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Sakāya niruttīyā revisited

Introduction

One of the hallmarks of modern critical theory has been the deconstruction of the language paradigm. No longer can we take the simple early twentieth century referential theories of symbolic communication for granted: *this* means *that*, and *it exists* out there “in the world”. We now understand that words are loaded with unexamined pre-conceptions conditioned by our various social, cultural, political and historical biases; nor is exposing these prejudices and arriving at “the truth” an easy task, for often we are ignorant of our ignorance. Even with the best of intentions to be objective, Heisenberg has taught that the observer always adds uncertainty to “objective reality”.

Distrust of the truth value of language is not new. The first person to question the validity of language in a systematic way was the Buddha in the fifth century B.C. India. He grew up in a culture where the Vedic hymns were considered sacrosanct, the actual immortal words of God (Staal 1979, 11). If they were not repeated exactly, their sacramental efficacy was vitiated or destroyed. The Buddha maintained that words were changeable and arbitrary; the sonic element had no necessary connection either to the meaning, or to the referent. Words were often ambiguous and had many meanings, and it became a distinctive mark of the Buddha’s teaching style that he always used many synonyms in trying to describe a concept (von Hinüber 1994, 15; Allon 1997, 191f; Levman 2009a); recognizing that words lacked a centre of denotative meaning, his teachings are a study in circumlocutory play (Derrida 1980, 289).

How much then can we really know about “what the Buddha said or meant”? We are separated by some 2500 years from his life and half a world away from his culture. We know the middle Indic language he spoke only from books, in a state that has evolved significantly from the original form in which he spoke it. The teachings that have come down to us have been so differently interpreted by his followers that different sects split the community apart very soon after his death. Can we achieve what Gadamer calls “the intelligent and empathetic entry into another’s standpoint” (1988, 325)?

A case in point about the uncertainty of language is the *sakāya niruttīyā* controversy, an argument that has persisted for 1500 years, since Buddhaghosa wrote his commentaries on the teachings. Some scholars believe that the Buddha authorized his teachings to be transmitted and memorized only in his own language (which Buddhaghosa called *Māgadhī*). Others have argued (and they are probably the majority) that he allowed his teachings to be translated into local dialects. Most agree that he forbade the transposition of his words into Vedic Sanskrit or Vedic chant.¹

¹ The relevant section is from the *Vinaya Cullavagga* V, 33, (Vin II 139, 1-16):

There are a variety of grammatical, semantic and historical issues involved which I will discuss in an attempt to enter into the Buddha's viewpoint and understand what he meant. As to the first issue of authenticity – did the Buddha in fact make this statement? – this must be passed over quickly for, though there is some controversy over the date of the *Khandakas*² (of which the *Cullavagga* is a part), there is no easy resolution to this question and therefore we must take what is given. Most of this discussion will centre on the meaning of three key terms – *sakāya*, *niruttiyā* and *chandaso* – in the incident.

One might well ask, why bother? Is this not *crambe repetita* (cabbage served up again per Brough, 1980) or *piṣṭa peṣaṇa* (Ruegg 2000, 305) grinding what is already ground? However the stakes are quite high so that it is worthwhile revisiting again. To some extent the incident in question has become a *locus classicus* for the view that calls into question the existence of a recoverable “Archetypus der buddhistischen Tradition” (Bechert 1980, 26). If the Buddha himself spoke in various dialects (Norman 1980, 75) and specifically authorized his words to be translated into still other dialects, how can there be any uniform tradition to recover at all? We shall return to this question later on.

The meaning of *sakāya*

First, what do the words mean? *Saka* is an adjective meaning “one's own” in Pāli from Skt. *svaka* and related to Skt. *svayam*, an indeclinable with the same meaning (adjectival form *sva*; Pāli *sa*). All are in agreement on this point. *Sakāya* is an instrumental or locative form of *saka*, agreeing with the same form of *nirutti*. A much discussed point is who *sakāya* refers to, for it occurs twice in the passage: *Te sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ dūsentī.... Anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ pariyāpunituntī*. It has been argued by Weller (1922, 211), Brough (1980, 36) and Norman (1971, 330) that *sakāya niruttiyā* must refer to the same person(s) coming as they do so close to each other.³ Therefore, if the monks are ruining *buddhavacana* with

tena kho pana samayena yameḷutekulā nāma bhikkhū dve bhātikā honi brāhmaṇajātikā kalyāṇavācākalāyānavākaraṇā. Te yena bhagavā ten' upasaṅkamimsu. Upasaṅkamitvā bhagavantaṃ abhivādetvā ekamantaṃ nisīdīmsu. Ekamantaṃ nisīnā kho te bhikkhū bhagavantaṃ etad avocunī: "etarahi bhante bhikkhū nānānāmā nānāgotā nānājaccā nānākulā pabbajitā. Te sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ dūsentī. Handa mayaṃ bhante buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā" ti. Vigarahi buddho bhagavā. "Kathaṃ hi nāma tumhe moghapurisā evaṃ vakkhatha 'handa mayaṃ bhante buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā' ti. Netam moghapurisā appasannānaṃ vā pasādāya pasannānaṃ vā bhīyyobhāvāya. Aha khv etaṃ bhikkhave appasannānaṃ ceva appasādāya pasannānaṃ ca ekaccānaṃ aññathatīyā" ti. Vigarahivā dhammiṃ kathaṃ karvā bhikkhū āmantesi:

"Na bhikkhave buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropetabbaṃ. Yo āropeyya āpatti dukkaṭassa. Anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ pariyāpunituntī ti."

At one time there were two brothers named Yameḷutekulā of Brahmin birth who had nice voices and recited clearly. They approached the Buddha, etc. and said: “Nowadays, sir there are many monks, of various names, various kinds of descent, from various nations and various clans who have gone forth. They are spoiling the Buddha's word with their own *nirutti*. Let us entrust (*āropema*) the *buddhavacana* to the *chanda*.” The Buddha scolded them, “How can you say this, stupid people, ‘Let us entrust the *buddhavacana* to the *chanda*’? This is not, stupid people, conducive to the faith of the unbelievers or for the increase of the virtuous and is an erroneous supposition of a few.” Having scolded them and delivered a religious discourse he said to the monks, “The Buddha's word is not to be entrusted to the *chanda*. For whoever does so, there is an offence of a *dukkata*. I prescribe monks, the *buddhavacana* to be learned thoroughly with/in *sakāya niruttiyā*.”

² Frauwallner, 1956, 68 believing they were composed in the first half of the 4th century B.C. and Lamotte, 1958, 194f. disagreeing; also cf. von Hinüber 1996 ¶32, 37.

