"Wordplay": Emergent Ideology through Semantic elucidation

—A Rhetorical Technique in Mahāyāna Buddhist formations—[1]

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This paper examines the use of *nirvacana* ('semantic elucidation') in selected examples from self-proclaimed Mahāyāna Buddhist texts to theorize, as well as illustrate, one among several rhetorical techniques utilized by early to middle period Indian Buddhist authorial communities in the social formation of what comes to be subsequently known and classified as "Mahāyāna."

In the study of cultural formations, emergent ideologies are new beliefs, things which are in the process of becoming more popular but which have not made it. Emergent ideologies are new ideologies that are in the process of establishing their influence. Ideology, if it is functioning perfectly, will disguise inequalities and resolve contradictions, so that hegemony is maintained. Emergent ideologies attempt to alter fundamentally the ownership of the means of production. I wish to suggest in this paper that *nirvacana* ('semantic elucidation') functions to let the emergent ideals of Mahāyāna formations become acceptable and more popular in its nascent phases. Through such processes authorial communities, preachers of Mahāyāna or *dharmabhāṇaka*s, alter the meaning of key Buddhist terms and invert the significance of mainstream Buddhist terms toward the vision of the bodhisattva way fermented in Mahāyāna formations.

Nirukta or nirvacana, what is commonly translated as "etymology," is found throughout classical South Asian literature. For a modern reader's eyes, the classical Indian usage of *nirukta* does not seem to be interested in the history of words or in linguistic developement, rather, the primary interest lies in semantic content. The technical terms

employed are derived from the Sanskrit verb *nir-vac*, and its past participle *nir-ukta*, meaning "to express" or "to explain" the underlying sense of a concept. Nirukta follows the name of the first systematic representative of this tradition, Yāska, who composed a commentary on the Nighantu, a catalog list of words of the Ṛgveda.[2] As Louis Renou has stated regarding this work, "it condenses the symbolic and mystical reflection on language; its import is to create verbal associations" (1985: §610). *Nirukta* in South Asian literature may be found in both ritual and philosophical applications. Vedic *nirukta* ('explication') merges etymologizing with ritual through the analysis of mantra focusing on the mystic and religious quality of etymology, while *mīmaṃsa* ('reflection') couples etymology and allegory to search for philosophical truths (Del Bello 2007: 43). Johannes Bronkhorst (2001: 147–148) explains the difference between the semantic content of etymology as opposed to linguistic or historical etymology as follows,

> "A semantic etymology is to be distinguished from a historical etymology. A historical etymology presents the origin or early history of a word; it tells us, for example, that a word in a modern language is derived from another word belonging to an earlier language, or to an earlier stage of the same language...Semantic etymologies...connect one with one or more others which are believed to elucidate its meaning. The god Rudra, for example, has that name according to the Vedic text called *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (6.1.3.10), because he cried (*rud-*) in one story that is told about him. Semantic etymologies tell us nothing about the history of a word, but something about its meaning."

Nirukta is traditionally held to be a 'limb of the Veda' (*vedāṅga*), an auxiliary branch of literature needed to help understand the Veda (Bronkhorst 2001:152). In Brahmanical terms, *nirukta* tries to bring value and order to the semantic etymologizing that is prevalent in the Vedic Brāhmaṇas. Etymologies in Vedic based traditions are thought to convey knowledge that is deemed important and advantageous. Along with special knowledge, *nirukta* has a close connection with myths. The etymological 'explanation' of *nirukta* employed in Brahmanical use con-

stantly makes reference to myths within Vedic lore. Etymologies, in addition to revealing special knowledge connected to myth, are also thought to reveal hidden layers of linguistic reality, bringing out the concealed significance of language (Bronkhorst 2001:153).

In its employment of *nirukta*, Brahmanical language presumes and stipulates the non-arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign—a correspondence theory of language. There must be a necessary and natural connection between a word and signification. *Nirkuta* seeks out a relation between the thing and the name that it is given, the presumption being that the connection brings out the function, activity, and character of the name. The question is of knowing why x is called x. *Nirukta*s in South Asian texts therefore often employ the interrogative adverb *kasmāt* "why..." to introduce an etymology of the correlative pronouns *yasmād...tasmād yena...tena*, "because this...that is why" (Balbir 1991:121– 122).

