

Meaning and Function of Sanskrit Prepositions (Upasargas): Classical Debates and Unpublished Textual Evidence

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Abstract. This study examines the semantic status of Sanskrit prepositions (*upasargas*) and particles (*nipātas*), focusing on early grammatical and philosophical debates. Beginning with Yāska's *Nirukta*, it analyzes the opposing views of Śākaṭāyana, who regarded prepositions as meaning-less modifiers of nouns and verbs, and Gārgya, who asserted their independent semantic value. The paper traces subsequent developments in grammatical, exegetical, and philosophical traditions, including Pāṇini, Patañjali, and later treatises, as well as manuscript sources on *upasarga* meanings. It highlights how differing theories of meaning shaped Sanskrit linguistic analysis.

Key words: Sanskrit, Language, Divisions of words, Preposition, Grammarians, *Nirukta*, Philosophy.

On the study of Sanskrit language we see that there are four divisions of words namely noun (*nāman*), verb (*ākhyāta*), preposition or prefix (*upasarga*) & particle (*nipāta*) (*tad yāni catvāri padajātāni nāmākhyāte copasarga-nipātās ca* –*Nirukta* by Yāska I/1). Among them there are different views about the meaning of prepositions and particles. Though since very early period of Sanskrit literature there were different ideas but we get the first evidence of that subject in the *Nirukta* of Yāska (7th century B. C.). The author of the text, *Nirukta*, mentions two different views, positive & negative, about the meaning of prepositions. In *Nirukta*, Yāska quotes two predecessors, Śākaṭāyana & Gārgya. According to Śākaṭāyana, "...when prefixes are detached from their fixture, that is, when they are used by themselves, they have no meaning whatever"¹ (*na nirbaddhā upasargā arthān nirāhur iti śākaṭāyanaḥ*- *Nirukta* I/3). Here Durga in his commentary says that if letters are detached from the words, they have no meaning. Like this, if prepositions are withdrawn from their connection with nouns and verbs and then by those prepositions if sentences are formed these sentences would have no meaning (*yathā- varṇānām padād apagatānām arthābhīdhāna-śaktir nāsti evam eteṣām api nāmākhyāta-viyoge' rthābhi-dhāna-śaktir nāsti*- Durga under *Nirukta* I/3). Thus according to Śākaṭāyana prepositions modify the senses of nouns and verbs, but they are practically without any meaning. A union of the nouns or verbs, with other senses, owing to circumstances undergoes a change in meaning; a new sense comes to inhere in them; there is a chemical change as it were in the noun or verb itself; prepositions are only signs (*dyotakā bhavanti*) to show that such a material change has taken place. "The Mahā-bhāṣya also holds this view"². Śākaṭāyana found that the prepositions or prefixes were always connected either with nouns or with verbs, e.g. *pratitiṣṭhate*, and in each case there was a certain modification of sense. So he regarded them as empty words.

The second view of Yāska's predecessor, Gārgya who did not deny that the prepositions modified the senses of nouns and verbs. He merely went a step farther than Śākaṭāyana and said that the prepositions are *padas* (*padāni*) and as such have their own various (*uccāvaca*) meanings and by these meaning they cause modification in the sense of the nouns and verbs. To support own opinion Gārgya argued that if prepositions are detached from the nouns and the verbs and then if they become

meaningless, by those meaningless prepositions no meaning could be modified. Because, if prepositions are meaningless and if any word is formed by those meaningless prepositions, the word also would be meaningless. By those meaningless words formed sentences, formed Vedic mantras also would be meaningless. And by this the whole literature would be meaningless. Thus Durga says in his commentary under Nirukta I/3, from meaningful words letters also have their own meaning, by which they make meaningful words (*sāmānyā hi varṇeṣv abhidhāna-śaktir asty eva*). Prepositions also being meaningful, by his own meaning they modify the sense of nouns and verbs (*evam upasargā arthavanto 'pi santaḥ svārthābhidhānaśaktim aneka-prakāraṁ vidyamānām api svārthābhidhāna-śaktyādhārabhūte nāmākhyāte pratyāyābhivyañjayeyuḥ*- Durga under Nirukta I/3). Those who support Śākaṭāyana, they say that like a lamp prepositions being meaningless they only can modify the sense of nouns and verbs (*pradīpavad anarthakā upasargāḥ*). Gārgya refuted their opinion by saying that, along with the power of modifying the sense (*arthābhidhānaśakti*) of nouns and verbs, prepositions should also have their own meaning.