³ Although Weller and Brough take *sakāya* as referring to the monks and Norman to the Buddha.

their own *nirutti*, then the Buddha's final statement, enjoining learning *buddhavacana* must also refer to their own *nirutti*. However, this is not necessarily the case as Geiger pointed out in his answer to Weller (1922, 114). He maintained that the meaning of *saka* must be determined by the grammatical or logical subject and gave as an example: "Wenn ein Deutscher zu einem Franzosen sagt: Reden Sie in der eigenen Sprache, Ich will in der eigenen Sprache antworten", "eigenen Sprache" (own language) must mean French in the first clause and German in the second. So, the grammatical subject of the first sentence is "the monks", therefore, "own language" must be their own language; in the second sentence the grammatical subject is "I" (i. e. *anujānāmi*, I enjoin) so "own language" must refer to the Buddha, as Buddhaghosa interpreted it.⁴ Alternatively, one might say (since the second sentence is made up of two clauses) that the subject of the second clause is *buddhavacana*, and therefore *sakāya* should be read as "its". In either case, one arrives at the same meaning: "I authorize the *buddhavacana* to be learned in its (my) own *nirutti*." It is clear that there is no necessity for *sakāya niruttiyā* to maintain the same referent in both the above sentences. In fact the Buddha may well have been gently mocking the Yameḷutekulā brothers when he used their exact words in a different context and with a different meaning. So we now have four possibilities: 1) The monks ruining *buddhavacana* with/in their own *nirutti*. 2) The monks ruining *buddhavacana* with/in the Buddha's own *nirutti*. 3) The Buddha enjoining *buddhavacana* to be learned in their (the monks') own *nirutti* and 4) The Buddha enjoining *buddhavacana* to be learned in his own *nirutti*. Almost all scholars have taken version 1 over version 2.⁵ The preponderance of scholars have taken version 3 over version 4.⁶

The meaning of *nirutti*

Most scholars have taken *nirutti* to mean "dialect" or "language". There is a smaller group who have taken it to mean "intonation" or "chant", the suprasegmental prosodic features of language (Lévi 1915, 441 "*façon de parler*"; Renou 1965, 86; Wright 1996, 51; Ruegg 2000, 289) – in effect "recitation". This will be discussed again below with the word *chandaṣo*. Nobody, however, has taken up a systematic study of the use of the word *nirutti* in the Pāli canon. This would indeed be a daunting task as there are 131 *Suttas* in

⁴ *Sakāya niruttiyā ti ettha sakā nirutti nāma sammāsambuddhena vuttappakāro māgadhiho vohāro*, usually translated as "*sakā nirutti* refers to the Māgadhi dialect in the form spoken by the Enlightened One." Sp 1214, 18-19 (Takakusu & Nagai 1924-47 vol. 6, 1214). But see below for further discussion. – Another example from the *Raghuvaṃśa* is:

matparaṃ durlabhaṃ marvā nūnam āvarjitaṃ mayā /

payah pūrvaiḥ svaniḥśvasaiḥ kavosṇam upabhujyate // Ragh I.67.

"Verily the libation of water, offered by me, is drunk, rendered lukewarm with their sighs, by my forefathers, thinking that it would be difficult to be obtained after my death." (trans. Kale 2005, 7). Here *sva-* agrees with "ancestors", which is the logical and grammatical subject of *upabhujyate*.

⁵ Except Norman (1992, 78) who believes that the first *sakāya niruttiyā* must also refer to *buddhavacana* (its own *nirutti*). "The monks are ruining *buddhavacana* in/with its own *nirutti*."

⁶ Version 3: Rhys-Davids & Oldenberg, 1885, 151; Lévi 1915, 441f.; Weller, 1922, 212; 1925, 350; Winternitz 1933, vol. 2, 603; Li-Kouang 1949, 216f.; Edgerton 1957, ¶1.7; Lamotte 1958, 610f.; Horner 1962, 194; Renou 1965, 86 "one's own intonation"; Brough 1980, 36; Renou & Filliozat 1985, 326; von Hinüber 1989, 351; Lopez 1995, 37; Wright 1996, 51 "own articulation"; Ruegg 2000, 296, "manner of speaking"; Version 4: Buddhaghosa; Geiger 1916, 5; Thomas 1924, 254 "in its own grammar"; Norman 1976, 15; revised, Norman 1980, 63; Smith 1992, 241; Ole Holten Pind, 2000 (email).

which *nirutti* is mentioned, 9 passages in the *Vinaya* and 68 in the *Abhidhamma*.⁷ What becomes immediately obvious from studying the usage of the term in the first two *Piṭakas* is that it almost never means “dialect”. In the one instance where it clearly does mean dialect, in the *Araṇavibhaṅgasutta* (MN III 230), it is always prefixed by *janapada* (“the country” or “local”). Everywhere else it means something else. The PED gives its definition as “explanation of words, grammatical analysis, etymological interpretation; pronunciation, dialect, way of speaking, expression.” But in its usage *nirutti* seems to be a synonym for “name” (Ole Pind 2009, email) or “designation”, both of which meanings are consistent with its etymology from *nir√vac*, “to express clearly”, “interpret” “explain” p.p. *nirukta*; *nirukti* is formed by the addition of the *taddhita* suffix *-i* to *nirukta* and in Skt. has the specific meaning of “Deutung eines Wortes, etymologisches Worterkklärung” (PW), but BHSD just gives it as “explanation, not necessarily etymological, of the meaning of a word or text” (s. v. *nirukti*). One of course usually explains a word by defining it with synonyms, so the two meanings are very closely related.

There are several instances in the canon which seem to corroborate this meaning of *nirutti*. In the *Poṭṭapādasutta* the Buddha talks about the different kinds of selves: “But, Citta, these are merely names, expressions [*nirutti*], turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata uses without misapprehending them.” (trans. Walshe 1987, 169).⁸ On the face of it there does not seem to be a significant difference between *nirutti*, *vohāra*⁹ or *paññatti*.¹⁰ Buddhaghosa’s commentary (Sv 382,15) makes this even more explicit; with analogy to the different kinds of selves, he talks about the products of a cow - milk, curd, butter, ghee, saying, “it is called, designated [*nirutti*], named, defined.”¹¹

In the *Mahānidānasutta*, we encounter the following, “This is the extent to which there is birth, aging, death, passing away, and re-arising. This is the extent to which there are means of designation, expression [*nirutti*], and delineation. This is the extent to which the sphere of discernment extends, the extent to which the cycle revolves for the manifesting (discernibility) of this world — i.e., name-and-form together with consciousness.”¹² (Thanissaro 2002, 94-95).¹³ Now two other words – *adhivacana*¹⁴ and *viññatti*¹⁵ – have been introduced, but all three seem to have a similar meaning of designation, description,

⁷ The program I am using, Digital Pāli Reader, counts one time per sutta/passage (no matter how many times the word occurs in a sutta), so actual word count is higher.

⁸ *Imā kho citta lokasamaññā lokaniruttiyo lokavohārā lokapaññattiyo yāhi tathāgato voharati aparāmanasā ti.* DN I 202.

⁹ PED *vohāra*: “current appellation, common use (of language), popular logic, common way of defining, usage, designation, term, cognomen.”

¹⁰ PED *paññatti*: “making known, manifestation, description, designation, name, idea, notion, concept.”

¹¹ *saṅkhyamā niruttiṃ nāmaṃ vohāraṃ gacchati.*

¹² *Etāvataḥ kho Ānanda jāyetha vā jīyetha vā mīyetha vā cavetha vā upapajjetha vā, etāvataḥ adhvāvacanaṃ patho, etāvataḥ niruttipatho, etāvataḥ viññattipatho, etāvataḥ paññāvacaraṇaṃ etāvataḥ vaṭṭaṃ vattati, (etāvataḥ) itthattaṃ paññāpanāya, yad idaṃ nāmarūpaṃ saha viññānena aññamaññāpaccayatāya pavattati.* DN II 63f.

