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स्वसंज्ञा

One's Own Term: Operational Definition

डॉ. मन्था-श्रीनिवासुः · Dr. Mantha Srinivasu · 15 Nov 2026 · AŚ 15.1.51–52; Su. Utt. 65.34

Abstract

Svasaṃjñā, "one's own term", is the device by which a śāstra coins or fixes a technical name for its own use. Kauṭilya defines it as "a word not agreed on by others", and his example is the numbered vocabulary of his theory of the circle of kings: "the first constituent (the would-be conqueror); the one whose territory is immediately adjacent, the second; the one separated by one territory, the third." Suśruta defines it as "a term not shared with other śāstras": *mithuna*, "the pair", means honey and ghee — "or an example well known in the world". Cakrapāṇi defines it as "a name made by the authors of a treatise for the sake of practice", such as *jentāka* and *holāka*, names of Caraka's methods of sudation. Pāṇini's grammar, built on short technical names such as *vṛddhi* and *guṇa*, is the great Indian example of the device, and Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya states its rationale: a technical name is made for brevity, and the shorter of the two is the name. This article examines the three kinds of own-term — numbered, borrowed and coined — and answers three objections: that private terms obstruct communication, that Suśruta's alternative "an example well known in the world" contradicts his definition, and that if each śāstra has its own terms the same word will mean different things in different places. It concludes that svasaṃjñā is the discipline of the defined term, that it makes a discipline-wise lexicon indispensable, and that its modern forms are the operational definition, the glossary and the controlled vocabulary.

Keywords: svasaṃjñā; saṃjñā; paribhāṣā; tantrayukti; technical term; terminology; operational definition; glossary; controlled vocabulary; maṇḍala; mithuna; jentāka; Pāṇini; Mahābhāṣya; Arthaśāstra; Suśruta; Caraka

1. प्रवेशः · Place in the lists

Svasaṃjñā is twenty-third in Kauṭilya's list, twenty-sixth in Suśruta's and twenty-seventh in Caraka's. It follows *apavarga* (TY-23) in Kauṭilya and stands next to *nirvacana* (TY-21) in the medical lists. Nirvacana explains a term from its form; svasaṃjñā declares that a term has a sense peculiar to this śāstra. The two together make up the theory of technical vocabulary in the tantrayukti tradition.

2. लक्षणानि · The definitions

> परैरसमितः शब्दः स्वसंज्ञा
>
> प्रथमा प्रकृतिः, तस्य भूम्यनन्तरा द्वितीया, भूम्येकान्तरा तृतीयेति

> "A word not agreed on by others is svasaṃjñā." — Example: "The first constituent; the one whose territory is immediately adjacent to his, the second; the one separated by one territory, the third."
>
> Kauṭilya, *Arthaśāstra* 15.1.51–52

> अन्यशास्त्रासामान्या स्वसंज्ञा । यथा मिथुनमिति मधुसर्पिषोर्ग्रहणं; लोकप्रसिद्धमुदाहरणं वा ॥
>
> "A term not shared with other śāstras is svasaṃjñā. For example: by *mithuna* ('the pair') honey and ghee are meant; or an example well known in the world."
>
> Suśruta, *Uttaratantra* 65.34

> स्वसञ्ज्ञा नाम या तन्त्रकारैर्व्यवहारार्थं सञ्ज्ञा क्रियते; यथा- जेन्ताकहोलाकादिका सञ्ज्ञा ।
>
> "Svasaṃjñā is a name made by the authors of a treatise for the sake of practice. For example: names such as *jentāka* and *holāka*."
>
> Cakrapāṇidatta, *Āyurvedadīpikā* on Caraka, *Siddhisthāna* 12.41–44

3. लक्षणपरीक्षा · Testing the definitions

3.1 Three kinds of own-term

Authority	Term	Kind	What it names
Kauṭilya	"First, second, third constituent"	**Numbered**: ordinary words given a system-internal sense	The would-be conqueror, his natural enemy, his natural friend, in the circle of kings
Suśruta	*mithuna*, "the pair"	**Borrowed**: a common word restricted to one referent	Honey and ghee taken together
Caraka (Cakrapāṇi)	*jentāka*, *holāka*	**Coined**: names with no ordinary meaning	Particular methods of sudation

Kauṭilya's numbered terms are the vocabulary of his geopolitics. In the circle of kings (*maṇḍala*, AŚ 6.2) the would-be conqueror stands at the centre; the king whose territory touches his is by position his enemy, and the king beyond that, separated by one territory, is by position his friend. Ordinal numbers, which in ordinary speech mean only order, here carry a theory: geography determines alignment. No other śāstra uses "second" and "third" in this way; hence "not agreed on by others".

