages on a semantic and pragmatic level. Traditional and modern scholars who have reflected upon and practiced interpretation, particularly scriptural hermeneutics and grammatical analysis, have brought wide attention to the varied metalinguistic devices and cultural pragmatics that go into shaping a commentarial tradition of cherished foundational works on Veda, *buddhavacana*, Jain *sūtra*, *vyākaraṇa*, and any number of traditions of philosophical *śāstra*. This paper builds on some of this reflection to specifically address metalinguistic features that characterize the *kāvya* commentary in Sanskrit. Among these features include discursive processes to underscore complex semantic sense in poetry as well as to reproduce or reveal pragmatic interactive contexts within which *kāvya* is read.

Keywords: commentary; communication; *kāvya*; metalanguage; Sanskrit

As is true of commentaries in every genre of Sanskrit, the *kāvya* commentary—like a poem, in a more oblique way—is a message between a sender and a receiver. The commentary is, of course, not an everyday communication since it is, first of all, formally stylized and specialized as well as artifactual. And yet, alongside the semantic and pragmatic aspects of everyday communication, the metasemantic and metapragmatic features that characterize ordinary social discourse also strikingly resonate with the commentarial act, implying interactional situations that move beyond the artificial communique between a commentator and an implied reader to perhaps point to more informal interactions between teachers and students or critics and audiences that must have existed in real time over the centuries. It may appear obvious to most who have read commentaries that the

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source-gloss unit comprises a complex one-way communication (and perhaps an implied dialogue) between two (or more) individuals, much in the way that ordinary communications between senders and receivers function in non-textual situations. In both cases, one party decodes a message and the more closely they can approximate that code, the more information they obtain. As with everyday communication so too with the *kāvya*, meaning forms through interpretation, and just as metalanguage gives meaning to everyday discourse so too does the commentary enhance *kāvya*'s sensibility to a receiver. The commentary, therefore, does not necessarily add to the *kāvya*'s content but it does make sense of the poem by decoding its content.

Both types of metalinguistic communication, the ordinary and the artificial, thus share features like pluralistic voicing that need to be skillfully aligned, interactive contexts within which communication occurs, tonal aspects in narrative/recitation, and ultimately meaning-making objectives (semantic and pragmatic) that encompass both routinized cultural practices and more technical pedagogical skills like the ability to read complexity in and into the *kāvya*. In everyday spoken contexts, metalanguage is utilized by the speaker in the reporting of information, or contributing an allusion within a statement, citing or referencing what someone else said, using a proper name to serve as a code between the speaker and receiver for a host of intended senses, etc. To make themselves clear, speakers use synonyms and often translate in other words what they initially said with an economy of expression, often employing as transitions what sociolinguists call "shifters," a direct application of a particular quality or feature that distinguishes one idea or possible interpretation from another; in Sanskrit, shifts are often indicated with phrases like *atha vā*, *yadvā*, *paraṃ tu*, etc. These shifters, in turn, are constantly shifting.

As a connective pathway, one may explore the ways in which basic principles of interactional everyday discourse are transplanted, albeit in a more stylized manner, in formal commentarial discourse as well. Synonyms and intralingual translations, for instance, are common interlinear features of glossing conventions; shifter words are prevalent; and deictic allusions and references are ubiquitous. The commentary allows the root text to be remapped psychologically and sociologically. With ordinary language transfers in the form of writing, the commentary's paraphrasing practices help to reconstruct or create the physical conditions of the *kāvya* as a communicative act, whose radius thus expands the spread of the *kāvya*'s communication and shrinks the requirement that *kāvya* be accessed, discussed, appreciated and enjoyed within small circles of performance. The expansive spread of *kāvya* commentaries across time and geographical space attests to this.

In manuscript or print, the *kāvya* and its commentary usually appear intertwined, with the poem and its gloss paired to be read or studied together in

classroom contexts. While it is unlikely that the standard gloss-commentary (*ṭīkā*) format that highlights syntax reconstruction can be meaningfully read in the absence of the root text (*mūla*) except perhaps as a comprehensible set of disconnected units, modern publications almost invariably treat the Sanskrit source and commentary (if one is available) as one unit, sometimes supplemented with a sub-commentary in Sanskrit or in a modern Indian language, like Hindi or Telugu. However, notwithstanding the interconnected relationship the two have with the singular event of reading the *kāvya*, it bears stating that the experience of the commentary nevertheless exists outside of the experience of the *kāvya*—especially the *mahākāvya* and the expanded literary drama (*nāṭaka* or *prakaraṇa*). This is especially the case when the two co-texts (poem and commentary) yield a different understanding when taken individually but come together to convey a more complex message when read together. In this way, just as in everyday communication, where there are particular semantic and pragmatic considerations that exist in the actual utterances and similar metasemantic and meta-pragmatic socio-cultural discourses outside of the utterances to produce subtler and more multifaceted significance, one may argue that the commentary's objectives, operational procedures, and metasemantic codes ultimately embody a similar type of discourse. Reflecting on commentary as a metalinguistic discourse akin to everyday communication, therefore, may assist in not only reconstructing actual scenes of reading that occurred in the past but also promote reflection on how *kāvya* continues to be read.