¹³ Both Walshe (1995, 226) and Thanissaro leave out *aññamaññāpaccayatāya pavattati* of their translation. I would emend to “...name-and-form together with consciousness [which] keep going mutually interdependent.”

¹⁴ CPD: “name, designation; metaphorical expression; near-synonym”.

¹⁵ PED: “intimation, giving to understand, information; begging or asking by intimation or hinting”.

explanation. In the commentary Buddhaghosa makes a differentiation between the three terms (Sv 503, 34f):

“‘Means of designation’: It is a means of worldly designation regarding the mere word only, not having understood the meaning of the words *sirivaḍḍhako* (‘augmenting glory’) and *dhanavaḍḍhako* (‘augmenting wealth’), etc.”¹⁶

“‘Means of explanation’: It is a means of worldly designation with reference to the cause of words like ‘he remembers, [therefore he is] mindful; he knows, [therefore he is] attentive,’ etc.”¹⁷

“‘Means of description’: It is a means of worldly designation by making known in their variety words like ‘wise, experienced, intelligent, subtle, practiced in disputing with others’, etc.”¹⁸

From Buddhaghosa’s examples it looks like he is saying that *adhivacana* relates to defining without understanding the underlying meaning, *nirutti* to defining the *kāraṇa* or etymology of words (e. g. *sato* < *sarati* < Skt. √ *smṛ*) and *paññatti* to designation by synonymy.¹⁹

The *Niruttipathasutta* (SN III 71) also seems to use *nirutti*, *adhivacana* and *paññatti* as synonyms or near synonyms: “There are three pathways of naming, pathways of designation, pathways of description that are unmixed, that were never mixed, that are not being mixed, that will not be mixed, that are not rejected by wise ascetics and brahmins.”²⁰ (trans. Bodhi 2000, 905).

All the references in the first three books of the *Sutta-Piṭaka* (with the exception of the *Araṇavibhaṅgasutta*, mentioned above) then use *nirutti* as more or less a synonym for designation, name, description or explanation. In the *Āṅuttara Nikāya*, the word has taken on a more technical meaning. It is mentioned in four suttas,²¹ third in a group of terms. In the *Sāriputta paṭisambhidāsutta* and *Paṭisambhidāsutta* we find “One gains discriminating insight into meaning, conditions, definitions [*nirutti*] and intellect.”²² The *Kathāvatthu* defines these as “the four branches of logical analysis” (*catupaṭisambhidā*), explained in the PED (s.v. *paṭisambhidā*) as *attha*° analysis of meanings “in extension”; *dhamma*° of reasons, conditions, or causal relations; *nirutti*° of [meanings “in intension” as given in] definitions *paṭibhāna*° or intellect to which things knowable by the foregoing processes are presented. Buddhaghosa (Mp 274, 5-6, commenting on the *Paṭisambhidāsutta*) defines someone who has achieved *niruttipaṭisambhidā* as “one who has achieved the analytical wisdom with respect to the explication of the Dharma”.²³ So

¹⁶ *Adhivacanapatho ti: siri-vaḍḍhako dhana-vaḍḍhako’ ’ti ādikassa atthaṃ adisvā vacanamattam eva adhikicca pavattassa vohārassa patho.*

¹⁷ *Niruttipatho ti: saratī ti sato, sampajānātī ti sampajāno ti ādikassa kāraṇāpadesavasena pavattassa vohārassa patho.*

¹⁸ *Paññattipatho ti: paṇḍito nipuṇo vyaṇo medhāvī kata-para-ppavādo ti ādikassa nānappakāro nāpanavasena pavattassa vohārassa patho.*

¹⁹ See also Bodhi 1995, 89-90.

²⁰ *Tayo me bhikkhave, niruttipathā adhivacanapathā paññattipathā asaṃkiñṇā asaṃkiñṇapubbā na saṃkiṇṇāni, na saṃkiṇṇissanti appatikuṭṭhā samaṇehi brāhmaṇehi viññūtihi.* I have changed Bodhi’s “pathways of language” in the first phrase to “pathways of naming” as more consistent with *nirutti*’s meaning, as explained here.

²¹ *Sāriputta paṭisambhidāsutta* (AN II 160), *Paṭisambhidāsutta* (AN III 113), *Akuppasutta* (AN III 120), *Khippanisantisutta* (AN III 201).

²² *Aṭṭhapāṭisambhidā, dhammapāṭisambhidā, niruttipāṭisambhidā and paṭibhānapāṭisambhidā.*

²³ *Niruttipaṭisambhidāppatto ti dhammaniruttīsu pabhedagataṃ ṇāṇaṃ patto.*

now *nirutti* is more than just explanation; the term suggests a deeper insight into the meaning of the words. In the *Akuppasutta* and *Khippanisantisutta* *nirutti* is third in a group of five terms: “Skilled in the meaning, in the dharma, in the explanation [*nirutti*], in the letter and what comes before and after.”²⁴

In the *Khuddaka Nikāya* *nirutti* is mentioned in 117 passages: once in the *Dhammapada*, once in the *Theragāthā*, 19 times in the *Apadāna* (mostly in the phrase *attadhammaniruttisu, paṭibhāne...* as above); 13 times in the *Mahā- and Cullaniiddesa* (usually in a long list of synonyms, viz., “*purisa* is a definition, a designation, a name, a term, a name, etc,”²⁵ similar in meaning, or associated with the *catuṣpaṭisambhidā* above); 74 times in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*; 3 times in the *Milindapañha*; 7 times in the *Nettipakarāṇa*; and 7 times in the *Petavatthu*. Space does not permit me to delve into all the uses of *nirutti* in these (rather late) contexts, but at a glance most seem to relate to explication of the meaning of the Dharma often in association with the other branches of “logical analysis”. Even the DhP reference (v. 352) which could be quite old (Norman 1983, 59) seems to refer to Dharma interpretation:

“Without craving, not talking, skilled in words and their interpretation [*niruttipadakovidō*], he would know the combination of letters and which go before and which after, he indeed, with his last body, having great knowledge, is called ‘great man’.”²⁶ (Norman 2004, 51).

Buddhaghosa glosses *niruttipadakovidō* as “skilled in word endings and interpretation and skilled in the four branches of logical analysis.” (Dhp-a 70, 19-20²⁷).

There are also 9 places in the *Vinaya* where *nirutti* is used: the incident we are discussing in the *Cullavagga*, four in the *Parivāra* and four in the *Bhikkhuvibhaṅga*. In the *Vibhaṅga* passage (Vin III 57) an honest monk takes another’s robe (*cīvaraṃ*) that had been left out in the open, presumably thinking it was abandoned. The monk to whom the robe belonged then asked who had taken his robe and the honest monk answered “I stole it” (*mayā avahaṭam*). Seized by the other monk, he was remorseful and spoke to the Buddha who asks him, “What were you thinking of?” (*kiñcitto tvaṃ bhikkhu?*) to which he responds, “[Saying] ‘I’ was just an expression. (*niruttipatho ahaṃ bhagavā ’ti.*) The Buddha says, “There is no fault in this case.” (*anāpaṇi bhikkhu niruttipathe’ti*). Here *nirutti* seems to have the simple meaning of “expression” or “manner of speaking”.²⁸ There are two other similar incidents related, where a Bhikkhu leaves his robe on a chair, and another where a Bhikkhunī leaves her robe on a fence. In the *Vinītavatthu-uddānagāthā* summary, just before these episodes we read “With explanation there are five [without fault]” (*niruttiyā pañca akkhātā*) where *nirutti* has the same meaning.