The definition of the circle in the sixth book shows the same terms at work:

> राजा आत्मद्रव्यप्रकृतिसम्पन्नो नयस्याधिष्ठानं विजिगीषुः ॥
> तस्य समन्ततो मण्डलीभूता भूम्यनन्तरा अरिप्रकृतिः ॥
> तथैव भूम्येकान्तरा मित्रप्रकृतिः ॥
>
> "The king endowed with personal and material excellences, the seat of good policy, is the would-be conqueror. Encircling him on all sides, with territory immediately adjacent, is the constituent of the enemy. In the same way, with territory separated by one, is the constituent of the ally."
>
> Kauṭilya, *Arthaśāstra* 6.2.13–15

3.2 Caraka's coined names

Caraka lists thirteen methods of sudation with heat, several of which bear names that occur nowhere outside medicine:

> सङ्करः प्रस्तरो नाडी परिषेको ऽवगाहनम्। जेन्ताको ऽश्मघनः कर्षूः कुटी भूः कुम्भिकैव च ॥
>
> "Saṅkara, prastara, nāḍī, pariṣeka, avagāhana, jentāka, aśmaghana, karṣū, kuṭī, bhū and kumbhikā too …"
>
> Caraka, *Sūtrasthāna* 14.39

The list of thirteen continues in the next verse of the e-text with *kūpa* and *holāka*.

A word like *jentāka* is pure svasaṃjñā: it has no meaning until the treatise gives it one, and Caraka gives it a detailed description — a round hut by a pond, with a hearth in the middle, built to precise measurements (Sūtrasthāna 14.46). Cakrapāṇi's phrase "for the sake of practice" (*vyavahārārtham*) is exact: the name exists so that physicians can refer quickly to a procedure that would otherwise need a paragraph.

3.3 The grammarians' rationale

Pāṇini's grammar is the most thorough use of svasaṃjñā in Sanskrit. Its first sūtra, *vṛddhir ādaic*, makes *vṛddhi* the name of the vowels ā, ai and au; the second makes *guṇa* the name of a, e and o. Patañjali asks how one knows which is the name and which the named:

> तत्र त्वेतावान्सन्देहः - कः संज्ञी का संज्ञेति । स चापि क्व सन्देहः । यत्रोभे समानाक्षरे । यत्र त्वन्यतरल्लघु सा संज्ञा, यद्गुरु स संज्ञी । कुत एतत् । लघ्वर्थं हि संज्ञाकरणम् ।
>
> "The only doubt there is — which is the named and which the name? And where is that doubt? Where both have the same number of syllables. But where one of the two is shorter, that is the name; the longer is the named. Why? Because the making of a name is for the sake of brevity."
>
> *Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini* 1.1.1 (bhashya)

"The making of a name is for brevity" (*laghv-artham hi saṃjñā-karaṇam*) is the principle behind every svasaṃjñā. Patañjali also gives the analogy from ordinary life:

तद्यथा लौकिकेषु वैदिकेषु च कृतान्तेषु । लोके तावत् मातापितरौ पुत्रस्य जातस्य संवृतेऽवकाशे नाम कुर्वाते देवदत्तो यज्ञदत्त इति । तयोरुपचारादन्येपि जानन्ति इयमस्य संज्ञेति । वेदे याज्ञिकाः संज्ञां कुर्वन्ति - स्फयो यूपश्चषाल इति । तत्र भवतामुपचारादन्येऽपि जानन्ति इयमस्य संज्ञेति । एवमिहापि - इहैव तावत्केचिद् व्याचक्षाणा आहुः वृद्धिशब्दः संज्ञा, आदैचः संज्ञिन इति । अपरे पुनः सिचि वृद्धिः इत्युक्त्वाऽऽकारेकारौकारानुदाहरन्ति । तेन मन्यामहे यया प्रत्याय्यन्ते सा संज्ञा, ये प्रतीयन्ते ते संज्ञिन इति ।

"As in matters established in worldly and Vedic usage. In the world, parents give a name to a son who is born, in a private place — 'Devadatta', 'Yajñadatta' — and from their use of it others too come to know 'this is his name'. In the Veda, the sacrificers make names — *sphya*, *yūpa*, *caṣāla* — and from their use others too come to know 'this is its name'. So here too: some who explain (this sūtra) say that the word *vṛddhi* is the name and ā, ai, au the named; others, having said 'vṛddhi before *sic*', give ā, ai and au as examples. From this we understand that that by which (something) is made known is the name, and those which are made known are the named."

Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini 1.1.1 (bhashya)

A technical name, like a child's name, is given privately and made public by use. The śāstra names, and the community of its readers learns the name from the śāstra's consistent use of it.