Most readers of Sanskrit literature intimately understand *kāvya* commentary's indexing function to frame, organize, and guide the root text toward a particular understanding. In addition to paraphrase and direct glosses of words, it reorders and sequences the poem's words by employing a variety of operations that consist of either asking and answering simple questions or directly disambiguating syntactical relations between words, occasionally prefacing each verse with a general explanatory passage (*avataraṇa*) or providing technical analysis of grammatical complexes and quotes from Sanskrit dictionaries. Such being the case, commentary's metalinguistic relationship with the linguistic aspects of the poem (its grammar, structural form and meaning) begins with metasemantic awareness before shifting to the metapragmatic. The commentary ultimately negotiates an interface of linguistic textuality and socio-cultural praxis, which include temporally and spatially localized pedagogical and institutional needs (usually focused on correctness of understanding) but extends to effect more imaginative management of co-texts within the poem and new pockets of significance and social roles outside of the poem, which usually entail the verbally playful, aesthetic, emotional, philosophical, and religious dimensions that the mere verbal signs do not readily index without mediation. While perhaps not explicitly indicating them

within the commentarial format, commentators indicate these aspects of index-icality as essential properties of the poet's creativity and deployment of linguistic signs. The presentation of options for understanding these signs—arguably forged in discursive interactions that undergird the artifactual form of the commentary—comprise some of the metapragmatic conventions of the *kāvya* commentary.

Although literary-commentarial operations ultimately develop out of pro-cedures developed in the *vyākāraṇa* and *mīmāṃsā* traditions, the metalanguage of the *kāvya* commentary necessarily diverges from both of these traditions on account of a difference in objective. Whereas the Pāṇinian method is to derive the semantic meaning without interest in the sentence (the outcome of that deriva-tion), *mīmāṃsā* approaches pragmatically locate the ways in which a singular utterance in a ritual context serves a singular purpose, thus reconstructing a comprehensive and wholly expected meaning. In some places, when more than a singular gloss of a word is given, *kāvya* commentaries generally follow the grammarian's procedure and sort out potential ambiguities by first giving the most common sense of the word, followed by the more exceptional sense that is likely the intended sense in the verse. This is, in some ways, similar to philosophical and scriptural commentaries, which also often treat individual words prior to moving to larger contexts, the important difference being that the *kāvya* commentary's arc does not culminate—with notable exceptions—in doctrinaire readings, criticism, or argument.[1]

The stated objectives of the *kāvya* commentary are sometimes invoked with the *Nyāyakośa*'s well-known snapshot of a perhaps older self-representation of what the commentary does. Its encapsulation of commentarial explanations into five categories (word-division; stating the meanings of the words; grammatical anal-ysis of compounds and other forms; construing the sentence's syntax; answering objections/stating the intended meaning)[2] highlights a metalinguistic awareness that reflects on the features of a *kāvya* text. This includes, as the *Nyāyakośa*

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1 For a commentary that does prioritize an overarching context of significance over and above a sustained focus on just the lexical and syntactic elements, see Y. Bronner's essay on Ravicandra's *Kāmadā* commentary (of unknown date) on the *Amaruśatakam* [Bronner, Yigal (1998). "Double-bodied Poet, Double-bodied Poem: Ravicandra's Commentary on the *Amaruśatakam* and the Rules of Sanskrit Literary Interpretation." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 233–261.]. I thank both editors of the present volume for this and other suggestions for consideration throughout this essay.

2 Under the entry for *vyākhyānam*, the *Nyāyakośa* reads: *pada-cchedaḥ padārthoktir vigraho vākya-yojanā/ākṣepeṣu samādhānaṃ vyākhyānaṃ pañca-lakṣaṇam//*(Jhalakikar 1928: 828). An alternative version is also attested: *pada-cchedo 'nvayoktiś ca samāsādi-vivecanam/padārtha-bodhas tātparyaṃ vyākhyānāvayava-pañcakam//*(Roodbergen 1984: 2). See also Klebanov 2020: 523–590 for a thoroughgoing structural analysis of commentarial functions.

formulation implies, distinguishing layers of semantic meaning, identifying various forms of word play and implied senses, and reordering into conventional syntax what is peculiarly staged for poetic effect. The metasemantics of the commentary assist with and sharpen language and literary skill acquisition in degrees of scale and sophistication. Over and above the standard word-for-word glosses, the *kāvya* commentator aptly demonstrates a skill to expand the gloss-centered denotational text.

For example, in Nārāyaṇa's sixteenth-century *Prakāśa* commentary, on *Naiṣadhīyacaritam* 11.42, the conceit formulated by the commentator is that Goddess Lakṣmī's suspicion has been aroused by observing Damayanti's beauty, as she worries that her own husband Lord Viṣṇu will leave her to be with the human woman. The poet Śrīharṣa merely suggests that the goddess has a suspicion: *tvad-rūpa-sampad-avalokana-jāta-śaṅkā*; however, it is left to the commentator Nārāyaṇa to flesh out the implication: "If that Viṣṇu sees her, then leaving me, he will fall in love with her" (*ayaṃ śrīviṣṇur imāṃ ced drakṣyati tarhi māṃ vihāyāsyām anurakto bhaviṣyati*).[3] Similarly the fifteenth-century commentator Rāghavabhaṭṭa, on *Śākuntalam* 1.32, expands Duṣyanta's assessment of his own mental state—where he simply says that while his body goes forward (*gacchati puraḥ śarīram*), backwards turns his disconcerted heart (*asaṃstutaṃ cetaḥ*). Here, the commentator insightfully elaborates that "by this [statement], the implication is that because of his heart's emptiness [separated from Śakuntalā], his body is like a piece of wood being carried off by another" (*anayā ca hṛdaya-śūnyatvāt pareṇa nīyamāna-kāṣṭa-tulyatvaṃ śarīram iti dhvanitam*).[4] As is evident in these examples, when commentators do elaborate, it virtually never concerns criticism or even significance, but rather evermore specific meanings, giving context and interpretation through semantic analysis.

