

# Being an Agent\*

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## 0. Introduction

This paper deals with the question of what an agent (*karṭṛ*) is in the view of the Pāṇinīyas. In connection with this question, one might be reminded of one of the most famous sūtras of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini, A1.4.54 *svatantraḥ kartā*, which defines the term *karṭṛ* ‘agent’. According to this sūtra, a *karṭṛ* is a *kāraka* which is spoken of as an independent (*svatantra*) participant in comparison with other participants in an act. It is difficult, however, to form a clear picture of what an agent is merely from this sūtra. Of course, one might be referred to the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali, where Kātyāyana and Patañjali are seen to discuss the question in greater detail. This paper, however, bases itself on the *Vākyapadīya* of Bhartṛhari, which, following the Pāṇinian grammatical tradition, brings out points of Pāṇini’s grammar. Naturally, focus will be on the *Sādhanasamuddeśa* of the *Vākyapadīya*. In this *samuddeśa* Bhartṛhari is concerned with *sādhana*, or what brings an action to accomplishment, which is just what is referred to by the term *kāraka*.

Not only will Bhartṛhari’s clarification about the concept of a *karṭṛ* be helpful in considering questions, such as those of what a creator (*sraṣṭṛ*) is and what a cognizer (*jñātr*) is, which we find discussed in so many works of classical Indian philosophers; it will also be absolutely essential for a proper understanding of his own metaphysical theory, the theory of *vivarta*. For, in Bhartṛhari’s *vivarta* theory, the concept of a *karṭṛ* plays an important role. In his view, the dynamic aspects of the phenomenal world have their basis in the time (*kāla*) power of Brahman and the time power is *svātantrya* which is the power of functioning as agent (*karṭṛśakti*).<sup>1</sup> In this respect

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<sup>1</sup>Vṛtti on VP 1.3: *kālākhyena hi svātantryeṇa sarvāḥ*

also we must say that it is important to see how Bhartṛhari understands what an agent is and to grasp the concept of a *karṭṛ* elaborated by him.

1. As Patañjali argues in his *Mahābhāṣya*, the term *svatantra* in the sūtra is a *bahuvrīhi* compound (*yasya svaṃ tantraṃ sa svatantraḥ*), whose constituent *tantra* signifies being a principal thing (*prādhānya*). It is equivalent to the term *svapradhāna* ‘one who has the self (*sva*) as a principal thing’, as in the utterance *svatantra ’sau brāhmaṇaḥ* ‘This Brahmin is *svatantra* or independent’.<sup>2</sup>

2. To begin with, let us consider the following utterance:

[1] *devadattas taṇḍulān edhaiḥ sthālyāṃ pacati*

‘Devadatta is cooking rice in a pot with firewood’.

In the situation conveyed by this utterance, the person called *devadatta* functions as agent, while the firewood (*edha*), pot (*sthālī*), and rice grains (*taṇḍula*) function respectively as instrument (*karāṇa*), locus (*adhikarāṇa*), and object (*karman*). It is interesting that in this situation as one has utterance [1], so also one has the following utterances:

[2] *sthālī pacati*

‘The pot is cooking [rice]’;

[3] *edhāḥ pacanti*

‘The firewood is cooking [rice]’.

*paratantrā janmavatyah śaktayah samāviṣṭāḥ kālaśakti-vṛttim anupatanti* / According to Bhartṛhari, by virtue of the power of functioning independently (*svātantrya*), called Time, effective things (*śakti*), which are those whose activities depend on factors other than Time and hence are causally conditioned (*janmavat*), come into play (*samāviṣṭa*); consequently, they are what follow the activities of the time power.

<sup>2</sup>MBh 1.334,17–20: *kiṃ yasya svaṃ tantraṃ sa svatantraḥ / . . . / asti prādhānye vartate / tad yathā / svatantra ’sau brāhmaṇa ity ucyate svapradhāna iti gamyate / tad yaḥ prādhānye vartate tantraśabdāḥ tasyedaṃ grahaṇam /*

The person called *devadatta* performs the acts of putting a pot on the stove, pouring into it water and food grains, setting fire wood under it, etc. Similarly, the pot performs the act of containing grains and the firewood carries out the act of burning up to the point where the grains are soft. Since the meaning of a verb is a composite of component actions, these acts are denoted by the same verb.

