

## **Lexical Ambiguities in the Buddhist Teachings, an Example & Methodology**

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### **Abstract**

The actual words that the Buddha spoke are inaccessible to us; his teachings were orally preserved over time and either gradually evolved according to natural phonological rule and/or changed at the point they were committed to writing in local or artificially fabricated dialects, starting perhaps from the time of Aśoka, but certainly by the first century B.C. The phonological simplifications we see in the Aśokan edicts were also prevalent in the Buddhist oral tradition and often led to homonymic ambiguities and confusion on the part of translators. Language was arbitrary, changeable and imprecise according to the Buddha, and his teaching style reflects language's inability to precisely express the Dharma he attained: one of the characteristic features of the Buddha's oral style is synonymic or near-synonymic word repetition; another is a malleable, polysemic approach to key individual word meanings. This article exams one keyword—*pramūñcantu*—from one of the *gāthās* in the story of the Buddha's Great Hesitation, his initial decision not to teach the Dharma after his enlightenment out of concern that people would not understand him. The word was variously interpreted in four different Middle Indic traditions and the different interpretations can help identify an underlying homonymic oral source form. The ambiguity in the source form and the translators' decisions as to its meaning led to various other rationalizing alterations in the surrounding lexemic and semantic structure. The article concludes that the original composer of the *gāthās* was likely aware of and comfortable with the polyvocal nature of the teachings, which added a richer and deeper dimension to the teaching.

**Keywords:** Early Buddhism language, phonology, Prakrit, Middle Indic, homonyms

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# 佛教教說中的語彙多義性： 例証與方法論

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## 摘要

佛住世時究竟說過甚麼話，我們已無從稽考。佛陀的說法曾被口耳相傳地保留下來，大概從阿育王時代開始，但不遲於公元前一世紀，這些教法內容基於自然的語音演變規則，又或在謄寫為當地的或典雅的方言的過程中，逐漸發生了變化。反映在阿育王敕令裏的語音簡化現象，亦常見於佛教的口述傳統，緣此而有同音異義詞造成的模稜兩可、語意含混等問題，替譯寫佛經人士增添了難度。在佛陀看來，語言原無定法，既變化多端，亦非精確無謬。佛陀說法的風格，印證了語言無法如實呈現其證悟境界的事實。因而，利用同義詞或近義詞，進行反覆演述，乃其教學特色之一；此外，又藉逗機說教、一言多義等方法，對個別詞義予以開示。本文將考察一個關鍵詞——*pramuñcantu*。此詞出自一個偈頌，它記載佛陀初成道時，考慮到眾生迷惑，難以了解佛法，決定不住世說法的故事。在四種中期印度語的記述系統中，對於此詞各持不同解釋，這些釋義將有助於追溯同音異義詞背後口語語源形態。由於語源形態模糊難辨，再加上譯寫者對語義的裁定，以致將周邊的詞彙與語義結構內的一些改動合理化。本文的結論是，原初的偈頌編撰者不但已注意到教說的多義性，並且泰然處之，這無疑充實和深化了佛教教理。

關鍵詞：早期佛教語言、音韻學、普拉克利特語、中期印度語、同音異義詞