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निर्वचनम्

Derivation: the Etymology of Technical Terms

डॉ. मन्था-श्रीनिवासुः · Dr. Mantha Srinivasu · 14 Nov 2026 · AŚ 15.1.45–46; Su. Utt. 65.35

Abstract

Nirvacana is the device by which a technical term is explained through its derivation. Kauṭilya defines it as "the formation of a word from its quality", and opens his book on calamities with an example: "it throws a man away from his welfare — hence *vyasana*, calamity." Suśruta defines it as "definitive statement", and gives the derivation of the name of his science: "life exists in it, or by it one attains life — hence *āyurveda*." Cakrapāṇi gives two accounts. In the first, nirvacana is an illustration intelligible only to the learned, as distinct from *nidarśana* (TY-22), which is intelligible to learned and unlearned alike; in the second, it is simply *nirukti*, etymology — "because it creeps in various ways (*vividhaṃ sarpati*), it is called *visarpa*." This article sets the device in the tradition of Yāska's Nirukta, whose five operations of derivation are recorded in the Kāśikā, and whose principle — that a derivation makes the sense definite — is precisely Suśruta's "definitive statement". It answers three objections: that such derivations are arbitrary, that Cakrapāṇi's two senses are two different devices, and that derivation conflicts with established usage. It concludes that nirvacana is the device of the transparent term: a name that tells the reader, from its own structure, what the thing is or does, and that its modern form is the principled coinage of technical vocabulary.

Keywords: nirvacana; nirukti; tantrayukti; etymology; derivation; technical terminology; term formation; Nirukta; Yāska; vyasana; āyurveda; visarpa; Arthaśāstra; Suśruta; Caraka

1. प्रवेशः · Place in the lists

Nirvacana is twentieth in Kauṭilya's list, twenty-seventh in Suśruta's and thirty-first in Caraka's. In all three it stands near *svasaṃjñā* (TY-24) and *nidarśana* (TY-22) — the devices that concern technical terms and illustrations. The word is from *nis-* + √*vac*, "to speak out": to say fully what a word contains. The cognate *nirukta*, "spoken out", is the name of the Vedic discipline of etymology, one of the six auxiliaries of the Veda.

2. लक्षणानि · The definitions

> गुणतः शब्दनिष्पत्तिर्निर्वचनम्
>
> व्यस्यत्येनं श्रेयसेति व्यसनमिति
>
> "The formation of a word from its quality is nirvacana." — Example: "'It throws him away from welfare' — hence *vyasana*."

Kauṭilya, *Arthaśāstra* 15.1.45–46

> निश्चितं वचनं निर्वचनम्। यथा आयुर्विद्यते ऽस्मिन्ननेन वा आयुर्विन्दतीत्यायुर्वेदः ॥
>
> "A definitive statement is nirvacana. For example: 'Life exists in it, or by it one attains life' — hence *āyurveda*."

Suśruta, *Uttaratantra* 65.35

> निर्वचनं नाम पण्डितबुद्धिगम्यो दृष्टान्तः; यथा- "ज्ञायते नित्यगस्येव कालस्यात्ययकारणम्" (सू.अ.१६) इति। निदर्शननिर्वचनयोरयं विशेषः- यन्निदर्शनं मूर्खविदुषां बुद्धिसामान्यविषयं, निर्वचनं तु पण्डितबुद्धिवेद्यमेव; किंवा निर्वचनं निरुक्तिः- यथा- "विविधं सर्पति यतो विसर्पस्तेन सञ्ज्ञितः" (चि.अ.२१) इत्यादि।
>
> "Nirvacana is an illustration intelligible to the understanding of the learned. For example: '(no cause) is known for the passing of ever-moving time' (Sūtrasthāna 16). The difference between nidarśana and nirvacana is this: nidarśana is within the common understanding of the unlearned and the learned, while nirvacana is to be known by the understanding of the learned only. Or else nirvacana is etymology (*nirukti*): for example, 'because it creeps in various ways, it is called *visarpa*' (Cikitsāsthāna 21), and so on."

Cakrapāṇidatta, *Āyurvedadīpikā* on Caraka, *Siddhisthāna* 12.41–44

3. लक्षणपरीक्षा · Testing the definitions

3.1 Kauṭilya's example where it stands

Kauṭilya's example is not invented for the list; it is the opening definition of the eighth book of the Arthaśāstra, on calamities:

> व्यस्यत्येनं श्रेयस इति व्यसनम् ॥
>
> "'It throws him away from welfare' — hence *vyasana*."

Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra 8.1.4

The derivation is grammatically sound: *vi-* + √*as* ("to throw") gives *vyasyati*, "throws apart", and *vyasana*, "that which throws apart". But its point is not grammatical. It defines what a calamity is for the purposes of polity: not merely misfortune, but whatever separates a king from his welfare. Every calamity discussed in the book is measured by that standard.

3.2 Suśruta's "definitive statement"

Suśruta's definition, *niścitaṃ vacanam*, "a statement that makes certain", matches the grammarians' own account of the word *nirukta*. Commenting on Pāṇini 6.3.119, the Nyāsa says:

> एतत्? पञ्चविधं पञ्चप्रकारं निरुक्तम्, निश्चयेनोच्यतेऽर्थोऽनेनेति निरुक्तम् ॥
>
> "This is the fivefold nirukta — of five kinds. 'That by which the meaning is stated with certainty' is nirukta."
>
> *Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini* 6.3.119 (nyaas)

The five kinds are listed in a verse quoted by the Kāśikā on the same sūtra:

> वर्णागमो वर्णविपर्ययश्च द्वौ चापरौ वर्णविकारनाशौ । धातोस्तदर्थातिशयेन योगस्तदुच्यते पञ्चविधं निरुक्त म् ॥
>
> "The addition of a sound, the transposition of a sound, and two others — the modification and the loss of a sound — and the connection with a root through the pre-eminence of its meaning: that is called the fivefold nirukta."
>
> *Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini* 6.3.109 (kashika)

The last clause is the heart of the method: a word is connected with a root by the pre-eminence of its meaning (*tad-artha-atiśayena*). Suśruta's derivation of *āyurveda* illustrates this. He offers two roots of the same form, √*vid* "to exist" (*vidyate*) and √*vid* "to obtain" (*vindati*), and both yield a true account of the science: life is the subject in which it exists, and life is what it enables one to obtain. The derivation makes certain what the science is about and what it is for. It appears in his own first chapter:

> आयुरस्मिन् विद्यते ऽनेन वायुर्विन्दतीत्यायुर्वेदः ॥
>
> "Life exists in it, or by it one attains life — hence *āyurveda*."
>
> Suśruta, *Sūtrasthāna* 1.15

3.3 Cakrapāṇi's two senses

Cakrapāṇi's first account makes nirvacana a kind of illustration, distinguished from nidarśana by its audience. His example is from Caraka's argument that things perish of their own nature, without a cause of destruction:

> न नाशकारणाभावाद्भावानां नाशकारणम् । ज्ञायते नित्यगस्येव कालस्यात्ययकारणम् ॥
>
> "Since there is no cause of destruction, no cause of the destruction of things is known — just as no cause is known for the passing of time, which is ever moving."
>
> Caraka, *Sūtrasthāna* 16.32

Time passes by itself; no one asks what makes it pass. This is an illustration, but an abstract one, meaningful only to those who have reflected on time and causation — hence "for the learned". His second account, "or else nirvacana is etymology", returns to the sense of Kauṭilya and Suśruta, with an example from Caraka's chapter on *visarpa*:

> विविधं सर्पति यतो विसर्पस्तेन स स्मृतः। परिसर्पो ऽथवा नाम्ना सर्वतः परिसर्पणात् ॥
>
> "Because it creeps in various ways, it is called *visarpa*; or else, by name, *parisarpa*, from its creeping all around."
>
> Caraka, *Cikitsāsthāna* 21.11

The derivation is clinical: the name describes the characteristic spread of the disease. And Caraka immediately gives a second name with a second derivation — *parisarpa*, "creeping around" — each true of the disease, each highlighting a feature.