The person called *devadatta*, the firewood, and the pot are assigned the name *karṭṛ* by the sūtra in question.<sup>3</sup> They are said to be independent with respect to their own actions (*svavyāpāra*), although they are respectively an agent, an instrument, and a locus, relative to the principal action of cooking. It may be said in this connection that Devadatta is called a principal agent (*pradhānakarṭṛ*) and others subordinate agents.

However, a question arises: Then what differentiates Devadatta from other *kāraḥ*? Patañjali gives the following answer:

*MBh* I.326.10: *yat sarveṣu sādhanēṣu saṁnihiteṣu kartā pravartayitā bhavati/*  
“Because when all *sādhanas* [i.e., *kāraḥ*] are present, it is the agent who sets them into play.”

According to Patañjali, the principal agent is that *kāraḥ* which sets others into play. Naturally this implies that the subordinate agents are those *kāraḥ* which are set into play by the principal agent.

3. In view of this Bhāṣya Bhartṛhari states the following *kārikās*:

*VP3.7.101: prāg anyataḥ śaktilābhān nyagbhāvāpādanād api / tadadhīnapravṛttivāt pravṛttānām nivartanāt //*

*VP3.7.102: adṛṣṭatvāt pratinidheḥ praviveke ca darśanāt / ārād apy upakāritve svātantryaṁ kartur ucyate //*

“Even if a [principal agent] helps from a distance a main act to be brought to accomplishment, the [principal] agent is said to be inde-

<sup>3</sup>*Vts.* 8–10 on A1.4.23: *adhiśrayaṇodakāsecanatanūlavāpanaidhopakaraṇakriyāḥ pradhānasya kartuḥ pākāḥ // droṇaṁ pacaty ādhakaṁ pacatīti saṁbhavanakriyā dhāraṇakriyā cādhikaraṇasya pākāḥ // edhāḥ pakṣyantiyā viklitter jvaliṣyantīti jvalanakriyā karaṇasya pākāḥ //*

pendent or a principal factor, for the following reasons:

- (1) because he acquires his power before the operation of the other *kāraḥ* and from some other source (*prāg anyataḥ śaktilābhāt*);
- (2) because he keeps the others subordinate to himself (*nyagbhāvāpādanāt*);
- (3) because the others start off their activities depending on him (*tadadhīnapravṛttivāt*);
- (4) because he holds the others back from continuing their activities (*pravṛttānām nivartanāt*);
- (5) because no substitute for him is seen (*adṛṣṭatvāt pratinidheḥ*);
- (6) because he is seen to be present even when the others are not (*praviveke darśanāt*).”

Before moving on to the main task, it is desirable to explain the point that the principal agent helps from a distance a main act to be brought to accomplishment. The key to this point is that by A1.4.42 *sādhakatamaṁ karaṇam* Pāṇini assigns the name *karaṇa* ‘instrument’ to that *kāraḥ* which most serves to bring about an act. In the situation conveyed by [1], the firewood, which functions as instrument, is considered to be that *kāraḥ* which most serves to bring the main act of cooking to accomplishment. Devadatta, on the other hand, has to be said to help in the accomplishment of the act of cooking from a distance in comparison with the firewood. Thus, what Bhartṛhari has in mind in making the above-mentioned point is that, in comparison with an instrument, an agent is said to help the main act to be brought to accomplishment, from a distance.<sup>4</sup>

Now let us consider the characteristics of the main agent.

### 3.1. *prāg anyataḥ śaktilābhāt*

First, to be an agent is to be one who acquires a power to bring an action to accomplishment, from what is different from other *kāraḥ* set into play by him, before the other *kāraḥ* operate.

This will be explained as follows. Devadatta who desires rice gruel (*odana*) sets into play the

<sup>4</sup>According to Bhartṛhari, a thing is spoken of as instrument when its own activity is viewed as immediately preceding the accomplishment of an action.