Commentaries work with surfaces and depths, with oblique senses and transparent ones, with what is made explicit and what is suggested. Determining word-references and their relations with each other constitute the explicit work of commentaries to fulfill an understanding of the essential speech act. It is what they do and what readers see. The commentarial co-text yields cultural information that not only subsumes basic semantic references and predications but also secondary sets of operations that bear on literary significance: tropic embellishment (*alaṅkāra*), secondary senses beyond mere polysemy (*lakṣaṇārtha*), and suggested senses requiring greater literary sensitivity or cultural competency (*vyañjanārtha*). Commentarial co-texts vary and, although the scope here concerns the interlinear commentarial co-text, so essential to the purely pedagogical function of commentary, an important study would include the singularly fascinating poem/

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3 Paṇḍit Śivadatta (ed.) 1928: 425.
4 Kale (ed.) 1969: 53.

epitome (*sāra*) "commentaries" of scholar-poets such as the fourteenth-century Pūrṇasarasvatī, whose famous *Ṛjulaghvī* on Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhavam* sustains a critical and creative approach to the act of commentary by composing in 266 verse a summary of the poem's plot along with thoughtful bits of information and carefully crafted interpretations. While Pūrṇasarasvatī authored traditional commentaries as well, on poems like *Meghadūtam* and *Anargharāghavam* in addition to the *Mālatīmādhavam* itself, works like the *Ṛjulaghvī* are truly *co-texts*, as they mirror the metrical, thematic, and stylistic aspects of their source in ways that bring the reader closer to the original without blurring the lines of poem-and-commentary as many traditional *ṭīkā* and *vyākhyā* works do, especially when they are published and read together in manuscript or book form.[5]

The artifactual nature of the textualized *ṭīkā* and *vyākhyā* commentarial form in Sanskrit—by one account, 75% of the total extant literature in the language[6]— may, at times, obscure the fact that there is a communication occurring, as it might between a teacher and a student or a critic and an audience. That communication also exists in contexts that invite reconstructions that exceed the standard scholarly thematization of the *kāvya* commentary's denotational text, which emphasizes a carefully curated reference-and-predication discursive map of the source text (about *what* is being said) but stops short of factoring in the ways in which the semantic effects are derived from contextual conditions (*why* is it being said the way it is).[7] Embodying a *mīmāṃsā* logic for deriving sentence meaning [expectancy (*ākāṅkṣā*), proximity (*sannidhi*), and appropriateness to the context (*yogyatā*)], the *kāvya* commentary exemplifies the glossing conventions of everyday communication, organizing tokens-referents-predicates but also how they conform to produce sensibility. It also epitomizes the structure of communication in terms of using language to talk about *kāvya*. Even though the denotation of the words might be the same across different types of communication, the commentary emphasizes subtleties of usage that inform cultural practices and situations, demonstrating a sort of dynamic yet stylized real-time communication effect.

The specialist *kāvya* commentarial curation of the verse's text-sentence—in various metasemantic regulations of what the grammar construes—may clash or

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5 See especially NVP Unithiri's work on the commentator-poet Pūrṇasarasvatī (http://hdl.handle.net/10603/169560). I thank the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this important Sanskrit exegete.

6 Pollock (2015: 115) offers that "[i]t has been estimated that commentaries constitute as much as 75 percent of the Sanskrit written tradition, and they embody some of its most insightful thinking about texts."

7 See Silverstein (1993) for a comprehensive discussion of denotational texts in everyday discursive metapragmatics.

be more or less elaborate in comparison to what other commentators do. Nevertheless, all commentators take one of two approaches toward arriving at the logical syntax of natural language through skillful syntactical rearrangements and glossing methods based either on a direct string of glosses of words as they would occur in a normal prose order or by guiding the syntactic reconstruction through a series of leading questions.[8] The resultant effect is of a co-presence of a reference-predication unit operating internal to the poem's language mapped on to an implicit discursive interaction with certain features of deictic signaling conveyed through intonation, syllabic stress, tone, voice, etc. that textualization effectively brackets. One may look at the commentarial element in the Sanskrit stage-performance tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam to notice the ways in which these features (tone, voice, and so forth) are restored in live performance.[9]

Absent the live scene, the interlinear, textualized *kāvya* commentary very much follows procedures developed in other contexts, especially *vyākaraṇa*, *mīmāṃsā*, and *nyāya*. What distinguishes the *kāvya* commentary from the more interpretation-heavy commentary on scriptural texts, whether it is Veda, *buddhavacana*, or the Jain *sūtra* is that the end result of the *kāvya* commentary is not meant to yield an explicit interpretation.[10] Rather, it is meant to set the limits for an interpretation by deriving all of the probable meanings that the source intends based on the parameters set by grammar, poetic conventions, the context of the work as a whole, and an expanded common sense that sometimes also allows for unusual but nevertheless possible readings. When multiple options or more refined secondary senses exist, these meanings are usually ordered with the commentator's sense of the common or intended usage first, followed by the more exceptional explanations. Very rarely, *kāvya* commentators might prioritize an exceptional sense before giving the common one. Clearly, however, rather than the goal being an interpretation, the traditional *kāvya* commentary (again, with notable exceptions) seems to have only sought to do the necessary to facilitate a

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8 See Tubb and Boose (2007: 149–150) and Patel (2014: 88) for details.