Yāska, the author of the Nirukta, accepts the view of Gārgya and mentions the twenty prepositions with their various meanings, e. g. *ā* 'hitherward' (*ā ity arvāgarthe*- Nirukta I/3), *pra* and *parā* opposite of hitherward (*pretty asya prātilomyam*- Nirukta I/3) and so on.

We see in Bṛhaddevatā that according to Śākaṭāyana, *accha*, *śrat* and *antar* are also prepositions. Because they are also used being connected to the verbs. Bṛhaddevatā accepts the view of Śākaṭāyana and regards prepositions as having no meaning of their own³(*vivecayanti te hy artham nāmākhyātavibhaktiṣu*- Bṛhaddevatā). In Ṛk-prātiśākhya we see that there also Śākaṭāyana's view is accepted by saying that the twenty prepositions are expressive of meaning in combination with nouns and verbs (*upasargā vimśatir arthavācakāḥ sahetarābhyām*- Ṛk-prātiśākhya- XII. 22).

How prepositions modify the sense of nouns and verbs, some examples-

1. *ā ity arvāgarthe (vartate); ataḥ: o āgahi divo vārocanādadhi* (Ṛg-veda- 1/6/9); *āgahi*= come down. This sense of *ā* is accidental; one may come from an underground region in which case *ā* would mean 'up'. *ā* really reverses the sense of the root to which it is prefixed; *gaccha*= go; *ā gaccha*= come; *naya*=lead; *ā naya*= lead back, bring.⁴

2. *prātilomyam (āhatuḥ athavā ācaksāte); pra* and *parā* mean the reverses of this sense of *ā*; they mean 'up', *sudevo adyapra pated anāvṛtparāvataṁ paramām gantavā u* (Ṛg-veda- 10/95/14)= today the good king would fly (*patet*) up (*pra*) to go to the highest upper region (*paravatam*) never to return (*anāvṛt*); *parāvata*= an upper region. *parā me yantiḥdūtaḥ* (1/25/16)= my prayers go up (*parā*)⁵

In Pāṇini's system when *pra*, *parā* etc. (*prādayaḥ*) connected with verbs then they are called prepositions (Pāṇini -*upasargāḥ kriyā-yoge* I/4/59). But being detached from verbs they have no own meaning and then they are called particles (*nipātāḥ*, Pāṇini -I/4/56). Kātyāyana has the *vārttika* (under Pāṇini -I/3/1) *kriyāviśeṣaka upasargāḥ*. Under Pāṇini -II/1/1 Patañjali, the great commentator of Pāṇini says: 'such is the nature of *upasargas* that where a word denoting action (i.e. verb) is used, they express the special character of the action'⁶.

Under the *vārttika kriyāviśeṣaka upasargāḥ* (Pāṇini -I/3/1/7) Patañjali appears to accept the view of Śākaṭāyana and holds that *upasargas* merely make explicit what was implicit in the root itself (*pacatīti kriyā gamyate tām pro viśinaṣṭi...evam ihāpi tiṣṭhatir eva vraji-kriyām āha, tiṣṭhatir eva vraji-kriyāyā nivṛttim*'- Mahā-bhāṣya under the *vārttika* I/3/1/7).

There are some unpublished texts which preserved in manuscript form, containing the meaning of prepositions. It is know from the text named Laghūpasarga-dīpikā, that the preposition *pra* has fifteen meanings, e.g. employment (*niyoge*), separation (*viyoge*), frequent (*bhṛśārthe*) etc. (*pra ity upasargāḥ pañcadaśasv artheṣu/ niyoge prayuktaḥ /1/ viyoge proṣitaḥ /2/ bhṛśārthe pravādanti dāyādaḥ /3/- Laghūpasarga-dīpikā*).⁷ In another unpublished text, named *Upasargārtha-saṁgrahaḥ* (the author is Kṛṣṇācārya) "... gives the different meanings of all the *Upasargas*, in 19 verses by the author with perhaps his own commentary on them."⁸ Like Śākaṭāyana in the text *Upasargārtha-saṁgraha*"Adding *nis*, *dus*, *śrat*, *antar* and *āvis* the number of prefixes has been increased to 25."⁹ In the colophon of the text the author writes, here the description of 25 prepositions, is ended (*iti pañcaviṁśati*

upasargāḥ sampūrṇāḥ- Upasargārtha-saṁgrahaḥ by Kṛṣṇācārya).¹⁰ There in the library of The Asiatic Society, is another manuscript of an unpublished text named Upasargārtha, gives various meanings of prepositions. But the manuscript is incomplete and the author is unknown. Here also fifteen meanings are given of the prefix *pra* (“*athopasargārthā likhyamne*”*prā-ādikarmmodīrṇabhṛśārthaiśvāryasambhaviyoga- tṛpti- śuddhi + śakti- śānti- pūjā-graham darśaneṣu* etc., etc.”- *Upasargārthaḥ*).¹¹