²⁴ *Bhikkhū atihakusalo ca hoti dhammakusalo ca niruttikusalo ca vyañjanakusalo ca pubbāparakusalo ca.*

²⁵ *Puriso ti saṅkhā samaññā paññatti vohāro nāmaṃ nāmakammaṃ nāmadheyyaṃ nirutti vyañjanam abhilāpo* Nidd 1 124.

²⁶ *Vīraṇho anādāno niruttipadakovidō*

Akharāṇaṃ sannipātaṃ jaññā pubbaparāni ca

So ve animasārīro mahāpañño mahāpuriso’ñi vuccati.

The *Theragāthā* ref. is the same: *niruttipadakovidō*. (PTS p. 92).

²⁷ *Niruttiyā ca sesapadesu cāti niruttiyā ca sesapadesu cāti catūsopi paṭisambhidāsu cheko ti attho.*

²⁸ See Horner 1997 vol. 4, 95-96.

In the *Parivāra, Atthavasakaraṇaṃ* (Vin V 143) *nirutti* appears in its familiar location along with *attha* and *dhamma* (“One hundred meanings, a hundred phenomena and two hundred names”²⁹) and also in a discussion on knowledge of the *kaṭṭhinam*, the wooden frame used by bhikkhus to sow their robes. Here we find *nirutti* in a string of nouns, all having the similar meaning of “naming”: (“The *Kaṭṭhinam* is to be known’: the gathering of the parts, the combination, the name, the naming, the designation, the explanation, the characteristic, the expression – all this is the *kaṭṭhinam*”.³⁰

There are also 68 passages in the *Abhidhamma* which I have only passed over cursorily; their usage of *nirutti* seems to be consistent with the above, almost always appearing after *attha-* and *dhamma-pañisaṃbhidā*.

We have reached a fairly definite conclusion: *nirutti*, in its use in the canon does not mean “dialect”, nor does it mean “language”. How is it possible then that so many scholars have used the word incorrectly (except Norman 1980, 61³¹)? Probably because of Buddhaghosa and his notorious gloss: *Sakāya niruttiyā ti ettha sakā nirutti nāma sammāsambuddhena vuttappakāro māgadhiko vohāro*, which because of *māgadhiko* has always been translated as “Here *sakā nirutti* is indeed the Māgadhian language/dialect in the manner spoken by the Completely Enlightened One.” I would modify this to “Here *sakā nirutti* means indeed the Māgadhian name/designation in the manner spoken by the Completely Enlightened One.” We have seen above that *vohāra* is used as a synonym for *nirutti*, meaning “name, designation, definition, explanation”, etc. So the relevant passage may now be translated as follows: *Te sakāya niruttiyā buddhavaṇaṇaṃ dūseni*. “They are ruining the Buddha’s words with their own names.” *Anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavaṇaṇaṃ pariyaṇiṇiṇiṇi ti*. “Monks, I enjoin the Buddha’s words be learned with its (my) own names.”

The Buddha had developed a specialized vocabulary to communicate his new philosophy. Words like *dukkha*, *anicca*, *anatta*, *ariyasacca*, *taṇhā*, *aṭṭhangikamagga*, *paticcaṣamuppāda*, *saiṇipattihāna*, *nekkhamma*, *nibbāna*, etc., while previously existent, had all been adapted to specific connotations in keeping with the Buddha’s views (or better, his lack of such). As his teachings spread and monks of different backgrounds joined, they would explain to each other and themselves, what it is that the Buddha meant; in their own words, with their own names, definitions and explanations. Someone might equate *nibbāna* with *mokṣa* or *anatta* with *Brahman* (*tat tvam asi*), etc. Surely this

²⁹ Trans. by Horner 1997, vol. 6, 232 as “hundred meanings, a hundred clauses and two hundred expressions...” *atthasatam dhammasatani, dve ca niruttisatani*.

³⁰ See Horner 1997 vol. 6, 285. *Kaṭṭhinam jānitabban ti tesāññeva dhammānaṃ saigaho, samavāyo, nāmaṃ, nāmakammaṃ, nāmadhēyaṃ, nirutti, byañjanaṃ, abhilāpo, yad idaṃ kaṭṭhinan ti*. Vin V 176.

³¹ Norman correctly defines *nirutti* as “synonym (or gloss)” (p. 62), but his explication of the incident is still confusing. “People were spoiling the Buddha’s words by reciting them with explanatory glosses replacing some of the original words. The Buddha did not think this was important enough to merit translating *chandaso*. Even though his words were being spoiled, he gave permission for the practice to continue. What the people recited and remembered, therefore, and what doubtless became the basis of the various traditions, were the Buddha’s own words, not translated, but sometimes changed a little, by the Buddha himself, to meet local requirements” (63). The confusion in this explication stems from Norman’s belief that both the first and the second *sakāya* must refer to the Buddha (see note 5 above), so the “explanatory glosses” which were spoiling *buddhavaṇaṇa* were the Buddha’s own glosses. In my reading of this incident, the Buddha did not give “permission for the practice to continue”, nor was he sanctioning his words to be “changed a little, by the Buddha himself, to meet local requirements.” He simply said, “Memorize it as I have said it, with my own terms, glosses, explanations, etc., not with theirs.”

would be ruining the *buddhavacana* with their own names and descriptions (*sakāya niruttiyā*); Buddha's views were a radical departure from the brahminical beliefs of the day, not an extension of them. True, some monks may have also spoken a different dialect than Māgadhī as well, further complicating issues. But – if this incident goes back to the time of the historical Buddha – it is highly unlikely that this is primarily a dialectal issue under discussion, as the changes amongst the dialects would have been minor. For the Buddha lived and taught in a very confined area – in the city states of Magadhā, Vajjī, Mallā, Kāsī, Sākiyā and Kosalā, all within a few hundred kilometres of each other (Ānandajoti 2008) – and the languages spoken in these areas would have been Māgadhī (Mg) or Ardha-Māgadhī (Amg). Even if there were already monks from western India who had joined the Saṅgha and spoke a different dialect, they would have been able to understand the speech, as the changes were not significant enough to cause much confusion once the basic rules were known: e. g. eastern (E), nom. sing *-e* > western (W) *-o*; E, *s, ś, ṣ* > W, *s*; E, *kkh-* > W, *cch-*; E, *j-* > W, *y-*; E, *-l-* > W, *-r-*; etc. (Lüders 1954, 6f; von Hinüber 2001, ¶71, ¶74, ¶89-91; Norman 2006a, 80). We know that as time progressed the language continued to evolve phonologically and by the time the words were written down in the first century B. C. they had reached a stage more phonologically advanced than the Aśokan edicts (Lamotte 1958, 627); but we do not know when these changes took place – presumably not in the lifetime of the Buddha, although it is possible, as has been argued (Geiger 1916, 3; Bechert 1980, 34) that a *lingua franca* arose quite early, in an attempt to make the teachings available to as wide an audience as possible. However the evidence – particularly the requirement of memorization and recitation of *buddhavacana* to be discussed below – suggests that the language was fairly uniform while the Buddha was alive. Another (albeit negative) proof that *nirutti* does not mean “dialect” is this very point; if the *buddhavacana* was to be memorized and recited, how could that be, if there were no “standard” *buddhavacana* to memorize? The *Vinaya* story of Soṇa Kuṭikaṇṇa makes it very clear that the only latitude that monks had with *buddhavacana* was their vocal style of recitation (Lévi 1915), not the words.