9 The so-called *ślokārttham* component of Kerala's Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre, where Sanskrit verses are recited and explained, perhaps offers the closest glimpse to the public discursive effect of commentary a complement to the more intimate reading that may go on in a small gathering (*goṣṭhi*) or between a teacher and student. While there may be an essential unity between all of these forms of oral and textualized commentary (to bring out the inner meaning or *antarārtha*), it seems the performance tradition engages a much wider range of social and hermeneutic functions which would need further study. See especially the essays of Mucciarelli, Shulman, Oberlin, and Devadevan in *Two Masterpieces of Kūṭiyāṭṭam: Mantrāṅkam and Aṅgulīyāṅkam*. Edited by Heike Oberlin and David Shulman. Oxford Scholarship Online: 2020. I again thank the anonymous reviewer for directing my attention towards the Kerala theatre tradition.

10 See Lubin (2019), Heim (2018), and Jyväsjärvi (2010) for insightful discussions of Brāhmaṇa, Bauddha, and Jaina commentarial methods respectively.

reading and perhaps an interpretation, to open the text up and not to narrow its scope. The goal of most of the *kāvya* commentaries seems to be to extract the maximal amount of optimal information about the verse's linguistic elements so that they can be reconstituted mentally to create a meaning that, in different measures, triggers and elevates a cognitive, emotional, or imaginative understanding in the individual reader.

It is, therefore, certainly a mistaken view to insist on *kāvya* commentaries being epiphenomena of commentaries on *vyākaraṇa*, *mīmāṃsā*, and *darśanaśāstra*—of commentaries on grammar, scriptural texts or philosophical *sūtras*— or practice-focused handmaidens of poetics-focused conceptual abstractions in the *alaṅkāraśāstra*. While they certainly draw on these earlier models of commentary-writing and certainly are interdisciplinary in their use of methods (especially the *mīmāṃsā* and the *nyāya*), and while it is very closely tied to poetics, the objectives of the *kāvya ṭīkā* from the point of view of semantics does not necessarily carry the commitments of those disciplines. The literary commentary, for example, does not focus on interpretation as such, like the *mīmāṃsā* or the commentaries on *buddhavacana* or commentators on Jain *sūtra*, nor is it solely focused on identifying and evaluating correct linguistic usage or giving assessments appreciating or diminishing the quality or value of any given work. Common complaints accompany misperception of the function and format of the *kāvya* commentary; for example: they are too fragmentary to be useful as a reading; too close to the original and, therefore, lacking in objective or critical information; another is that they elaborate on unwanted information and neglect desired information.[11]

Another common view, understandably, is that commentaries exist in an ahistorical space and are generally static, uniform, faceless, and interchangeable. While the names of the commentators may change, they are generally thought to be doing the same thing. The commentary may perform everything from giving superficial notes or glosses to in-depth analysis indicated in Sanskrit sources by a diverse typological nomenclature (*ṭīkā*, *vyākhyā*, *bhāṣya*, *vārttika*, *guḍārtha*, *parīkṣā*, *dīpa*, *prakāśa*, *pañjikā*, *cūrṇi*, etc.). The surface text of each type of commentary does not suggest significant specialization and reflects, by and large, an interchangeable and universally shared set of procedures. These include: simple and elaborate explanations, coherent readings, linguistic and poetic analysis of each textual unit (in poetry), or a tally of arguments and counter-arguments (in

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11 The *Yogasūtra* commentator Bhoja's carp is legendary: "Whatever is rather difficult to understand, that they avoid by saying 'It is clear'. With respect to the clear meanings, they over-elaborate with useless analysis of compounds, etc. The *ṭīkā* seems to confuse issues for readers by aimlessly prattling on unhelpfully at the wrong places." See Patel (2014: 61) for a discussion of this passage.

philosophy). Very rarely do Sanskrit commentaries perform *all* of these functions to an ordinary reader's satisfaction. Perhaps, a commentary on a ritual or philosophical text may, to some extent, attend to most of these roles, but the *kāvya* commentary usually only offers glosses and an occasional elaborate explanation.

While commentaries do share a common look, each individuated commentary was probably composed, used, and shared in specialized contexts of interaction— between teachers and students, teachers and other teachers, and sometimes between scholars and patrons.[12] The commentary, on its surface, presents itself as an exercise of textual self-understanding and pedagogical elucidation. One needs also to attend to its critical motivations to generate complexity as an expression of an unreservedly positive passion for the work as well as its ambition to publicly demonstrate learning as an exchange commodity to gain a credential.[13] Furthermore, each commentary carries with it its own special approach that often borrows or is intertextually related with other commentaries on the same work.

Most features of the commentary's metalinguistic abstractions to clarify semantic subtexts hold across genres. For example, certain semantic codes to indicate shades of meaning (such as *ity arthaḥ, iti bhāvaḥ, iti yāvat, anena, kimbhūta,* etc.) ubiquitously populate all commentarial genres.[14] However, important differences distinguish the commentary on *kāvya* from, say, commentaries on grammatical works, which emphasize the derivation of verbal forms; or from ritual texts, whose commentaries are charged with making the ritual acts coherent with each other; or *dharmaśāstra*, where an ethical or just position may be debated; and philosophy, where correct logic and argument preoccupy commentators. For *kāvya* contexts, foremost is the attention commentaries give to language: its composition, the special way it expresses and engages the imagination, the hyperconscious use of linguistic forms to evoke and reveal imagistic aspects of the world. Arguments for correct views and persuasion, or perhaps even interpretation, seem to be secondary, and usually, altogether absent.