*VP* 3.7.90: *kriyāyāḥ pariṇipattir yadvyāpārād anantaram / vivakṣyate yadā tatra karaṇatvaṁ tadā smṛtam //*

firewood and others which serve to bring to accomplishment the act of cooking that leads to the softening of the rice grains, namely the rice gruel. He first desires the rice gruel and then obtains access to the firewood and others and sets them into play.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, it is proper to say that Devadatta, who has obtained access to the other *kāra*kas, can bring the act of cooking to accomplishment by means of setting them into play. We have to note that to acquire the power of bringing the act of cooking to accomplishment (*śakti*lābha) is to reach the state of being capable of exercising such a power.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, it is because he desires the rice gruel that Devadatta obtains access to the other *kāra*kas. The acquisition of the power, therefore, must be said to be from some source other than the other *kāra*kas (*anyataḥ*). In addition, it is unquestionable that such acquisition takes place before those other *kāra*kas operate (*prāk*). For, unless they are set into play by Devadatta who has the power of bringing the act in question to accomplishment, they cannot operate.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2. *nyagbhāvāpādanāt*

Secondly, to be an agent is to be one to whom other *kāra*kas are subordinate.

All *kāra*kas are said to be independent with respect to their own actions. The firewood functions independently with respect to its own action of burning up. It is plain that the functioning of the firewood is brought about by Devadatta who brings it into use as the instrument of the act of cooking (*karṭṛviniyoga*). When it is in dependence on Devadatta that the firewood can function independently with respect to its own act, the firewood is properly described as being subordinate to the principal agent Devadatta.

### 3.3. *tadadhīnapravṛtītvāt*

Thirdly, to be an agent is to be one, in dependence on whom other *kāra*kas start off their activities. To put it in a clearer way, to be an agent is

<sup>5</sup>Prakāśa on VP3.7.101: *phalakāmo hi kartā karaṇādīny upārjayate /*

<sup>6</sup>It is interesting to note that Bhartṛhari uses the term *vṛtīlābha* ‘the acquisition of a function’ in the sense of the activation of a function. See *Vṛtī* on VP1.131-132.

<sup>7</sup>Prakāśa on VP3.7.101: *karaṇādīnām tu karṭṛviniyogād eva svavyāpāre svātantryam, na tv anyataḥ /*

to be one who sets other *kāra*kas into play (*pravartaka*).

This characterization has already been given by Patañjali. The point is clear. The firewood, set into play by Devadatta, performs its own activity, while Devadatta performs his own activities of his own accord when he wishes to obtain the fruit of the act of cooking. We must say that the activity of the firewood depends on Devadatta, for, set into play by Devadatta, it performs its own activity.

### 3.4. *pravṛttānām nivartanāt*

Fourthly, to be an agent is to be one who stops other *kāra*kas from continuing to function (*nivartanā*).

When Devadatta is cooking rice grains, he will hold the firewood back from continuing to burn up for fear that the firewood should heat the pot to the point where all the water evaporates and the grains burn dry—to say nothing of Devadatta’s stopping to function of his own accord when he has reaped the fruit of the action.

### 3.5. *adr̥ṣṭavāt pratinidheḥ*

Fifthly, to be an agent is to be one for whom another agent is not seen to be substituted.

We have the Vedic injunction *vṛhibhir yajeta* ‘He shall sacrifice with rice grains’. When the rice grains are not available, wild rice grains (*nīvāra*) can be substituted for them.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, when the firewood is not available, Devadatta can substitute some other inflammable thing for it to bring the act of cooking to accomplishment. When Caitra is cooking rice grains, however, it cannot be said that he is substituted for Devadatta. Whoever desires the fruit of an action and is capable of bringing the action to accomplishment is qualified to perform the action insofar as not prohibited from performing it.<sup>9</sup> If Devadatta

<sup>8</sup>Bhartṛhari notes that when a subsidiary thing necessary for a ritual act, obligatory or optional, is not available, the substitution for it has to be made so that the ritual act should be brought to completion. VP2.70: *asamnidhau pratinidhir mā bhūn nityasya karmaṇaḥ / kāmyasya vā pravṛttasya lopa ity upapadyate //*

<sup>9</sup>*Vṛtī* on VP2.65: *saty apy arthitve dṛṣṭe ’pi sāmārihye śāstreṇāparyudastasyādhikāro yuktaḥ / Prakāśa on VP3.7.102: kartrantaram hi kriyām nirvartayāt pratinihitam nocyate / tasyāpy arthinaḥ samarthasyāparyudastasyādhikārāt /*

who desires the fruit of the action cannot engage himself in the act of cooking for some reason, it follows that there is no agent who sets other *kāra*kas into play, so that the action itself is not brought to accomplishment.<sup>10</sup> For other *kāra*kas substitution should be made by an agent in order to bring to accomplishment the act intended by him.