4. पूर्वपक्षः खण्डनं मण्डनं च · Objections and replies

4.1 Are such derivations not arbitrary?

> ननु सुश्रुतः "आयुर्विद्यते ऽस्मिन्" इति, "अनेन वायुर्विन्दति" इति च द्वे निरुक्ती ददाति; चरकः "विसर्पः" "परिसर्पः" इति द्वे नामनी द्वे निरुक्ती च। यदि एकस्य शब्दस्य अनेकाः निरुक्तयः, तर्हि ताः स्वेच्छाकल्पिताः, न शब्दस्य सत्या व्युत्पत्तिः इति चेत्, न। निर्वचनस्य प्रयोजनं न इतिहासः — "अयं शब्दः पुरा कथं निष्पन्नः" इति; किन्तु अर्थस्य निश्चयः — "अनेन शब्देन कः अर्थः बोध्यते" इति। "तदर्थातिशयेन योगः" इति निरुक्तलक्षणम् — यस्मिन् धातौ अर्थस्य प्राधान्यं दृश्यते, तेन योगः। यदि द्वौ धातू द्वौ अपि अर्थौ सत्यौ दर्शयतः, तर्हि द्वे अपि निरुक्ती युक्ते — आयुः विषयः अपि, फलम् अपि। स्वेच्छा तदा यदा निरुक्तेन दर्शितः गुणः वस्तुनि न दृश्यते। "गुणतः" इति कौटिल्यस्य पदं नियामकम्।
>
> **Objection:** Suśruta gives two derivations — "life exists in it" and "by it one attains life"; Caraka gives two names and two derivations — *visarpa* and *parisarpa*. If one word has several derivations, they are invented at will and are not the true formation of the word. **Reply:** No. The purpose of nirvacana is not history — how the word came to be formed long ago — but certainty of meaning — what the word conveys. The definition of nirukta is "connection with a root through the pre-eminence of its meaning": the word is connected with the root in which its meaning is seen to predominate. If two roots show two true aspects, both derivations are proper — life is both the subject and the fruit of the science. Invention at will is when the quality shown by the derivation is not found in the thing. Kauṭilya's word "from its quality" (*guṇataḥ*) is the restraint.
>
> Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.2 Are Cakrapāṇi's two senses not two different devices?

ननु चक्रपाणिः प्रथमं "पण्डितबुद्धिगम्यो दृष्टान्तः" इति, पश्चात् "किंवा निर्वचनं निरुक्तिः" इति द्वे लक्षणे वदति। दृष्टान्तः च व्युत्पत्तिः च भिन्ने। अतः एकस्याः युक्तेः द्वौ अर्थौ असङ्गतौ इति चेत्, न। उभयत्र अर्थः शब्दात् निश्चीयते, न केवलं श्रवणात्। निरुक्तौ शब्दस्य अवयवेषु अर्थः दृश्यते — "विविधं सर्पति"; पण्डितदृष्टान्ते वाक्यस्य अर्थः सूक्ष्मसाम्येन निश्चीयते — "नित्यगस्य कालस्य"। उभयम् अपि श्रोतुः विचारम् अपेक्षते, न केवलं श्रुतिम्। अतः "निश्चितं वचनम्" इति सुश्रुतलक्षणे उभयम् अन्तर्भवति — शब्दतः अर्थनिश्चयः, विचारेण। चक्रपाणेः "किंवा" इति विकल्पः व्याख्यानभेदं दर्शयति, न विरोधम्।

Objection: Cakrapāṇi first says "an illustration intelligible to the learned", and then "or else nirvacana is etymology" — two definitions. An illustration and a derivation are different things. So the two senses of one device are incoherent. **Reply:** No. In both, meaning is made certain from the words themselves, by reflection, not by mere hearing. In etymology the meaning is seen in the parts of the word — "creeps in various ways"; in the learned illustration the meaning of a sentence is fixed by a subtle likeness — "of time, ever moving". Both require reflection from the hearer, not mere listening. So both are included in Suśruta's definition, "a statement that makes certain" — certainty of meaning from words, through reflection. Cakrapāṇi's "or else" records a difference of interpretation, not a contradiction.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.3 Does derivation not conflict with usage?

ननु शब्दाः रूढ्या प्रवर्तन्ते, न व्युत्पत्त्या — "पङ्कजम्" इति कुमुदे न प्रयुज्यते, यद्यपि तत् अपि पङ्के जायते। अतः निर्वचनेन अर्थनिश्चयः असम्भवः; व्युत्पत्तिः अतिव्याप्ता इति चेत्, न। निर्वचनं रूढिं न निराकरोति, किन्तु तां हेतुमतीं करोति। "व्यसनम्" इति शब्दः लोके प्रसिद्धः; कौटिल्यः तस्य निर्वचनेन तस्य मानं ददाति — यत् श्रेयसः व्यस्यति तत् व्यसनम्, अन्यत् न। एवं निर्वचनं शास्त्रे पारिभाषिकार्थस्य नियामकं भवति। अतिव्याप्तिः तु रूढ्या नियम्यते — विसर्पः विविधं सर्पति, किन्तु सर्वं विविधं सर्पत् न विसर्पः, यः रोगः एव। योगः रूढिः च मिलित्वा पारिभाषिकं शब्दं कुरुतः — योगरूढः शब्दः।