This absence advances a series of common misperceptions about the *kāvya* commentary's meaning-making objectives. First is that it performs a critical explanation or an interpretation. It seems that while not itself a translation, an

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12 Klebanov (2020: 527) cites, for instance, the case of Appayyadīkṣita, whose commentary on Vedāntadeśika's *Yādavābhyudaya*, was apparently composed at the behest of his royal patron, King Cinnatimma.

13 There is anecdotal evidence, for instance, that writing a commentary on certain works conferred a credential of sorts; for instance, some record that a commentary on the poem *Naiṣadhīyacaritam*, the philosophical treatise *Nyāyakusumāñjali*, and the poetics textbook *Kāvyaprakāśa* conferred upon one the title of *mahāmahopadhyāya*, which carried with it the eligibility to teach multiple students. See Patel (2014: 62) for elaboration.

14 See especially Tubb and Boose (2007: ch. 3) for elaborate examples of such usages.

interpretation, nor a critical analysis or appreciation of the poet's words, it *facilitates* all three. In that it fosters translation, critical appreciation, and a host of informal literary activity, the text-commentary complex is a completed unit that does not foreclose but rather furthers (perhaps not exactly infinite) addition. It is not just a supplement—to the literal or semantic interpretation of autonomous logical or natural syntactic expressions—but also presents distinctive objectives with operational procedures. Another misperception is that the commentary "simplifies" the text. While, the *ṭīkā* does serve to clarify the verse and make it contextually meaningful, it sometimes can actually complicate semantic and pragmatic significance rather than simplifying it.

Beyond semantic interpretations, important to highlight also are commentaries' pragmatic implications, the more expansive "meaning" of what is both denoted and not denoted that emerges from the actual event of *kāvya*. Some of the latter are embedded in the former. For instance, whereas commentators systematically map "sense" from the grammatical structure, using gloss as well as virtual types of explanations (*laukika* or *Pāṇinian*), likewise, they also perform an ordinary metapragmatics in the form of identifying and elucidating poetic figures and tropes (*alaṃkāras*), which provide context for word-meanings in poetry. In doing so, the commentary captures the inscription of sense-making in real-time, giving us a glimpse of an oral discursive interaction. For instance, in verse 11.48 from the *Naiṣadhīyacaritam*, goddess Speech (*Sarasvatī*) praises Damayantī's teeth as similar to lustrous rubies (*kuruvinda-sakānti-danti*). As a somewhat opaque metaphor (why indeed compare teeth to rubies?), the commentator Nārāyaṇa makes sense of this simile in a metapragmatic way that one might gloss a complex thought to another person in an ordinary conversation: "By this (word's use), i.e. rubies [*kuruvinda*], what is indicated is that because she was chewing on many *tāmbūla* (quicklime, betel nut, and other ingredients neatly wrapped in a betel leaf), her teeth became red."[15] The unstated connection—known to all who have chewed *tāmbūla* (or *paan*, the modern word in most Indian languages)—is that the juice that forms in the mouth upon chewing it is bright red and stains the teeth. Here, the commentator offers an explicit equation of two elements that can otherwise remain ambiguous, or more likely, may not immediately occur to the audience. In doing so, the pragmatic effect of glossing this trope in such a way (x as y) is determinative and holds no possibility for an alternate sense to arise. In other words, her teeth are like rubies for no other reason than her habitual *paan* eating.

Other significant metapragmatic gestures in *kāvya* commentaries to complete understanding include the marking of internal codes of information and communication on a surface and deep level as well as signaling implicit codes

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15 Paṇḍit Śivadatta (ed.) 1928: 426.

through explicit commonplace usages. The commentarial sequencing (*krama*) of the verse units that structurally reorders (*anvaya*) the verse to facilitate meaning, for example, also has the effect of deictically gesturing to the contexts embedded in each verse (be they agents, some kind of action, or a dynamic description). The use of words like *atra, saḥ/sā/tat,* etc. restores a certain *krama* that may be experienced differently by what is heard when the verse is recited. Even though the commentary is sequenced in parts, the competent reader who has gone through it straight through has experienced it as singular. Each element of the sequence is segmented into parts (either phrase structure, *alaṅkāra,* plot contexts) and stacked, as it were, to produce a singular reception of the verse's semantic meaning. This is not unlike what grammarians describe in the grasping of a word through the hearing of its constituent sound elements. For example, the commentator Mallinātha's gloss on *Śiśupālavadham* 2.61 restates the poet's statement-cum-analogy, that the political maxim that one ought to attack the enemy when they are mired in misfortune brings shame to a proud warrior (*nītir āpadi yadgamyaḥ paras tanmānino hriye*); rather, like Rāhu (*vidhuntudas*) who attacks a moon (*vidhus*) that is full (*pūrṇas*), a proud person who attacks an enemy at full-strength invites celebration (*utsavāya*). Mallinātha here not only makes explicit the connection between the proud person (*mānin*) and Rāhu, but also unpacks the terse language of the poet, explaining the fourth-case dative form *hriye* as "producing shame" (*lajjākaram ityarthaḥ*); the connection of the moon's "fullness" with the enemy's being "fully armed" (*upacita-gātra*); and leaving the assumption that his audience will understand why "celebration" with regard to a full moon, the dative *utsavāya* in the context of confronting a formidable enemy means that "a strong person ought to fight with a strong person, [celebrating the fact that] we are strong" (*balinā balavān eva yātavyaḥ balinaś ca eva vayam iti bhāvaḥ*).[16] The commentator's sequencing (*anvaya*) not only suggests a propositional or sentential logic, reorienting the words of the sentence to communicate a statement of what is being said by the poet, but also *augments* this restated sentence with other information that produces an ever more complex communication.