4. पूर्वपक्षः खण्डनं मण्डनं च · Objections and replies

4.1 Do private terms not obstruct communication?

ननु शब्दः लोकव्यवहाराय । "परैरसमितः" शब्दः अन्यैः न ज्ञायते, अतः व्यवहारं निरुणद्धि । शास्त्रं च लोकहिताय — कथं अज्ञातैः शब्दैः हितं करोति इति चेत्, न । स्वसंज्ञा प्रथमप्रयोगे एव परिभाष्यते — "प्रथमा प्रकृतिः, भूम्यनन्तरा द्वितीया" इति कौटिल्यः संज्ञां संज्ञिनं च सह वदति । ततः परं लघुना शब्देन दीर्घः अर्थः बोध्यते — "लघ्वर्थं हि संज्ञाकरणम्" । मातापितरौ अपि पुत्रस्य नाम संवृते अवकाशे कुर्वाते, अन्ये तु उपचारात् जानन्ति । एवं शास्त्रस्य अध्येतारः शास्त्रोपचारात् संज्ञां जानन्ति । व्यवहारः न निरुध्यते, किन्तु शास्त्रज्ञानां मध्ये शीघ्रः भवति । परिभाषा च "स्वतन्त्रानुक्तापि वृद्धव्यवहारसिद्धा प्रमाणीभूता" इति चक्रपाणिः अन्यत्र वदति ।

Objection: words are for communication among people. A word "not agreed on by others" is not understood by others, and so obstructs communication. A śāstra is for the good of the world — how can it do good with unknown words? **Reply:** No. A svasaṃjñā is defined at its first use — Kauṭilya states the name and the named together: "the first constituent; the one adjacent, the second." Thereafter a long meaning is conveyed by a short word — "the making of a name is for brevity". Parents too name their son in a private place, and others learn the name

from its use. So the students of a śāstra learn its terms from the śāstra's use of them. Communication is not obstructed; among those who know the śāstra it becomes swift. And Cakrapāṇi says elsewhere that a technical convention, even when not stated in one's own treatise, is authoritative when established by the usage of the elders.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.2 Does Suśruta's alternative not contradict his definition?

ननु सुश्रुतः "अन्यशास्त्रासामान्या" इति लक्षणं कृत्वा "लोकप्रसिद्धमुदाहरणं वा" इति वदति। लोकप्रसिद्धं च सामान्यम् एव। अतः लक्षणोदाहरणयोः विरोधः इति चेत्, न। स्वसंज्ञायां शब्दः लोकात् अपि गृह्येत — "मिथुनम्" इति लोके युग्मवाचकं प्रसिद्धम्। तस्य तु शास्त्रे नियतः अर्थः — मधुसर्पिषी — सः एव अन्यशास्त्रासामान्यः। शब्दः लोकप्रसिद्धः, अर्थनियमः शास्त्रीयः। "लोकप्रसिद्धमुदाहरणं वा" इति वाक्यं दर्शयति — स्वसंज्ञायाः शब्दः नवः वा भवति (जेन्ताकः), लोकात् गृहीतः वा (मिथुनम्)। उभयत्र अपि अर्थस्य नियमः स्वशास्त्रस्य एव। अतः न विरोधः, किन्तु स्वसंज्ञायाः द्वैविध्यम्।

Objection: Suśruta defines svasaṃjñā as "not shared with other śāstras" and then says "or an example well known in the world". What is well known in the world is shared. So the definition and the example contradict each other. **Reply:** No. In svasaṃjñā the word may be taken from the world: *mithuna* is well known in ordinary speech for any pair. But its fixed meaning in the śāstra — honey and ghee — is not shared with other śāstras. The word is well known; the restriction of meaning is the śāstra's own. The phrase "or an example well known in the world" shows that the word of a svasaṃjñā may be new (*jentāka*) or taken from ordinary speech (*mithuna*). In both cases the fixing of the meaning belongs to the śāstra. There is no contradiction, only two kinds of svasaṃjñā.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.3 Will the same word not mean different things in different śāstras?

ननु यदि प्रतिशास्त्रं स्वसंज्ञाः, तर्हि एकः शब्दः अनेकेषु शास्त्रेषु अनेकार्थः भवेत् — "रसः" आयुर्वेदे स्वादः, काव्ये भावास्वादः, रसशास्त्रे पारदः। "अतिदेशः" "प्रदेशः" इति कौटिल्ये सुश्रुते च विपरीतार्थौ। अतः शास्त्राणां मिथः सङ्करः, पाठकस्य भ्रमः इति चेत्, न। स्वसंज्ञा एव भ्रमस्य निवारिका — "परैरसमितः", "अन्यशास्त्रासामान्यः" इति लक्षणे एव पाठकः बोध्यते: अस्मिन् शास्त्रे अयम् अर्थः, अन्यत्र अन्यः स्यात्। भ्रमः तदा भवति यदा एकस्य शास्त्रस्य संज्ञा अन्यस्मिन् शास्त्रे आरोप्यते। अतः शास्त्रविभागेन परिभाषाकोशः अपेक्षितः — यत्र प्रतिशब्दं प्रतिशास्त्रं च अर्थः निर्दिश्यते। स्वसंज्ञायुक्तिः एव तादृशस्य कोशस्य मूलम्।

