

Pali polysemy: the colours of words¹

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2.1.3.1 We have noted the **polysemy** of the verb *acceti* (plural, *accenti*) [2.1.1.1]. Why is the such polysemy? It has to do with the language and languages used by the Buddha. He probably used various local dialects to teach his Dharma throughout the central Gangetic plain dominated by the kingdoms of Magadha and Kosala. We have no record of these dialects, but we do have a comprehensive translation of these teachings compiled by the early teachers, mostly monastics, in a language we today call **Pali**.

Pali arose as **koine** (Greek for “common, vernacular”), a mixture of vernacular dialects, including Magadhī and Kosalan. The versatility of such a potent mixture allows the expression and preservation of the early teachings in their nuances of language and subtleties of doctrine. The richness and profundity of the Pali suttas lie in its often **non-technical** use of language and terms.

2.1.3.2 Words do not define the context; rather, the context defines the words. Early Buddhism, after all, is not a word-based religion of fiats and dogmas, but an experiential journey on the path of awakening. Without truly and fully experiencing life and understanding its patterns and potential, we will not see true reality. To know and see true reality, we need to understand how the mind works and fine-tune its workings to reflect true reality. Then, we will awaken from the sleep of ignorance and dreams of craving into the bright space of the unconditioned.

2.1.3.3 Hence, **polysemy** is a common and vital feature of the textual language and teaching —where words and ideas have often multiple senses that may apply simultaneously.² Since the suttas record a wealth of the awakening experience and wisdom of the Buddha and the early saints, such a fluid use of language is able to record and preserve experiential teachings without being limited by the technicalities and temporality of language. Reading the texts today may, of course, give us the impression that the sutta words and terms may have fixed senses.

2.1.3.4 Such an approach will limit our understanding of depth of the teachings and their interconnections with other teachings. A careful look at the list of the 7 sets, comprising the 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi, pakkhiya, dhamma*) will show that many of the factors in most of the set overlap: effort (*virīya*), for example, is found in 6 of the 7 sets. While maintaining its essential meaning, each same term is used with a nuance in each of these sets.

In fact, it is obvious that all the teachings of the Buddha Dharma are somehow interrelated. Hence, it is helpful, even essential, that we should ensure we understand the context of every teaching. This is called **the rule of context**.³

¹ From Accenti Sutta (S 1.4), SD 54.2d (2.1.3) Text and context.

² On Pali polysemy, see SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2; 2.2). See also DEB: polysemy.

³ On the rule of context, see SD 53.5 (4.2.3).

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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