In addition to providing a more manifest expression of the poet's words ensconced within the poem's cohesive structures, the commentary also reveals what may leak out from the text into the social world of the text-as-interactional event. The commentary makes the poem an interpretable experience and, therefore, an interactional text that presupposes structures of participation of multiple (at least two) voices. Much of the interaction embedded in the particular event embodied by the commentary—imaginative or reflective of some pedagogical or communal reality—is implicit. However, what lies beneath these practices are non-

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16 Chowkhamba Vidyabhavan edition 1961: 91.

referential aspects of what and how the commentary performs. Much of what a native user of Sanskrit experienced in the social context within which the commentary was produced and received must be inferred, and it is in this recovery that perhaps we can approach these textual artifacts as evidence of a livelier interactional subtext.

Represented by the first sets of source-commentary communiques in ancient India, the Veda exemplifies a conscious process of transmission, reception, interpretation, and communication. Although the metasemantic and meta-pragmatic commentarial approach of the Veda is a recovery project of what is already self-determined and established in the source—and thus differs from *kāvya*'s apparently forward-looking approach—there is continuity in the scene of pedagogy and its recursive practices of recitation, memorization, reflection, and transmission. Understanding an utterance requires an immediate aural perception. Understanding the context in which that utterance exists is not immediate and requires bringing together complex utterances that are not uttered together. If the expression of meaning of a speech unit is understood merely by hearing it, (*śrutimātra*), it is not dependent on any kind of commentary.

The commentary's *raison d'être*, in this context, is to provide a scaffolding to ultimately build a particular skill: to be able to understand a verse merely by hearing it and to be able to recite the verse with understanding to others. As Rājaśekhara indicates in the fifth and seventh chapters of the *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, one can say that understanding (and the ability to compose) is complete when the meanings of words are mentally well-established (*padānāṃ sthāpite sthairye hanta siddhā sarasvatī*) and when the receiver knows how to recite the poem perfectly (*karoti kāvyaṃ prāyeṇa saṃskṛtātmā yathā tathā/paṭhituṃ vetti sa paraṃ yasya siddhā sarasvatī//*).[17] It is arguable that this ability to spontaneously understand is a primary goal of the *kāvya* commentary, another being the ability to take pleasure from a poem that is fully understood. If these goals are not met through the mediating agency of the commentary, one has not really completed *kāvya* training, as the poet Bhaṭṭi (22.34) suggests about his own poem, when he writes that his *Rāvaṇavadha* is to be "approached with a commentary, which will render it nothing less than a celebration for the brilliant, and it will utterly frustrate lazy readers" (*vyākhyā-gamyam idam kāvyam utsavaḥ sudhiyām alam/hatā durmed-hasaś cāsmin vidvat-priyatayā mayā//*).[18] Subsidiary goals may be that one uses the commentary format to explore other directions, often intersemiotic ones, like so-called virtuosic allegorical or double-meaning readings, or even giving very

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17 Dalal/Sastry (eds.) 1934: 20; 33.
18 Joshi/Paṇśikar (eds.) 1934: 478.

basic information meant for a targeted audience (like children, for instance) or a student/patron who has a specific interest in the text at hand.

From this point of view, the lack of theoretical energy spent on what the *kāvya* commentary is and does (in relation to similar works for other Sanskrit genres) is perhaps willful. Rather than positioning the *kāvya* commentary as short on delivering in a satisfactory way, the ostensibly incomplete and provisional format may actually trigger a more engaged teaching and reading invisible to manuscript and print. As a superior aid for mental reconstruction, memorization through metrical recitation or melodic singing, and informal translation rather than a coherent reading packaged for consumption, the *kāvya* commentary exists as an artifactual remainder of oral teaching practices as well as part of a complex and sophisticated reading attitude and not, as it often has been understood, a transparently secondary form of textuality useful to occasionally consult but not necessarily to read together with the source. The recursive practice of *kāvya* pedagogy retains its vitality even today in certain *pāṭhaśālā* settings where a staged set of evermore explanatory glosses accompany repeated recitations of the verse until, for a student, understanding dawns and recitation fulfills the teaching. The received literary commentary ultimately exists as a glimpse into this peculiar communication. In interactional text genres like *kāvya*, a commentary can never be sufficient and, in a fundamental way, not even adequate to exhaust the implicit metapragmatic communication. In a manner akin to ritual, the commentary ontically reanimates a *kāvya* verse. The commentary is meant to be repeatable, across time and space but it cannot capture the event that has to be reanimated every time between a teacher and a student or the performer and the audience—the ritual renewal necessary to complete the commentary/poem co-textual experience. Each commentary is thus a ritual of the primal event of the *kāvya*'s first performance.

The commentary also serves as a remnant of a routinized cultural practice that is learned and developed in ordinary communication. For instance, glossing semantically equivalent expressions for grammatically complex ones occurs in everyday speech, especially when teaching language to children, and also in numerous *kāvya* commentaries with the objective of assisting novice readers (often aptly entitled something like *bālabodhinī*). Commentators can use language to make things opaque or clear, as the occasion invites. The textual form limits, however, the articulation of certain vitally important features of *kāvya*'s interactional text, such as meter, for instance. Some *kāvya* commentators (like Mallinātha, for example) occasionally identify the meter (and give its scholastic definition) but are helpless within the given format to fully represent its real-time role to enhance the poem's effectiveness to convey semantic and extra-semantic meaning. One usually has to *recite* the *kāvya* in a certain regimented and ritualized

way—with perhaps a range of melodic options—in order to make the communication optimally effective. That particular aspect of the *kāvya* experience does not immediately jump off the page.