Objection: if every śāstra has its own terms, one word will have different meanings in different śāstras — *rasa* is taste in Āyurveda, aesthetic relish in poetics, mercury in alchemy. *Atideśa* and *pradeśa* have opposite meanings in Kauṭilya and Suśruta. So the śāstras will be confused with each other, and the reader misled. **Reply:** No. Svasaṃjñā itself prevents the error. Its very definition — "not agreed on by others", "not shared with other śāstras" — tells the reader: in this śāstra the word means this; elsewhere it may mean something else. Error arises when the term of one śāstra is imposed on another. Hence a lexicon of technical terms arranged by discipline is required, in which the meaning is given for each word and each śāstra. The device of svasaṃjñā is the very foundation of such a lexicon.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

5. सिद्धान्तः · The settled view

> शास्त्रकारेण व्यवहारलाघवार्थं, नवेन लोकात् गृहीतेन वा शब्देन, स्वशास्त्रमात्रे नियतेन अर्थेन, प्रथमप्रयोगे परिभाष्य, क्रियमाणा संज्ञा, सा स्वसंज्ञा ।
>
> "Svasaṃjñā is a name made by the author of a śāstra for brevity in practice — with a new word or one taken from ordinary speech — whose meaning is fixed for that śāstra alone and defined at its first use."

Definition composed for this article.

The definition combines Cakrapāṇi's "for the sake of practice", Patañjali's "for brevity", Suśruta's two sources of the word, and Kauṭilya's and Suśruta's restriction to the śāstra. The clause "defined at its first use" is what Kauṭilya's example demonstrates, and what answers the charge of obscurity.

6. आधुनिकसंवादः · The modern counterpart

Classical form	Modern counterpart
Kauṭilya: ordinals given a theoretical sense	Model-specific terms in a theory ("first-mover", "periphery", "core" in world-systems theory)
Suśruta: a common word restricted	**Operational definition**: an ordinary word given a precise meaning for a study ("exposure", "adherence")
Caraka: a coined name	Neologisms and eponyms in science; names of instruments and procedures
Pāṇini: *vṛddhi*, *guṇa*, for brevity	Notation and abbreviations defined at first use
A lexicon by discipline	**Glossaries**, controlled vocabularies and domain ontologies (such as MeSH in medicine)

The rule in modern style guides — define every abbreviation and technical term at its first use — is svasaṃjñā restated. So is the practice of placing a definitions section at the start of a statute or a standard.

7. प्रयोगाः · Uses

7.1 In research

List the key terms of your study and mark each as numbered, borrowed or coined. For borrowed terms, state how your sense differs from ordinary usage; for all terms, define them at first use and keep them fixed throughout. When reading a classical text, never assume that a word has the sense it has in another śāstra; consult a discipline-wise lexicon or establish the sense from the text's own use.

7.2 In teaching

Give students the same word as used in three śāstras — *rasa*, *dhātu*, *prakṛti* — and ask them to state its sense in each. The exercise teaches both the necessity of svasaṃjñā and the danger of ignoring it.

7.3 In daily life

Every profession, family and team has its own terms. Misunderstandings between groups often come from shared words with different own-senses. Asking "what do you mean by that word here?" is the everyday practice of this device.

8. अभ्यासः · Exercise

1. Read Caraka, Sūtrasthāna 14.39–64, on the thirteen methods of sudation. Which names are coined and which borrowed from ordinary speech?
2. Choose a word used technically in at least three śāstras and write its definition in each, citing a passage for each.
3. Draft a definitions section for your own thesis or project, marking the kind of each term.

9. उपसंहारः · Conclusion

Svasaṃjñā is one's own term. Kauṭilya numbers the kings of his circle, Suśruta restricts a common word to honey and ghee, Caraka coins names for his methods of sudation; Pāṇini builds a grammar on short names, and Patañjali states the principle — names are made for brevity. A private term does not obstruct communication when it is defined at first use and learnt from consistent use; a term may be new or borrowed, so long as its fixed sense is the śāstra's own; and the multiplicity of senses across śāstras is not a fault but a fact that svasaṃjñā itself announces — and that a discipline-wise lexicon of technical terms exists to record.

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8. Caraka. *Caraka Saṃhitā*, Sūtrasthāna 14 (*svedādhyāya*), with Cakrapāṇidatta's *Āyurvedadīpikā* (including on Cikitsāsthāna 3.145).
9. Kauṭilya. *Arthaśāstra* 6.2 (*maṇḍala*).

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