Heterodox Indic traditions such as the followers of Gautama Buddha do not uphold such a correspondence theory of language. *Nirukta* rather than a technique of registering correspondence becomes a technique of rhetoric in which established meanings of key signifiers are hollowed out and re-defined. Pan-Indic terms such as '*dharma*, *karma*, *saṃsāra* are accepted by all traditions but the defined significance is generated for each particular tradition. In the discourses of the Indian heterodox traditions, etymologico-grammatical analysis generates a number of recurrent concepts—the conquering over the passions, the principles of cause and effect or karma, asceticism, and detachment. As Nalini Balbir has noted (1991:131), it is not exaggerated to say that *nirukta* functions as an instrument of propaganda for the basic values of Buddhist ideologies. In early Buddhist usage, the instruments of etymology are employed against Brahmanical orthodoxy.

In these instances, terms that become transvalued usually hold some social significance or status in the competing communities of Brahmaṇas, Jainas, and Buddhists. Status marking classifications or registers of reverence such as "Arhat," "Bhagavan" are shaped by *nirukta* according to the ideals of the community. So for example, the terms 'brahmaṇa' or 'snahaka' are hollowed out and transvalued in discourses attributed to the Buddha himself in the *Dhammapada* as well as the dis-

course of Sabbiya in the *Sutta Nipāta* (513ff.). The proper meaning of the term 'brahmaṇa', a term for ritual technicians who gain such standing through hereditary birth status, becomes in the eyes of the Buddhist *bāhitapāpo ti brāhmaṇo*, a brāhmaṇa is "one who has banished wrong."[3]

What I want to briefly explore in this paper is similar processes of transvaluation that take place within Buddhist authorial communities. That is, the transvaluation of Buddhist terms which takes place between mainstream Buddhist and Mahāyāna authorial communities. The process of transvaluation through etymological discourse between these communities replicates the etymological discourses that took place between Brahmanical and heterodox communities.

For Buddhist authorial communities *nirukta* is a special type of knowledge known as *niruktipratisaṃvid. Niruktipratisaṃvid* occurs in both mainstream Buddhist and Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. *Nirukti* is consistently listed with three other *pratisaṃvid* or 'analytical knowledges'—*artha* ('objects' or 'things'), *dharma* ('Buddhist teaching'), and *pratibhāna* ('eloquence'). As a set, these four occur together in the Nikāyas and Āgamas, the Abhidharma and Śāstra literature, and in Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras.[4]

Niruktipratisaṃvid in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature

Mahāyāna teaching digests such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* ascribe *Niruktipratisaṃvid* to the bodhisattva and this is also described in several Mahāyāna sūtras as well such as the *Akṣayamatinirdeśa* and *Daśabhūmika*. The term qualifies bodhisattvas in the opening *nidānas*, is a name of a *samādhi* in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, serves as a quality of *dharmabhāṇakas* in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, and is a special instruction which Vimalakīrti gives to Maudgalyāyana (Thurman, 1976:25–26; Lamotte, 1976:49; section 8, p. 84: *dharmaniruktividhijñena=chos kyi nge pa'i tshig rnam par shes pas...*).

As Ulrich Pagel (1995: 273n780) notes, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and the *Daśabhūmika* mention that the primary aim of the analytical knowledges is for the training of a bodhisattva to become a teacher and reciter of the doctrine (*dharmabhāṇaka*). While the general nature of the various types of *pratisaṃvid* is described in the texts, their exact scope and practical application is not clearly demonstrated. Several passages in the

nikāyas indicate that in early Buddhism, the *pratisaṃvids* were not considered to be advanced practices of the path. The *pratisaṃvids* are listed in the practices of 'ordinary' monks (Aṅguttaranikāya I, p. 24, *Aṅguttaranikāya* II, p. 161) and Śāriputra was able to attain them only a few months after his ordination (*Aṅguttaranikāya* II, p. 160). The four *pratisaṃvid* in mainstream forms of Buddhism are considered to be naturally indivisible and achieved at the same time. The *Abhidharmakośa* (chapter vii, verses 37–40) ranks them into two categories. The *nirukti*, as well as the *dharma pratisaṃvid*, relate to conventional knowledge (*saṃvṛtijñāna*) and operate only within the 'desire realm' (*kāmadhātu*) and the meditative concentrations (*dhyānas*), with the *nirukti pratisaṃvid* being restricted to the first level of concentration (*dhyāna*).

In general, for a *śrāvaka, niruktipratisaṃvid* has as its object forms of conventional speech, or the expressions of language relative to the thing designated and the designation (*attadhammaniruttābhilāpa*). *Nirukti* for a *śrāvaka* focuses on the correct discrimination of the philological knowledge of grammatical forms and its linguistic expression in vernacular language (Pagel (1995: 273n780) citing *Vibhaṅga*, pp. 295–9 as well as the *Prajñaptapādaśāstra* cited in *Abhidharmakośa*, at chapter vii, verse 40b). In Mahāyāna texts on the subject, for the bodhisattva, knowledge of *nirukti* is not only ability in philological analysis but also the ability to gain fluency in multiple languages including human and non-human forms of speech (See Braavig 1993, volume I, pp. 112–113).