Promoting effective recitation and comprehension skills admittedly are not the sole objectives of the commentary. Nor is, however, settling on an appropriate interpretation by configuring a semantic sense. Most skilled readers of Sanskrit with an adequate understanding of the grammar (especially ones who are equipped with the competency to read at least *kāvya*'s surface text) do not require a commentator to explain what the verse is saying, especially after potentially difficult words, constructions, or figures of speech are elucidated. However, over and above a baseline comprehension, the commentary highlights the range of the poet's usages; disambiguates a plural sense or ambiguates an ordinary understanding; translates (intra-lingually) the *kāvya*'s Sanskrit into different registers of Sanskrit that nevertheless align with registers familiar to the reader in order to make the reader hyperaware of the specialized codes of the poet. To what end? One surmises that ultimately, it is to facilitate the ability to take in the maximum amount of optimal information about the verse's linguistic elements that can then be reconstituted mentally to create a meaning that, in different measures, triggers and elevates a cognitive, emotional, or imaginative understanding—what in traditional Sanskrit theory is framed as *rasa*. Eventually, one may arrive at the primary goal of being able to experience the verse—with *rasa*—merely upon hearing it (*śrutimātra*).

The commentary's limited charge thus is to teach the *skill* of reading but not really to provide a reading. The central goal of the commentary's performance, therefore, implies a co-textual practice that is fundamentally interactional and dialogical. Much of the interactive performance remains metapragmatic, though it is implied in the denotational text. The ideas of each *kāvya* verse, its sounds and invisible gestures are construable to an extent through the various text-building activities the commentary engages in—as it breaks down and rebuilds a text with glosses, citations, explanations, and text-critical notes—but ultimately the commentary's discursive voice reflects upon the socialized competence of Sanskrit readers and aligns the various registers of their linguistic awareness. Beyond the voicing of expansive semiotic registers, found regularly in the practice of everyday communication, the commentary negotiates an in-between format making available points of access to "read" the source (in the sense of understanding, imagining, and feeling) without staking a claim to have given a reading. The format thus projects a humility by foregoing a decisive translation (in its broadest hermeneutic sense) in order to preserve a semblance of the source's incommensurability. In doing so, it authorizes the potential for interpretation, argument, creation, and meaning-making of all other sorts without foreclosing the power of the poet's

received word. While this may not always be the case with every commentary, one may argue that the ethos is widespread enough to warrant an assertion of a pattern, if not a rule.

A ubiquitous function of the commentator, therefore, involves aligning the text's voice with the voices that comprise multiple social and institutional registers, including the private voice of the commentator himself. Rather than merely an index of voices internal and external to the text, alignment accounts for the social setting and its diverse conditions. Though difficult to untangle, we must presume that techniques of commentarial analysis reflect micro-level processes shaped in dialogical interactions with types of readers—real, virtual, and imagined. In single commentaries, one may detect multiple voicing contrasts that stand for living reading contexts that the commentary ultimately aligns in a mutually intelligible format. That format, of course, as an artifact often occludes the users, situations, and purposes that produced and received the commentary in the first place. Occasionally, however, the virtual voices within and among the commentaries are differentiable—in a way similar to how linguistic anthropologists describe voicing in ordinary discursive situations—through a range of metapragmatic abilities that receivers of the commentary possess to distinguish and comprehend layers of information being presented.[19] The persistence of the *kāvya* commentary form across time depends on its success as a form to widely circulate and socialize an awareness and competence among changing readerships.

Along with the format of the commentary, the contexts within which they were institutionalized contribute to their becoming staple features of a normative, formalist *kāvya* education. Thus, for instance, the *kāvya* commentaries obliquely index literary values in their treatment of a poem's perceived flawed usage of words (*padadoṣa*) and sentences (*vākyadoṣa*); in these cases, commentators implicitly discipline stylistic norms through paraphrase of the poet's words while with other *doṣa*, as in the case of perceived ill-considered repetitions of words or meanings (the so-called *punarukti*), the commentary will explicitly emend the text or, at least, note the criticism outright. In this regard, I have argued elsewhere that the *mahākāvya* commentator Mallinātha participates in such a prescriptive socialization that reveals the disciplinary aspect of commentary; his commentaries create ideal readers as much as satisfying existing ones, expanding a domain of competence from one generation of reader to the next. In this case the commentary is about its object (the poem) but also about itself and its replication of stereotypical reading practice to promote a uniform competence across contexts.[20]

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19 See Agha (2005) and Silverstein (1993) for an analysis of metapragmatic abilities in relation to voicing, differentiating registers within discourse, identifying repertoires of usage.

20 For a discussion of Mallinātha's commentaries from this point of view, see Patel (2014: 60–63).

However, the genre of commentary, like ordinary communication formats, is not contextually invariant, as registers and features change according to aesthetic reframing and new social settings. Here the *kāvya* genre takes on a sort of progressive aspect, often manifested in fresh types of virtuosic readings that go beyond disciplinary pedagogical documents. Across all of the changes of the *kāvya*'s existence in a reading culture, the commentary genre dutifully serves a mediating role. Perhaps this balance it seems to strike as a comprehensive co-text to the *kāvya* that aims to not alienate but rather align the roles of different users explains the lack of opinionated literary-critical energy in the commentary.