### 3.6. *praviveke darśanāt*

Sixthly, to be an agent is to be one who is seen to operate alone in the absence of other *kāra*kas.

This characterization of an agent is applicable to an agent of the act signified by an objectless verb. Consider the utterance *devadatto 'sti* 'Devadatta is'. It is observed that Devadatta is present even when the firewood and others are not present. One might ask where he is. To be sure, a locus is essential for the act of being.<sup>11</sup> But a certain place is said to be the locus with respect to the act of being, when the place serves as the locus of an agent of the act of being. The agent is thus said to be directly related to the act of being in comparison with the locus.<sup>12</sup> What is more, one understands from the finite verb *asti* that the act of being is inseparably connected with the agent. This shows that every act requires an agent or that there is no act which is devoid of an agent.<sup>13</sup> If every act requires an agent and if not every act is followed by other *kāra*kas, then it is established that an agent is a principal factor in the accomplishment of an act.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup>*Prakāśa* on VP3.7.102: *asambhave ca pravartayituru evābhāvaḥ /*

<sup>11</sup>Note that Pāṇinīyas hold that the meaning of the verb *astī* 'be' is an action (*kriyā*). See Ogawa [2005: Section 6].

<sup>12</sup>Helārāja calls the agent in this case 'one who is capable of directly bringing the act to accomplishment' (*sākṣātsamartha*). *Prakāśa* on VP3.7.102: *sākṣātsamarthasya kvacid anyānapekṣanāt praviveke ca darśanam . . . /*

<sup>13</sup>*Prakāśa* on VP3.7.102: *yady apy atrādhikaraṇādayaḥ sambhavanti tathāpi nāntarīyāḥ te śabdavyāpārād apratīyamānāḥ / tataś cākartṛkāyāḥ kriyāyā abhāvāt sambhūyakāribhyo 'pi viśiṣyate kartā /*

<sup>14</sup>According to Kaiyaṭa, it is determined that an agent is a principal factor in comparison with other *kāra*kas, when the following both hold: (1) When other *kāra*kas are absent, an agent alone is seen to occur; (2) When an agent is absent, other *kāra*kas are not seen to occur. *Pradīpa* on MBh ad A1.4.23 (II.384): *karaṇādyabhāve 'py āste śete ityādau kevalasya kartur darśanāt kartṛrahitānām karaṇādīnām adarśanāt prādhānyam kartuḥ /*

4. So far we have seen how the principal agent, Devadatta, in utterance [1] is characterized. It is also interesting to see how he is characterized if he is prompted to perform the act of cooking by somebody else. Consider the following utterance:

[4] *pācayaty odanam devadattena yajñadattaḥ*  
'Yajñadatta causes Devadatta to cook rice gruel'.

Here Devadatta is assigned the name *karṭṛ* by A1.4.54, so that the third triplet ending is used after the nominal base *devadatta*. Now a difficulty arises. How can the prompted agent be said to be an agent, since being prompted he lacks independence in undertaking an action? This is comparable to the case where in utterance [1] the firewood and others, being set into play by Devadatta, lacks independence in relation to the main act of cooking. In utterance [4] Devadatta becomes a subordinate agent. He is called *prayojyakarṭṛ* 'an agent who is prompted to do something', while Yajñadatta is called *prayojakakarṭṛ* 'an agent who prompts someone else to do something'.

In connection with the question mentioned above, we have to note the following *kārikā*s of the *Vākyapadīya*, where Bhartṛhari establishes that the agent who is prompted by another is not different from the other independent agents about whom there is no doubt.