As Braavig has noted (1985:17) rhetoric grew as a significant discipline within Mahāyāna formations with principle parts including memory (*dhāraṇī*), eloquence (*pratibhāna*), and for our purposes here—semantic elucidation—*nirukti* or *nirvacana*.

Although a great number of Mahāyāna *sūtras* and *śāstras* contain normative descriptions of *niruktipratisaṃvid* as knowledge that bodhisattvas acquire as well as qualities they embody, ostensively it seems that *sūtras* do not explicitly provide examples of a bodhisattva's semantic elucidation. However, in light of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi's* discription of *nirukti/nirvacana* as semantic elucidation, I think that we can point toward examples of semantic elucidation in Mahāyāna *sūtras* that are present in the form of what is commonly called 'word-play'.

Nirvacana occurs in a number of Mahāyāna *sūtras* as what we

may call 'word-play,' that is, the emphasis or manipulation of sounds to provide the opportunity for transformed meaning. Such word-play is dependent on its context of occurrence in a *sūtra* as well as its phonic effect as a performative utterance in recitation. Occurrences may have a variety of functions: explanatory, emphatic, descriptive, and so forth that cannot be fully explored in this paper.

Rhetorical nature of nirukti/nirvacana

Nirvacana as rhetoric serves to elide the meaning of principle signifiers of mainstream Buddhism and persuade its audience that the elucidated meaning authenticates the understanding of a given sūtra's bodhisattva vision of a particular term. A case in point would be the appearance of *nirukta* or *nirvacana* in the prose portions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the verses of the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*. In his translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* Conze refers to these occurrences as 'definitions' where such terms as bodhisattva (i 18), great being (*mahāsattva*) (i 18), world (*loka*) (xii 256), unthinkable (*acintya*) (viii 193; xiii 277), immeasurable (i 23; xviii 346), incalculable (xviii 346), and *tathāgata* (xii 272, 274) are explained through nirvacana.

For example, the Buddha is called a 'Tathāgata' because he has awakened to *tathatā* or 'suchness' (*evaṃ hi subhūte tathāgatas-tathatām-abhisaṃbudhya lokasya tathatāṃ jānāti, avitathatāṃ jānāti, ananyatathatāṃ jānāti / evaṃ ca subhūte tathāgatas-tathatām-abhisaṃbuddhaḥ saṃs-tathāgata ityucyate //*).

The *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* (as well as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*) defines three key terms through *nirvacana*. A good example is the term bodhisattva.

kiṃ kāraṇaṃ ayu pravucyati bodhisattvo sarvatra saṅgakriya icchati saṅgachedī /
bodhiṃ spṛśiṣyati jināna asaṅgabhūtāṃ tasmāddhi nāma labhate ayu bodhisattvo // Rgs_1.16 //

> 16. What is the reason why we speak of 'Bodhisattvas'?
> Desirous to extinguish all attachment, and to cut it off,
> True non-attachment, or the Bodhi of Jinas is their future lot.
> 'Beings who strive for Bodhi' are they therefore called. (Conze,

p. 11)

Whatever the actual linguistic etymology may be, the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* produces a semantic etymology in which the authors authenticate the proper meaning of the term for their audience. In this instance, bodhisattvas are called as such since they are desirous to cut off all attachment (*sarvatra saṅgakriya icchati*) and strive for awakening (*bodhi*). The *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* give semantic etymologies for 'great beings' (*mahāsattva*) as well:

> *mahāsattva so 'tha kenocyati kāraṇena mahatāya atra ayu bheṣyati sattvarāśeḥ /*
> *dṛṣṭīgatāṃ mahati chindati sattvadhātoḥ mahāsattva tena hi pravucyati kāraṇena //* Rgs 1.17 //
>
> 17. What is the reason why 'Great Beings' are so called?
> They rise to the highest place above a great number of people;
> And of a great number of people they cut off mistaken views.
> That is why we come to speak of them as 'Great Beings.'
>
> *mahānāyako mahatābuddhi mahānubhāvo mahāyāna uttama-jināna samādhirūḍho*
> *mahatā sanaddhu namuciṃ śaṭha dharṣayiṣye mahāsattva tena hi pravucyati kāraṇena //* Rgs 1.18 //
>
> 18. Great as a giver, as a thinker, as a power,
> He mounts upon the vessel of the Supreme Jinas.
> Armed with the great armour he will subdue Mara the artful.
> These are the reasons why 'Great Beings' are so called.