Rather, the commentator subtly builds a narrative in the same way as a *kavi* builds the poem, switching back and forth between a real and an imagined identity, as a critic/commentator and an actual person. Naturally, the commentator controls representation of the poem and thus takes on a role more authoritative than might be intended. Similarly, a sub-commentator may mediate the author and the commentator's communication in a way that now further aligns roles. One is directly alerted, in many instances, of the commentator's self-represented authorial objective and his commentary's primary function. Again, to borrow an example from the *Naiṣadhīyacaritam* tradition, the thirteenth-century commentator Cāṇḍupaṇḍita, in the opening preface of his *Dīpikā* commentary, explains his objectives as an extension of a dialogue with the text begun by his predecessor:

> Vidyādhara [and earlier commentator] has composed a helpful commentary but its eloquence doesn't quite release Śrīharṣa's profundity. Moving clouds frequently carry water from one shore of the ocean to the other and in all directions. Can that water be knee-deep anywhere?[21]

Likewise, Iśānadeva another commentator on the same *kāvya*, clarifies his objectives in relation to his forerunners as well:

> Let those scholars who are curious about the delineation of poetic figures in Śrīharṣa's poem either employ their own aptitude toward discovering it or let them consult Vidyādhara's commentary, a thorough exploration of the subject from all perspectives. Whatever I might say on the matter is generally in deference to him alone and is not the result of my own diligence. I have composed this commentary on *Naiṣadhīya* from a Śaiva point of view to please the good. I've produced this work adopting the method of bees gathering small gobbets of honey (*mādhukarī*). Therefore, scholars of poetry should not ridicule it. Every

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21 ṭīkāṃ yady api sopapatti-racanāṃ vidyādharo nirmame/śrīharṣasya tathāpi na tyajati sā gambhīratāṃ bhāratī//dik kūlaṅka-ṣatāṃ gatair jala-dharair udgṛhyamāṇaṃ muhuḥ/pārāvāram apāram ambu kiṃ iha syāj jānu-mātraṃ kvacit//Quoted in Patel (2014: 211).

commentators' work tries its best to explain its source. And so, I admit that my own work follows my teacher's commentary on the source poem.[22]

Learning a new language fosters hyperawareness of the arbitrariness of language and, in some ways, of all cultural signs and codes. Each new commentary effects a similar awareness for the poem or philosophical work. The more individuated the commentary is, the more destabilized the original text appears. This is why the explicit form of the commentary appears so familiar and stable, to overwhelm the fact that the very writing and memorializing of a new reading (however similar it looks to previous readings) undermines the established understanding of the text at hand. Why would you have to keep writing commentaries otherwise if one already written suffices to satisfy your needs?

On some level, each commentary is both an embrace and struggle with the poem. The *kāvya*, one may argue, resists commentarial *reading*. The *mahākavi*'s desire is to express elegant complexity, even if it be in simple language, or even to reflect the frailty of language to express fully. If the poet's results are confusing, the implication on their part seems to be: "So be it." The commentary, on the one hand, revels in the multiplicity of meanings, or at least the layers of significance, thrown up by the *kāvya*. While poets play with words, mostly conventional and well-worn, to awaken their harmonics and their polyphony in addition to their potency to mean, the commentator has a further investment—not necessarily shared by the poet—to speak to sociolinguistic contexts of reading decades and centuries after the poem's emergence. Whereas the poet generally strives to say things uniquely, the commentator participates and is deeply established in cultural routines and norms of communication. The commentators—like all readers—are driven by prescriptions molded by cultural schemes. While the prospects for elaboration face few limitations, the drawbacks are nevertheless stark. The *kāvya* commentary-as-text cannot reproduce, for example, the melodic and tonal metrical recitation of the verse. Its generic features as crafted and designed speech-acts perform differently than the immediacy and spontaneity that a recited *kāvya* projects.

Still, the commentary is the primary cultural vehicle for the sustenance and transmission of the *kāvya*, as for every other Sanskrit genre. It offers a link between the Sanskrit language which comprises the poem (*vāṅmaya*) and a peculiar and

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22 ye 'laṃkāra-vivecane kutukinaḥ śrīharṣa-saṃkīrtite/kāvye 'smin svayam eva te vidadhatu prajñā-vilāsaṃ budhāḥ//ṭīkāṃ vā bahuśo vicāra-jaṭilāṃ paśyantu vidyā-dharīṃ/tad-vācyā na vayaṃ hi tasya karaṇe prāyo na jātodyamāḥ//satāṃ mude naiṣadha-ṭippaṇaṃ mayā viracyate śaivamatānusāriṇā/mādhukarīṃ samāśritya vṛttim etad ihārjitam mayā tapasvinā tasmād alaṃ kāvya-vidāṃ hāsaiḥ//sarvo' pi kāvyam upajīvya karoti śāstra-vyākhyāṃ guror api mayā'nukṛtā tadeyam/vidvān sa yāti narakaṃ khalu yaḥ prasiddhyai svīyāṃ vadan para-kṛtiṃ pratibhāti loke//Quoted in Patel (2014: 211–212).

dominant subtype of Sanskrit literary culture that connects linguistic structures and grammatical analysis with events and structures of culture outside of language. The commentary embodies in text the routinized cultural processes of poets, professional critics, matriculated students, and ordinary learned people who write, listen, memorize, debate, and repeat Sanskrit verbal discourse. Its unimpeachable significance, therefore—for framing learning modules, mediating social spaces for pedagogy and the credentialization of pedagogues, and for modeling the informal interactive contexts that create communities of connoisseurs—cannot be overstated, in part because commentaries bring us closest to gleaning a historical sociology of reading Sanskrit texts as well as offering a glimpse into the metapragmatic underpinnings of learned Sanskrit culture.

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