Objection: words are used by convention, not by derivation — *paṅkaja*, "mud-born", is not used of the white water-lily, though it too is born in mud. So meaning cannot be fixed by derivation; derivation over-extends. **Reply:** No. Nirvacana does not reject convention; it gives convention a reason. The word *vyasana* is current in ordinary speech; Kauṭilya, by deriving it, gives it a measure — what throws one from welfare is vyasana, and nothing else. In this way nirvacana regulates the technical sense of a word in a śāstra. Over-extension is checked by convention: visarpa

creeps in various ways, but not everything that creeps in various ways is visarpa — only the disease. Derivation and convention together make a technical term: a word whose derived sense is fixed by usage (*yogarūḍha*).

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

5. सिद्धान्तः · The settled view

> पारिभाषिकस्य शब्दस्य, वस्तुनि दृश्यमानं गुणं प्रधानीकृत्य, धातुना प्रत्ययेन वा योजनं — रूढ्या नियम्यमानं — येन शब्दात् एव अर्थः निश्चीयते, तत् निर्वचनम्।
>
> "Nirvacana is the connection of a technical term with a root or suffix, by giving prominence to a quality seen in the thing — regulated by usage — so that the meaning is made certain from the word itself."

Definition composed for this article.

The definition joins Kauṭilya's "from its quality", the grammarians' "connection with a root through the pre-eminence of its meaning", Suśruta's "making certain", and the check of usage. Cakrapāṇi's learned illustration is covered by the clause "made certain from the word itself", read broadly as from the words of the text.

6. आधुनिकसंवादः · The modern counterpart

Classical form	Modern counterpart
Derivation from a quality	**Transparent terminology**: scientific coinages from roots that describe the thing ("photosynthesis", "leucocyte")
Kauṭilya: derivation as a definitional standard	Defining a concept by an etymological gloss that sets its scope ("crisis: a turning point")
Caraka: *visarpa* / *parisarpa*	Descriptive disease names and their synonyms, each highlighting a feature
The check of usage	The rule that a coined term must be adopted by the field; standard nomenclatures
Cakrapāṇi: illustration for the learned	Abstract analogies in theoretical writing, addressed to specialists

The coining of technical terms in Indian languages today — for science, law and administration — draws heavily on Sanskrit roots precisely because Sanskrit derivation makes terms transparent. Nirvacana is the classical theory behind that practice: a good term carries its definition in its form.

7. प्रयोगाः · Uses

7.1 In research

When introducing a technical term, give its derivation if it illuminates the concept, and state the quality it highlights. When coining a term, choose roots that name the defining feature, and check that the derived sense does not over-extend. When studying classical terms, record both the derivation the author gives and the usage that restricts it.

7.2 In teaching

Teach the key terms of a śāstra through their derivations — *vyasana*, *āyurveda*, *visarpa*, *doṣa*, *dhātu* — and ask students what each derivation reveals about the thing. A term understood from its form is remembered.

7.3 In daily life

Many everyday words carry a hidden definition in their form. Asking what a word literally means often clarifies what we ought to mean by it — as Kauṭilya's *vyasana* clarifies what counts as a calamity.

8. अभ्यासः · Exercise

1. Collect five nirvacanas of disease names from Caraka or Suśruta. For each, state the root, the quality it highlights, and whether the name is also restricted by usage.
2. Propose a Sanskrit-based term for a concept in your field that lacks one. Give its nirvacana and test it for over-extension.
3. Find a derivation in the Arthaśāstra other than *vyasana*, and explain how it sets the scope of the concept.

9. उपसंहारः · Conclusion

Nirvacana explains a term through its derivation. Kauṭilya defines calamity as what throws one from welfare, Suśruta his science as that in which life exists and by which it is attained, Caraka a spreading disease as what creeps in various ways; Cakrapāṇi adds a second sense, the illustration for the learned. The grammarians' account — the connection with a root through the pre-eminence of its meaning, making the sense certain — is the theory behind all of these. Multiple derivations are not arbitrary when each shows a true quality; Cakrapāṇi's two senses share the making certain of meaning; and derivation regulates usage rather than conflicting with it. A good technical term, in Sanskrit or any language, carries its nirvacana within it.

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