According to Naiyāyikas prepositions only can modify the senses of verbs, they have no own meaning practically. Except prepositions particles have their own meanings (...*upasargāṇām dyotakatvam tad itaranipātānām vācakatvam*- Parama-laghu-mañjūṣā: *nipātārthanirṇayaḥ*). Like grammarians they also accept, when *pra*, *parā* etc. (*prādayaḥ*) connected with verbs then they are called prepositions. When they detached from verbs they have no own meaning. Grammarians refuted their view by saying that there is no reason to distinguish between prepositions and particles. Grammarians say *anubhūyate ity anena sāksātkriyate ity asya samatvāt/ nāmārtha-dhātvarthayor bhedenā sāksād anvayābhāvān nipātārtha-dhātvarthayor anvayasyaivāsambhavāt/ nipātārtha-phalāśrayatve 'pi dhātvarthānvayam vinā karmatvānupapatteś ca*.¹²

There is a very beautiful well-known stanza in Māgha's Śiśupālabadha, where “The intoxicating due to drinking brought out in a beautiful manner the amorous gestures of the young women-gestures that had been lying dormant for a long time- because there had been no occasion for their manifestation, even as the upasargas bring out the sense latent in the root.”¹³Māgha says thus-*santam eva ciram aprakṛtatvād aprakāśitamadidyutadaṅge/vibhramam madhu-madaḥ pramadānām dhātulīnam upasargaivārtham*// (Śiśupāla-badha: X. 15)

Nārāyaṇā, the commentator of Māgha, makes clear under I.25. He says, along with prepositions, which meanings are expressed by the verbs, those are of meanings verbs. Prepositions only can modify the sense of the verbs, they have no own meaning actually.¹⁴

Macdonell says, in Sanskrit language there prepositions have to be distinguished in two classes. The first among them comprises the genuine or adverbial prepositions. He says –those prepositions connected with verbs “... are words with a local sense which, primarily used to modify the meaning of verbs, came to be connected independently with the cases governed by the verbs thus modified. They show no signs of derivation from in flexional forms or (except *tirās* and *purās*) forms made with adverbial suffixes.”¹⁵ M. R. Kale says – in Sanskrit a preposition is an indeclinable word. Prepositions have an independent meaning and they prefixed to verbs and also to their derivatives. “These prepositions modify, intensify and sometimes totally alter the senses of roots; *saṁhr* ‘to contract,’ *vihṛ* ‘to sport,’ *parihṛ* ‘to avoid,’ &c. Sometimes they are prefixed without any alteration in the sense.”¹⁶ Philosophical discourses on grammar like Parama-laghu-mañjūṣā of Nāgeśabhaṭṭa and Vaiyākaraṇa-bhūṣaṇa-sāra of Kauṇḍabhaṭṭa may through some light on this topic. European scholars like Max Müller, A. A. Macdonell, Renou, Bloomfield, M.R. Kale and others contributed to the analysis of the role played by particles including prefixes.

Notes & references

1. *Yāska's Nirukta*, Vol. 1, p.228.
2. Ibid.
3. *Technical Terms and Techniques of Sanskrit Grammar*, p. 401-402.
4. *Yāska's Nirukta*, Vol. 1, p.229.
5. Ibid.
6. *Technical Terms and Techniques of Sanskrit Grammar*; p. 402.
7. *A Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Government Collection*: Vol. VI, p. 256.
8. Ibid. p. 258.
9. Ibid. p. 498.

10. Ibid. p. 498.
11. Ibid. p. 498.
12. *ParamaLaghu-mañjūṣā*: p. 170.
13. *Technical Terms and Techniques of Sanskrit Grammar*; p. 403.
14. *dhātūnāmupasargeṇa ye' rthāḥpratīyantetesarve' pi teṣāmsvārthāeva/ upasargāṇāmpunarahivyañjakatvam-* Nārāyaṇa under Śīsupāla-badha: I.25.
15. *Vedic Grammar for Students*: p. 208.
16. *A Smaller Sanskrit Grammar for the Use of Schools*: p. 125.

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