These semantic elucidations for 'great being' (*mahāsattva*) ascribe high social status and acute intellectual abilities among other qualities to such persons. This is in order to increase the prestige of these beings as teachers of dharma and enhance their authority as disciples of the Buddha stressed in the earlier verses of the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* (Rgs 1.3–1.4).

An early bodhisattva sūtra, *The Inquiry of Ugra* (*Ugraparipṛcchā*), recently published in an excellent translation by Jan Nattier, also provides several examples of *nirvacana*[5] in the form of play on words. In the first part of the *sūtra*, when the lay bodhisattva enters a monastery (AY *miao*, Tib. *gtsug-lag-khang*=Skt. *vihāra*), after cultivating a proper attitude of reverence the bodhisattva should reflect as follows:

> "This is a place for dwelling in emptiness (Tib. *stong-pa-nyid-la gnas-pa'i gnas*, Skt. *śūnyatā-vihārāvāsa*). This is place for dwelling in the signless (**animitta-vihārāvāsa*). This is a place for dwelling in the wishless (**apraṇihita-vihārāvāsa*). It is a place for dwelling in loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekṣa*). (§18A) (Nattier 2003: 92, 264–265)

The word play is here is on *vihāra*. Nattier is able to identify the Indic 'word-play' underlying the Chinese and Tibetan translations through a process that she calls 'triangulation,' whereby a comparison of the languages of translation allows for a hypothesis of the Indic based source language. In this occurrence, the *nirvacana* of *vihāra* allows for an extension of the common Buddhist ideal of *vihāra* or dwelling place to include bodhisattva ideals of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), signlessness (*animitta*), and wishlessness (*apaṇihita*).

The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra* also provides examples of *nirvacana* as a means of rhetoric. A good example is found in the fourth chapter, *adhimuktiparivartaḥ* (Vaidya 1960: 70ff.), where Subhūti, *Mahākātyāyana*, and Mahākāśyapa among other great disciples express amazement upon hearing the Buddha's announcement to Śāriputra that he, too, shall one day become a Buddha. Mahākāśyapa gives voice to their feelings in a parable of the wealthy father and beggar son and restates this in a number of stanzas. Among those stanzas we hear Mahākāśyapa state (Vaidya 1960: 82):

> *adyo vayaṃ śrāvakabhūta nātha saṃśrāvayiṣyām atha cāgrabodhim /*

bodhīya śabdaṃ ca prakāśayāmasteno vayaṃ śrāvaka bhīṣmakalpāḥ // 4.53 //

We are now truly listeners and we shall proclaim supreme enlightenment everywhere, reveal the sound of awakening, by which we are formidable disciples.

This verse involves a play on the word *śrāvaka*. The term *śrāvaka* is a *vṛddhi* derivative of the root *śru-* ("to hear") to which the suffx *-ka* has been appended. What the present verse is attempting is a *nirvacana* on the word *śrāvaka* through *śrāvayati*, the causative of the same verb. In this instance, the verse tries to make *śrāvaka* mean two things at the same time, the meaning of "one who hears" found within mainstream Buddhist formations, including Indic heterodox traditions such as Jainism, and the rhetorical meaning that this Mahāyāna sūtra wishes to advocate, "one who enables others to hear." The idea being that *śrāvaka*s receive or hear teachings on the Mahāyāna from the Buddha, and although they do not practice these teachings themselves, they retain these teachings through memory, and then proclaim the Mahāyāna teachings which they have memorized to those suitable to understand them. *Nirvacana* in this context often has the function of 'double-signification' that is routinely seen in Chinese translations of Mahāyāna sūtras from Indic based sources (Deeg 2004).

A final example, the *Avaivartika-dharmacakra-sūtra*[6] (Pk.906, Taipei 240) is classified as a *mahāyāna sūtra* and is said to have been taught by the Buddha, at *Śrāvastī*, in the Jeta Grove of Anāthapiṇḍada. The *sūtra* depicts the Buddha teaching the "wheel of the irreversible doctrine" (*avaivartikadharmacakra*) where all beings are destined for Buddhahood. Among the topics in this sūtra, the Buddha articulates to Ānanda that when he discusses śrāvaka stages of the path the Buddha is actually making reference to bodhisattvas.