The meaning of *chandaso*

It has long been appreciated that Buddhist monks were expected to memorize and recite *buddhavacana* as an integral part of their practice (Rhys Davids 1881, xxi; Lévi 1915; Gombrich 1990a, 7; 1990b, 32; Collins 1992, 127; Allon 1997, 357f.; Wynne, 2004; Norman 2006, 64). Yet the fact that this contradicts the conventional understanding of *Cullavagga* V, 33 – that each monk was to learn, and presumably recite the Dharma in his own dialect – has not been noted. For if everyone were reciting something different, then there is no root text to memorize. In fact, it is exactly this situation that Buddha is addressing. Monks are to learn his words, *with his own terms*, not theirs. In this context Norman's suggestion (1980, 75) that there was “no single language or dialect used by Buddha” does not make sense, at least in terms of the earliest Buddhist practice, i. e. when the Founder lived. The Yameḷutekulā brothers had a different solution to the problem of linguistic uniformity. Why not render the Buddha's words *chandaso* and standardize them that way, they suggested? Some scholars have taken this to mean “render into Sanskrit or Veda” and others as “render into recitatory verse, like the Veda.” Buddhaghosa quite clearly states the latter: *Chandaso āropemā ti vedam viya sakkatabhāsāya vācanāmaggaṃ āropema*. “‘Chandaso āropema’ means May we render

[*buddhavacana*] into the way of recitation of honoured speech like the Veda?" but was not always so understood, starting with Rhys-Davids & Oldenberg in 1885.³² This misunderstanding led to the counterposing of "local dialect" with Sanskrit and contaminated the whole exegesis of the incident. The Yameḷutekulā brothers wanted to put the *buddhavacana* into metrical chant along the lines of the Veda. This was a fixed system of accent (*udātta, anudāta, svarita*), metrics (*sāman, ṛc, chandas*,³³ *yajus*), melody (*svara*) and dynamics (*mandra, madhyama, uttara*) by which the Vedas were memorized and recited, preventing the alteration of the words by the complex dovetailing of all the parts. Consistent with the Buddha's opposition to and reinterpretation of all things Vedic, he refuses. After a short diatribe about why this would not be conducive to the spread of the Dharma, he returns to the main point – learn the *buddhavacana* with the Buddha's own names, not with locally invented ones.

But this is not where the story ends. For as time passed by and the religion spread, afterwards the *Vinaya* was translated into Chinese and we have five different versions of it which are worth discussing for two reasons: these passages have often been used to "prove" the "each in his own dialect" theory discussed above, and whatever they do prove, they certainly illustrate the vagaries and complexities of the transmission and translation processes.

1) Maṭṭhāsaka *Vinaya*.³⁴ There were two Brahmin brothers who chanted the Veda and left their households to become monks. They heard various monks reciting passages "lacking integrity"³⁵ and scolded them for not knowing masculine and feminine, singular or plural, present, past or future tense, long or short stress. They complained to the Buddha (but made no suggestions) and he allowed "reading and recitation in the sound of the country"³⁶ as long as the meaning of the Buddha is not violated. Now this is usually interpreted as "Je permets qu'on récite comme on parle dans chaque royaume" (Lévi, 1915, 442) or "suivant les phonèmes des pays (kouo-yin, la phonologie dialectale?)" (Li-Kouang 1949, 219) or "in keeping with dialectal pronunciation" (Lamotte 1958, 612). But these translations seem to be conflating two related language aspects – phonology and suprasegmentals (Ruegg 2000). It is not dialect that Buddha is talking about, but the

³² Rhys-Davids and Oldenberg 1885, 150 ("...into (Sanskrit) verse"); Lévi 1915, 441 ("... faire passer.. en vers"); Geiger 1922, 5 ("Es handelt sich nur darum, ob eine Übertragung in das Sanskrit stattfinden soll."); Thomas 1924, 254 ("in metre"); Winternitz 1933, 603 ("metre" or "Veda"); Li-Kouang 1949, 218 ("sanskritisation"); Smith 1949, 1191 ("d'astreindre ces textes à des règles orthoépiques pour la récitation"); Horner 1952, 194 ("in metrical form"); Edgerton 1953, ¶1.7 ("into Vedic"); Renou 1965, 86 ("Vedic intonation", sic); Norman 1971, 331 ("in accordance with their various desires"); cf. also 1990, 156 (if *chanda* = will is rejected, then "it would appear from the Pāli uses of the *chanda* that it means 'metre' rather than 'Vedic language'"); Brough 1980, 36 ("in Sanskrit"); Renou & Filliozat 1953 (1985), 326 ("proscrite... la mise en vers à la manière védique... une proscription de la langue sanskrite..."); von Hinüber 1989, 351 ("Vedic Sanskrit for the recitation of Buddhist texts"); Smith 1992, 240 ("at will"); Barrett 1992, 87 (quoting Ji Xianlin, "Vedic or Sanskrit"); Mair 1994, 723 ("mannered, metrical verse and in this context probably just means 'Veda'"); Lopez 1995, 37 ("a method of chanting employed for the Vedas which involved melody (*sāman*) and prolonged intonation (*āyatasvara*)"); Wright 1996, 52 ("as we wish" with an allusion to Vedic chant); Ruegg, 2000, 291 ("a fixed and regulated form of vocal delivery"); Collins (quoted in Pollock 2006, 54; "in a fixed" recitational form, as the Vedas are in Sanskrit").

³³ *chandas* is in fact one of the metrical Vedic forms and *chandaso* is used in the *Vinaya* incident as a synecdoche.- the part standing for the whole.

³⁴ T22n1421_p0174b15 f.

³⁵ 不正bùzhèng.

