

# Nirukta

Nirukta (Sanskrit: निरुक्त, "explained, interpreted") is one of the six ancient Vedangas or subsidiary sciences associated with the Vedas—the scriptures of Hinduism. Nirukta covers etymology and is a study dealing with the correct interpretation of Sanskrit words in the Vedas.

The Nirukta is a systematic creation of a glossary and discusses how to understand archaic, unusual words. The field grew probably because nearly a quarter of the words in the Vedic texts composed in the 2nd millennium BCE appeared only once.

## Dates

The study of Nirukta can be traced back to the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE Brahmanas layer of Vedic texts. The most famous scholar in this field is Yāska, who wrote the Nighaṇṭu (book of glossaries), the first book in this field. His text is also referred to simply as Nirukta. The study of Nirukta is closely related to the subsidiary Vedic science of Vyakarana, but they have a different focus. Vyakarana deals with linguistic analysis to determine the exact form of words to properly express ideas, while Nirukta focuses on linguistic analysis to help determine the correct meaning of words given the context in which they are used. Yaska states that the study of Vyakarana is a prerequisite for the study of Nirukta.

The texts of the Nirukta field of study are also called Nirvacana shastra. A critical edition of Nighant and Nirukta was published by Lakshman Sarup in the 1920s. A critical edition by Lakshmana Sarup places it between 700 and 500 BCE, i.e. before Gautama Buddha.

## Origin

Nirukta (Sanskrit), according to Monier-Williams, means "uttered, uttered, explained, expressed, defined, loud". It also refers to the etymological interpretation of the word, also to the title of such works.

The related Sanskrit noun niruktiḥ means "poetic origin" or "explanation of the word".

## Discussions

The field of Nirukta deals with finding out the meaning of words, especially archaic words that are no longer in use, long ago created and even then rarely used. The Vedic literature of the 2nd millennium BCE has a very large collection of such words, with nearly 25% of the words used only once. By the 1st millennium BCE, interpreting and understanding what the Vedas

meant became a challenge, and Nirukta attempted to systematically propose theories about how words were formed and then determine their meaning in order to understand the Vedas.

Yaska, a sage who probably lived around 7–5 century BC, approached this problem through a semantic analysis of words, breaking them down into their components and then combining them in the context in which they were used to suggest what the archaic words might mean.

***Don't memorize, seek the meaning***

*What has been taken [from the teacher's mouth] but not understood,*

*is uttered by mere [memory] recitation,*

*it never flares up, like dry firewood without fire.*

*Many a one, [although] seeing, do not see Speech,*

*many a one, [although] hearing, do not hear Her,*

*and many a one, She spreads out [Her] body, like a wife desiring her husband.*

*The meaning of Speech, is its fruit and flower.*

— Yaska, Nirukta 1.18-1.20

Yaska's central assumption was that man creates multiple new words to conceptualize and describe action, that is, nouns often have verbal roots. However, Yaska added, not all words have verbal roots. He argued that both the meaning and etymology of words are always context dependent. Words are created around the object agent, according to Yaska, to express the external or internal reality perceived by man and are one of the six modifications of Kriya (action) and Bhava (dynamic being), namely birth, existence, transformation, increase, waning and perishing.

A sentence is a collection of words, a word is a collection of phonemes, according to scholars of the Hindu Nirukta traditions. The meaning of Vedic passages has to be understood through the context, the purpose stated, the subject matter discussed, what is said, how, where and when.

## **Texts**

The only core Nirvacana shastra (text related to Nirukta) that has survived from ancient times to the modern era is that of Yaska and is simply called Nirukta. Three bhasyas (commentaries) on Yaska's Nirukta also survive. Additionally, a related work that survives and predates Yaska's Nirukta of the 5th century BCE is the Nighantu, which is a lexicographical treatise. Nighantu is a glossary or compilation of words in the Vedas and is an example of the Abhidhanashastra (literally, science of words) text. However, Nighantu is not a dictionary, a genre of texts that

developed in later centuries and was called Kosha in Sanskrit. Yaska's Nirukta makes extensive reference to Nighanta.

The three commentaries on the Yaska Nirukta text are by Hindu scholars named Durgasinha (also known as Durga) who probably lived before the 6th century AD, Skanda-Mahesvara, who may be two scholars who probably lived before the 5th century AD, and Nilakantha, which probably dates from the 14th century.

## Usage

### Ancient

Yaska, in his famous text called the Nirukta, argues that the Rigveda in the ancient tradition can be interpreted in three ways - from the point of view of religious ceremonies (adhiyajna), from the point of view of the deities (adhidevata) and from the point of view of the soul (adhyatman). A fourth way to interpret the Rigveda also emerged in ancient times, where the gods mentioned were seen as symbolism for legendary individuals or stories. It has been generally accepted that creative poets often insert and express double meanings, ellipses and novel ideas to inspire the reader. The Nirukta makes it possible to identify alternative embedded meanings that poets and writers may have included in ancient texts.

### Medieval

Many examples of the rhetorical use of nirukta occur in Bhaskararaya's commentaries. Here is an example from the opening verse of his commentary on the Ganesha Sahasranama.

The opening verse contains Gaṇanātha as a name for Ganesha. A simple meaning of this name that would seem obvious to his readers would be "Protector of the Ganas", which would analyze the name straightforwardly as gaṇa (group) + nātha (protector). However, Bhaskararaya demonstrates his skill in nirukta by analyzing it in an unexpected way as Bahuvrīhi compound gaṇana + atha, meaning "one whose enumeration (gaṇanaṁ) of qualities brings auspiciousness." The word atha is associated with auspiciousness (maṅgalam)."