In the *sūtra*, the Buddha gives a whole discourse on a certain type of *bodhisattva* who obtains the status name from *śrāvaka* terminology, say for instance the *śraddhānusārin*" a "follower by way of faith." After the Buddha gives a discourse as to why a bodhisattva takes up the name of whichever *śrāvaka*, the Buddha is made to proclaim a number

of stanzas that provide a summary of the particular “re-defined” term.

According to the normative representation of this *sūtra*, the Buddha here skillfully creates notions or perceptions (*saṃjñā*) of stages of progression, such as the followers of dharma, Once-returner, Non-returner, Arhat, or Pratyekabuddha as a form of encouraging beings to progress towards attaining a *śrāvaka* goal and then informs his audience that rather than heading toward the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, they are really irreversible from *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*, unsurpassable complete full awakening. The *sūtra* persuades its audience through *nirukti* or *nirvacana*.

In the discourse of the *Avaivartikadharmacakra* the Dharmānusārin is “one who follows the stream of inconceivable dharmas” (Taipai 240, fol. 502, *chos rjes ’brang zhes gsungs/ chos rgyun bsam gyis mi khyab pa ≈ acintya-dharma-śrota-anusāri*). A Stream-enterer is redefined as “one who enters the stream of the Buddha’s inconceivable path (Taipai 240, fol. 510, *bsam du med pa sangs rgyas lam...rgyun la gzhol ≈ acintya-buddha-mārga-śrota-āpannaḥ*). An Arhat becomes one who destroys (*hanta*) the afflictions (*ari*) of all sentient beings or who is worthy (*arhayati*) of causing others to obtain inconceivable bodhi (Taipai 240, fol. 524.7). Echoing the *Saddharmapuṇḍarika*, a *śrāvaka* is one who proclaims unelaborated, pacified, awakening (Taipai 240, fol. 531.3, *byang chub zhi ba spros pa med / rnyog pa med pa sgrogs par byed*). In all, nine terms of *śrāvaka* status are hollowed out and reconstituted—Aṣṭamaka (‘The Eighth’), Sakṛāgāmin (‘Once-returner’), Anāgamin (‘Non-returner’), Pratyekabuddha among others—as signifiying bodhisattvas.

What this represents is skillful rhetorical tactics through *nirvacana* on the part of the authorial communities of this literature, to redefine and re-describe mainstream Buddhist ideal figures so as to accommodate them into the emergent ideology of universal accessibility to full complete awakening social movements classified as “Mahāyāna”. Nirvacana, as one form of rhetoric among others, serves to transform śrāvaka terminology into Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals.

To conclude, I have suggested that knowledge of semantic elucidation serves as a powerful ideological tool for authorial communities in the propagation of Mahāyāna texts. From the examples drawn from such

sūtras such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, and *Avaivartikadharmacakra*, the 'method of *nairukta*' (*nairukta-vidhānena*), through processes of transvaluation and substitution, hollows out mainstream Buddhist understandings of concepts and principles and reformulates the conceptual framework found in mainstream Buddhist formations toward visions of the bodhisattva way found in nascent Mahāyāna communities.

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Notes

1 This is a revised version of a paper given in the Mahāyāna section at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, June 28, 2008.
2 Yāska is previous to the 5th century before the common era before the grammarian Pāṇini. See *The Nirukta of Yāska: with Nighantu edited with Durga's commentary* by H.M. Bhadkamkar. Poona, India: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1985.
3 *The Dhammapada*. 1987. Edited by John Ross Carter & Mahinda Palihawadana. New York: Oxford University Press. Page 395 The Brāhamaṇa (26.6.) 388. As "one who has banished wrong" is one a brāhmaṇa; Because of "living in calm" is one called a samaṇa. Dispelling one's own

stain—Therefore is one called "gone forth." *bāhitapāpo ti brāhmaṇo samacarityā samaṇo ti vuccati pabbājayaṃ attano malaṃ tasmā pabbjito ti vuccati*.

4 See Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, vol III, pp 1614 ff for a brief list of traditional sources for the *pratisaṃvids* or 'analytical knowledges' as well as Pagel 1995:272–280.

5 See Nattier 2003: pp. 92n28, 255n311, 257n319, 264n353, 271n412, 303n641.

6 See Handurukande (1973) for an overview of this *sūtra*. As a side note, I have visited a temple in Hōren-chō, Nara city, Nara prefecture, Japan which is named after this *sūtra* called "Futai-ji" = Futaiten bōrin ji= *Avinivartanīya-dharmacakra* temple. This temple was established in 847 of the common era.