³⁶ 國音讀誦guóyīn dú sòng.

manner in which the verses are chanted (i. e. *dū sòng*, which he allows to be done according to the local custom). In his study “Sur la récitation primitive des textes bouddhiques” Lévi (1915, 402f) makes it clear that certain recitation styles were allowed and some weren’t. In the Pāli version of the Soṇa Kuṭṭikaṇṇa story³⁷ Buddha praises Soṇa for his recitation of the verses in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*: “Excellent, monk! These *Aṭṭhakavagga* verses have been well grasped by you, joyfully cultivated, well reflected on. You are impressive, well accomplished in voice [the words] distinct and clearly enunciated, making the meaning clear.”³⁸ In the various Chinese parallel versions, the Buddha praises him for his local dialect (“Vous savez déclamer avec la prononciation du pays d’Avanti”³⁹). It is clear that the monks had an accepted way of declaiming (termed *sarabhañña* which Lévi defines as “en mélodie”⁴⁰); what was not allowed was a Vedic form of intonation, *āyatakena gītassarena* “with a drawn-out sound”.⁴¹ Lévi has a full discussion on the various Chinese texts on chanting, concluding that *sarabhañña* was a form of chant which avoided the faults of the Vedic *āyataka* (435). What concerns us here is that chanting, intoning, recitation, etc. were allowed, even encouraged,⁴² as long as it was not done in a Vedic fashion.

2) Dharmaguptaka Vinaya.⁴³ There was a brahmin called Yongmeng who had left home and become a monk. He complains to the Buddha about monks of different background ruining the *buddhavacana* and implores the Buddha to fix the situation “using the fine speech of the world”.⁴⁴ After criticizing this suggestion, the Buddha allows “the sounds and common language of the country to be used in learning the scriptures by recitation and explanation”.⁴⁵ The “fine speech of the world” is clearly Sanskrit and perhaps also Vedic chant, as it is counterpoised against *sòngxí*, the practice of chant. However “the common language of the country” does appear to mean “dialect”. This passage seems to conflate intonation/recitation with dialect – which is not all that surprising considering it is being rendered into Chinese and the translator may have seen this as a justification for his/her work. Brough (1980, 40) suggests that the source word was *janapada-nirutti* (the only use of *nirutti* that does actually mean dialect as discussed above), but this seems extremely unlikely; it is probably just the translator’s misinterpretation, which was, as we have seen, not the first.

3) Vināyamaṅgala.⁴⁶ There were two brahmin monks named Wujieje and Sanmotuo who complained to the Buddha as above and ask him to allow them, “According to the rules of the *chandasa* (*chǎntuó*) to put the words and sentences in order for the sounds of the words to be articulated according to their definitive meaning (*nītārtha*).”⁴⁷ The Buddha

³⁷ Mahāvagga V, 13; Vin I 195.

³⁸ *sādhu sādhu bhikkhu, suggahītāni kho te bhikkhu, aṭṭhakavaggikāni sumanakassitāni sūpadhāritāni. Kālyāṇiyāsi vācāya samantāgato vissaṭṭhāya aneḷagalāya añṭhassa viññāpaniyā.*

³⁹ Lévi 1915, 407 from the *Sarvāstivādin Vinaya*, translated from the Chinese.

⁴⁰ English melopoeia “the art or theory of inventing melody” from Greek μελοποιειν to write a lyric poem or set to music.

⁴¹ *Cullavagga* V, 3, Vin II 108.

⁴² See Lévi, p. 430 for a discussion of the five advantages of chanting.

⁴³ T22n1428_p0955a17

⁴⁴ 以世間好言論 *yǐ shìjiān hǎo yánlùn*

⁴⁵ 國俗言音所解讀習佛經 *Guó sú yán yīn suǒ jiě sòngxí Fójīng.*

⁴⁶ T24n1463_p0822a16

⁴⁷ 依闍陀至持論。撰集佛經次比文句。使言音辯了義亦得顯 *Yī chātúo zhì chílùn. Zhuàn jí Fójīng cǐbǐ. Shǐ yán yīn biàn liǎo yì yì dé xiǎn.*

replied: "In my *buddhadharma* there is no concern for fine language as long as the meaning is not violated, this is my intention. You must use whatever sounds people need to realize awakening. Thus it is known as the obligation to act according to the country."

⁴⁸ Although this incident is ambiguous, it does not appear to be a question of dialect but of the clarity of the chant. The Buddha's response – to use whatever sounds you need so that people understand and gain awakening – could refer to either the local dialect or the recitation practice or both. Brough believes the passage is corrupt (1980, 39).

4) and 5) The Sarvāstivādin⁴⁹ and Mūlasarvāstivādin⁵⁰ *Vinaya* passages are both unambiguously about chant. In the first two brahmins Qupo and Yepo had recited the four Vedic books⁵¹ from memory; when they became monks they did the same with the Buddha's teachings. When one died, the other forgot the chants and unsuccessfully sought another companion to instruct him. He was unhappy and this fact was reported to the Buddha who prohibited "using the chant of the heretics".⁵² In the latter (Mūlasarvāstivādin) passage, there are two brahmins, who are now brothers. One of them dies and the forgetful survivor goes to various of the Buddha's disciples to ask for instruction but when he is accommodated, in every case he is dissatisfied with their chanting, which was so unlike the one he remembered. When the matter was brought to the attention of the Buddha he said that "making songs in long-drawn out musical sounds"⁵³ was a fault and ordered the practice stopped. Only if the "regional character of the voice"⁵⁴ requires this practice is it allowed. This whole passage is clearly a reference to the *sarabhañña – āyatakena gūtasarena* Buddhist-Vedic recitation technique distinction referred to above and has nothing to do with dialect issues. Brough sees the absence of request for a Sanskrit rendition of the *buddhavacana* as a political ploy – since both of these schools had adopted a form of Prakritized Sanskrit for their canon – but even if that were the case, it is clear that the Chinese recensions offer only marginal evidence in support of the "each to his own dialect theory", despite assumptions to the contrary (Lévi, 1915, 442; Li-Kouang 1949, 217; Edgerton 1953, ¶1.12f; Lamotte 1958, 611; Brough 1980, 38). In fact, only one of the five versions is unambiguously about dialect and even that one (the Dharmaguptaka) is not only about dialect, but about intonation as well.

All the Chinese versions must also be viewed through a different historical lens than the Pāli. We may assume that the Pāli goes back to the historical Buddha, if not in precise language, at least in concept. We know that the Chinese was translated many centuries later from a now lost Prakritised Sanskrit by Buddhist monks who were anxious to have their new religion accepted in a new country (Mair 1994, 715, 721); so it is natural that in some cases (i.e. Dharmaguptaka) they would interpret their source text as allowing or encouraging the rendition of *buddhavacana* in a local dialect.

⁴⁸ 吾佛法中不與美言為是。但使義理不失。是吾意也。隨諸眾生應與何音而得受悟應為說之。是故名為

隨國應作 *Wú Fǎfǎ zhōng bù yǔ měiyán wèishì. Dànshǐ yìlǐ bùshī. Shì wú yì yě. Suí zhū zhōngshēng yīng yǔ hé yīn ér dé shòu wù yīng wéi shuō zhī. Shìgū mǐngwéi suǒ guó yīng zuò.*

⁴⁹ T23n1435_p0274a20.

⁵⁰ T24n1451_p0232b17.

⁵¹ 四圍陀 *Sivēi tuó.*

⁵² 以外音聲譎 *Yìwài shēng shēng song.*

⁵³ 長牽音韻作歌詠聲 *Cháng qiān yīnyùn zuògē yǒng shēng.*

⁵⁴ 方國言音 *Fāngguó yán yīn*; equivalent to *svaragupti* ("depth of voice") per DDB.

