

Terminological traps and how to deal with them

Małgorzata Wielińska-Soltwedel

For every scientific discipline, today as in the past, terminology is the basis on which the entire system is built. It is thus the key to understanding and at the same time the cause of misunderstandings, especially when we want to compare two different systems from two different cultural traditions.

In my talk, I would like to contrast traditional Indian and modern Western concepts and show that even those that are fairly well known and established are not really identical and easy to compare. I will focus on two disciplines: phonology and morphology and two basic concepts that represent them: a phoneme and a suffix in the Western tradition and a *varṇa* and a *pratyaya* in the Indian. In my opinion, the most problematic term is the phoneme, which has been defined so variously that one can form certain classes of these definitions, starting with the psychological one, which was first formulated by the Polish linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay and independently by Edward Sapir in the United States. Many scholars have rejected the mental nature of the phoneme and emphasised its physical aspect. Daniel Jones, for example, defined a phoneme as a class of sounds. The functional definition is associated with the Prague School and sees a phoneme as the smallest unit to distinguish meanings. The descriptive view has its origins in the works of Leonard Bloomfield, for whom a phoneme was a minimal bundle of the distinguishing properties of a sound.

Given this multitude of definitions – and indeed the ones mentioned above are just a few examples – the logical question arises whether a phoneme (in any sense of the term) can be a good translation and an equivalent concept for a *varṇa* (and vice versa). This discussion also provides a good opportunity to demonstrate how, in two different traditions, even identical observations and identical steps in the argumentation can still lead to divergent conclusions.

Compared to the phoneme-*varṇa* problem, the suffix-*pratyaya* pair seems much simpler. However, this impression is deceptive. Pāṇinian rule 3.1.2 *paraś ca*, which states that *pratyaya* should be added after a stem, seems to suggest the perfect equation between a *pratyaya* and a suffix, but this ideal state is disrupted by *bahuC* and *akAC*, which are *pratyayas* but must be added before a nominal stem (Pāṇ 5.3.68 *vibhāṣā supo bahuc purastāt tu*) or before the last vowel of particular kinds of nominal stems (Pāṇ 5.3.71 *avyayasarvanāmnām akac prāk ṭeḥ*) respectively. Nevertheless, most *pratyayas* are suffixes. Does that mean that we can translate this term as a suffix or should we, to be on the safe side, follow the mainstream and render it as an affix? Or, more generally, how can we deal with these inadequacies of the Indian and Western systems? Which strategy (and when) seems most promising? Is using the original Indian terms the right approach? Or is it better to adopt either the most similar or most general concepts? Or is there actually any generally valid strategy for dealing with these terminological pitfalls?