The Pāli

Having reviewed all the direct evidence available, we may now revisit the original Pāli and offer the following explanation. Monks of different backgrounds were spoiling the integrity of the *buddhavacana* with their own names, expressions and explanations of Buddha's terms. They were describing the Dharma in their own terms, with their own names and synonyms drawn from their own backgrounds. Two brahmin brothers complained of this fact to the Buddha suggesting that in order to preserve his exact words, they be put into formal Vedic chant, with all its accents, tones and rules. Buddha rejected the solution and ordered his teachings to be learned in the original terms in which he had taught them.

In fact, that is exactly what did happen during the Buddha's lifetime. The monks memorized and recited his words, as the story of Soṇa and other sūtras in the canon illustrate (discussed below). Local intonation variance was accepted, even applauded, but we have no indication in the canon that any laxity was allowed with the words themselves, as Wynne (2004) has convincingly demonstrated, *inter alia*, contra Cousins' 1983 assertion that the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (DN II 124) sanctioned lower standards of authenticity for non-*Vinaya* teachings. Buddha's words were to be memorized verbatim. This is not to say that *buddhavacana* did not change. It too was subject to *anicca*, and as time went on, and Buddhism spread into different linguistic areas, it certainly did change. But in theory anyways, these changes are recoverable by standard methods of comparative linguistics (Campbell 2004, 122f.; Norman 1990a; Levman 2009b being two examples), and as Wynne opines (2004, 124) "philological, conceptual, and narrative oddities in the early Buddhist texts are likely to be significant – not produced by the random variation of an oral tradition, but by causes that in theory can be discovered."

The Buddha and the Language(s) he spoke

That the Buddha was master of many, if not all, languages was a common conceit of later Buddhism. Lamotte (1958, 550) describes a famous incident in the *Vibhāṣā* where the Buddha converts four kings, first by speaking in Sanskrit, then, when the second two do not understand, in Dravidian and then in Mleccha. Buddhaghosa, in his gloss to DN I *evaṃ me sutam* says (Sv 27, 24-5) that the *buddhavacana* is with one form *sabbasattānaṃ sakasaka-bhāsānurūpato* "adapted to the individual dialects of all beings". This sentiment was expressed earlier in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*⁵⁵ (Weller 1925, 248 quotes the Tibetan version) "...with words which explained the meaning in a final form in the dialect of each and every one of all sentient beings...".⁵⁶ Probably the earliest occurrence of this sentiment is the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* which dates from the first century A.D. In this work the bodhisattva of the ninth level (termed *sādhumatī* or "good mind") has the following skill: "If here, all beings belonging to the three thousand, great thousand world systems, came in an instant, in a single moment of

⁵⁵ Not the Theravādin version of Waldschmidt, 1950, 1951, which is based on the same source as the Pāli version DN 16.

⁵⁶ *sems can thams cad shi rang rang gi yul gi skad du shin tu zur phyin par don brda spyod pa'i tshig mams kyis* |

time and one by one and were to ask an infinitude of different kinds of questions - that which each being asked, a second being would not ask - the bodhisattva would answer it in words, letters and sounds [understandable] to all beings, and having answered them with a single utterance it would satisfy the minds of all beings.”⁵⁷ These quotes highlight the disparity in time between the *Vinaya* incident and later development of the language question. For as Buddhism spread, its language spread and developed and each new translation form was rationalized by its translators. The rise of Mahāyāna schools introduced a whole new theme into the language discussion: simultaneous polyvocality.

Returning to our goal stated at the beginning of this article, to put ourselves in the Buddha's standpoint, using the language he used, with the situation as it was during his lifetime, things are quite a bit different than the Mahāyāna picture presented above. Here we are at the very beginning of the *saṅgha* in a very circumscribed geographical locale, where,

1) the Prakrit he spoke, a form of Māgadhī or Ardha-Māgadhī or (as Norman calls it) “old Māgadhī” (Norman 1980, 75; Alsdorf 1980), would have been understandable to most of the populace who lived in the city-states where the Buddha taught. Monks from other regions of India would also have understood it, once they had learned the appropriate changes. This is not to deny that on occasion, the Buddha may have made these alterations himself depending on his audience.

2) Although during his lifetime there was no “canon” as we know it, there was such a thing *buddhavacana*, as the *Vinaya* incident illustrates. The early existence of such a body of teaching to which monks could refer is also implicit in 1) the standards of authenticity criteria (*mahāpadesa*) taught in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (DN II 124f.); 2) the *pātimokkhas* which were to be recited every fortnight; 3) the *Kintisutta* (MN II 239f.) where the Buddha is concerned about disagreements over the meaning (*authato*) and the letter (*byañjanato*) of his teachings and provides means for resolving them; 4) the DN recitation suttas, DN 33 *Sangīhisutta* and DN 34 *Dasuttara Sutta*; 5) the *Dutiya Vinayadharasutta* (AN IV 140) where the monk is expected to know the teachings “chapter by chapter, down to the letter” (*suttaso anubyañjanaso*); not to mention numerous other references cited by Wynne (2004) and elsewhere.⁵⁸

3) The Buddha's words were expected to be memorized and recited. This, as shown above, and as is generally accepted, was an integral part of early (and present) Buddhist practice.

4) The Buddha's teachings were unique – i. e. completely different from the prevalent Brahminic beliefs – and endowed with their own specialized vocabulary devised by the Buddha to present his insights effectively.

⁵⁷ Vaidya 1967, 53. trans. by author. *sacettaṃ trisāhasramahāsāhasra-lokadhātuparyūpannaḥ sarvasatvā upasaṅkramaṃyā ekakṣaṇalavamuhūrtena praśnān pariṣṛccheyuḥ, ekaikaś ca teṣāṃ apramāṇaruṇavimātrataḥ pariṣṛcchet, yaṃ caikaḥ satvāḥ pariṣṛcchen na taṃ dvitīyaḥ, taṃ bodhisatvāḥ sarvasatvaruṇapadavyañjanam udgrhīyāt / udgrhya caikaruṇābhīryāhāreṇa teṣāṃ sarvasatvānāṃ cītāśayān pariśāyey.*

⁵⁸ As, for example in the *Sugatavinayasutta* AN II 148, *te bhikkhū bahussutā āgatāgamā dhammadharā vinayadharā mātikādhārā. Te sakkaccaṃ sutantaṃ paraṃ vāventi*, (“those monks who are of wide knowledge, versed in the doctrines, who know Dhamma by heart, who know *Vinaya* by heart, who know the summaries by heart, - these dutifully hand on a text to another”). trans. Hare, 2006, vol. 2, 152; or the *Sotānudhātasutta*, AN II 185, *bhikkhu dhammaṃ pariṣyāpuṇāti: sutta geyyaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ gāthā*, “A monk memorizes the Dharma: suttas, *geyya* and exposition...”.

Given these conditions, how likely would it have been for the Buddha to authorize the substitution of his followers' terms, explanations, names or expressions for his own or to allow his words to be formalized in Vedic chant? The Buddha wanted his *very* words, in his own vocabulary and designations, memorized, repeated and recited. This is the gist of the *Cullavagga* incident, and the significance of the phrase *sakāya niruttiyā*.

Postscript

One of the arguments advanced for the spread of Buddhism was the liberality of its language policy (Mair 1994, 722 f.⁵⁹) and this was certainly the case after Buddha's *parinibbāna*. It is well known that the Buddha had a completely different view of language and words than was prevalent in his time. For him words were not eternal and unchangeable as the Veda was for the Brahmins; words were simply social conventions. His teachings reflects this view, using a "decentered" approach to language with synonymic and near-synonymic word repetition being a constant feature of his style. Ultimately Buddha believed that words could not communicate his liberative insights which were *atakkāvacharo* ("beyond the realm of reasoning") – that is why after his awakening, he chose not to teach as he felt no one would understand him; it took a visit from Brahma to persuade him to turn the wheel of Dharma. In one sutta important to the later Chan tradition (*Athattasutta* SN IV 400), he renounces the use of words altogether, for they only create misunderstandings. Why then was he concerned that his words be learned to the letter? The answer I think is found in the *Nāmasutta* (SN I 39), where a divine being asks the Buddha,

*kiṃ su sabbam addhabhavi*⁶⁰ *kismā bhiyyo na vijjati,*
kissassa ekadhammassa sabb' eva vasamanvagūti.

"What is overpowering all, what is unsurpassed? All are under the power of what one thing?"

The Buddha replies,

nāmaṃ sabbam addhabhavi nāmā bhiyyo na vijjati,
nāmassa ekadhammassa sabb' eva vasam anvagū ti.

"Name overpowers all. Nothing surpasses name. All are under the power of this one thing, name."

Nāma-rūpa is the fourth link in the chain of dependent origination. Once consciousness has arisen, depending on it, name and form arises. Once we name things, "reality" begins to take shape and conditions the origin of the six sense fields leading to contact, feeling, craving, etc. and the suffering of *samsāra*. So though names are arbitrary, conditioned and non-absolute, they do have a lot to do with the way we perceive reality, for they "create" the world by superimposition on form which takes shape based on our

⁵⁹ In footnote 4, at the bottom of page 722 Mair mistakenly derives Pāli *sakāya* from Sanskrit *satkāya* (meaning "personality"). It seems that Mair is unfamiliar with the case endings in Pāli. The stem word is *saka* and the Skt. root is *svaka*. *sakāya* is instrumental fem. sing. (sometimes read as locative which has the identical case ending).

⁶⁰ *addhabhavi*, Burmese tradition; *anvabhavi* ("participates in"), Sinhalese tradition.

understanding of the name. *Nāma* is part of the Buddha's specialized teaching vocabulary. So, although words by themselves may not be able to communicate Buddha's supralinguistic insights, it is essential to correctly understand how the Buddha uses and explains them in order to enter into his standpoint and have the opportunity to see what he saw.

Abbreviations

AN = *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

BHSD = *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* (Edgerton, 1953)

CPF = *Critical Pāli Dictionary* (<http://pali.hum.ku.dk/cpd/>)

DDB = *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* (<http://www.buddhism-dict.net/dbb/>)

Dhp = *Dhammapada*

Dhp-a = *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* (H. C. Norman 1970)

DN = *Dīgha Nikāya*

MN = *Majjhima Nikāya*

Mp = *Manorathapūraṇī* (Kopp 1936)

PED = *Pāli-English Dictionary*

PW = *Sanskrit (Petersburg) Wörterbuch* (Böhtlingk & Roth)

Sp = *Samantapāsādikā*, (Takakusu & Nagai 1924-47)

Sv = *Sumaṅgala-Vilāsinī* (Rhys-Davids & Carpenter 1886-1932)

Vin = *Vinayaṭṭhaka*

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SUMMARY

This paper revisits the well-known incident in the Vinaya (II, 139) where the Buddha is believed to authorize translation of the *buddhavacana* into “the monks’ own dialects”. The key phrase *sakāya niruttiyā* is analyzed in detail, showing that in the first key statement, *te sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ dūseṇti*, “They are ruining the *buddhavacana* with their own *nirutti*”, the word *sakāya* (“one’s own”) refers to the monks, while in the second key statement, *anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ pariyāpunituṃ*, “I prescribe monks, the *buddhavacana* to be learned thoroughly with my own *nirutti*”, the word *sakāya* refers to the Buddha. The paper looks at the use of the word *nirutti* throughout the Pāli scriptures and concludes that the word does not mean “dialect” as most translators have taken it, but “name”, “term”, “explanation” “definition” or “designation”. So the correct sense of the passage is that various monks are ruining *buddhavacana* using their own names for the Buddha’s terms and the Buddha therefore orders that *buddhavacana* be learned with the names and terms that he has designated. Presumably this refers to the specialized vocabulary unique to the Buddha’s teaching, like *anatta*, *anicca*, *paticcasamuppāda*, etc., for which other terms were being substituted. The Buddha also forbids his words to be rendered into Vedic recitatory verse (*chandaso*). The Chinese versions of this incident are also examined. Although the Buddha does authorize learning and reciting *buddhavacana* in the “sounds

of the country”, it appears – from examining all recensions – that he is talking as much or more about recitation as he is about dialect. The paper ends by examining the longstanding Buddhist recitation tradition and concludes that the Buddha wanted his words memorized and recited exactly as he spoke them.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article reprend la question du fameux incident relaté dans le Vinaya (II 139) où le Bouddha est supposé avoir autorisé la traduction du *buddhavacana* dans « le dialecte propre des moines ». L’expression *sakāya niruttīyā* est analysée en détail. On montre que dans la première affirmation-clé, *te sakāya niruttīyā buddhavacanaṃ dūṣenti*, « ils ruinent le *buddhavacana* avec leur propre *nirutti* », le mot *sakāya* (« son propre ») renvoie aux moines, tandis que dans la seconde affirmation-clé, *anuḷānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttīyā buddhavacanaṃ pariāpuṇitum*, « je permets, ô moines, que le *buddhavacana* soit appris complètement dans ma propre *nirutti*, le mot *sakāya* renvoie au Bouddha. L’article examine les emplois du mot *nirutti* » dans les textes palis et conclut que le mot ne signifie pas « dialecte », selon la traduction adoptée le plus souvent, mais « nom », « terme », « explication », « définition » ou « désignation ». Le sens correct du passage discuté est donc le suivant : les moines ruinent le *buddhavacana* en employant leurs propres termes pour les termes du Bouddha et le Bouddha demande donc que son enseignement soit appris avec les noms et les termes qu’il a établis. Il pourrait s’agir du vocabulaire spécifique à l’enseignement du Bouddha, des termes tels que *anatta*, *anicca*, *paticcasamuppāda*, etc., qui se trouvaient remplacés par d’autres termes. Le Bouddha interdit aussi que ses mots soient rendus en vers récités à la védique (*chandaso*). Les versions chinoises de l’épisode sont aussi passées en revue. Bien que le Bouddha autorise à enseigner et à réciter le *buddhavacana* dans les « sons du pays », il semble, à examiner toutes les recensions, qu’il parle autant, sinon plus, de récitation que de dialecte. Enfin, l’article examine la longue tradition bouddhique de récitation et conclut que le Bouddha tenait à ce que ses mots soient mémorisés et récités exactement comme il les avait prononcés.