VP3.7.122: *sambhāvanāt kriyāsiddhau karṭṛtvena samāśritaḥ /*

*kriyāyām ātmasādhyāyām sādhanānām prayojakāḥ //*

VP3.7.123: *prayogamātre nyagbhāvaḥ svātantryād eva niśritaḥ /*

*aviśiṣṭo bhavaty anyaiḥ svatantrair muktasamśayaiḥ //*

"An agent who is prompted by someone else is not distinguished from other unquestionably independent agents for the following reasons:

(1) because the agent who is prompted is conceived in a prompter's imagination to be an agent who contributes to the accomplishment of an action (*sambhāvanāt kriyāsiddhau karṭṛtvena samāśritaḥ*);

(2) because the agent who is prompted sets *sādhanas* into play for the accomplishment of

the action which he has to bring to accomplishment (*kriyāyām ātmasādhyāyām sādhanānām prayojakaḥ*);

(3) because he becomes subordinate to the prompter with respect simply to the act of prompting (*prayoga*) which is performed by the prompter, precisely because he is independent with respect to the act to be performed by himself (*prayogamātre nyagbhāvaṃ svātantryād eva niśritaḥ*).”

Let us consider briefly these three reasons.

**4.1. *saṃbhāvanāt kriyāsiddhau karṭṛtvena samāśritaḥ***

In the situation expressed by utterance [4], Devadatta has been chosen as the agent for his capacity to accomplish the action. Suppose that Devadatta is currently not engaged in cooking rice grains. Yajñadatta, who assumes that Devadatta is capable of bringing the act of cooking to accomplishment, incites the latter to perform the act. Therefore, Devadatta who is prompted to do the cooking is one who has been determined to have the power to bring the act to accomplishment and who is assumed to bring the act to accomplishment. Thus, in Yajñadatta’s imagination (*sambhāvana*), Devadatta is conceived to be capable of bringing the act of cooking to accomplishment. We must recall that in the situation conveyed by [1], it is taken for granted that Devadatta’s accomplishment of the act of cooking presupposes his power to perform that act.

**4.2. *kriyāyām ātmasādhyāyām sādhanānām prayojakaḥ***

In the given situation, Devadatta engages the other sādhanas to do the action which they can accomplish.

As said above, in utterance [1] Devadatta is said to be one who sets the firewood and others into play. In the present utterance also he must be characterized in the same manner. A simple determination of him as being capable of performing the act of cooking will not do. For, if Devadatta, even if he has the power to do the act, is indifferent and inactive, Yajñadatta cannot prompt Devadatta to perform it. Consequently, in the present case Devadatta must be one who sets into play things necessary for him to bring the act of cooking to accomplishment. Devadatta in

the situation conveyed by [4], who sets the things into play, thus meets the condition for being an agent of the act of cooking he himself has to perform.

**4.3. *prayogamātre nyagbhāvaṃ svātantryād eva niśritaḥ***

It is plain, furthermore, that in the situation conveyed by [4] Devadatta is prompted by Yajñadatta and so becomes subordinate to the latter just because of his independence with respect to his own activities.

In the present situation, there is no contradiction between Devadatta’s being prompted and his being independent. For, if Devadatta who is prompted to cook is not independent with respect to his own activities as mentioned earlier, he cannot set into play *kāraḥ* for the accomplishment of the act of cooking, so that the act of cooking itself is not brought to accomplishment. Here also we must recall that Devadatta in the situation conveyed by utterance [1], being a principal agent, is characterized as one who sets other *kāraḥ* into use.

**4.4.** What all this shows is clear. Devadatta, even in the situation expressed by utterance [4], does not lose the status of being a principal agent with respect to the act of cooking. It is to be noted that Yajñadatta there is assigned the name *hetu* as well as the name *karṭṛ* by A1.4.55 *tatprayojako hetuḥ*, according to which Yajñadatta is to be considered as a *kāra* which plays the role of causing an independent one, Devadatta, to participate in the act of cooking.

**5.** It has been said that in the situation conveyed by [4] Devadatta is described as being subordinate to Yajñadatta who prompts the former to carry out the act of cooking. Bhartṛhari goes on to present a different idea that even in the given situation there is no subordination of Devadatta to Yajñadatta.

VP3.7.124: *nimittebhyaḥ pravartante sarva eva svabhūtaye / abhiprāyānurodho 'pi svārthasyaiva prasiddhaye //*

“Everyone performs an act for their own benefit when caused to perform the act. Following the wishes of another is also to fulfil one’s own purpose.”

This kārīkā is stated on the basis of the following passages of the *Mahābhāṣya*:

*MBh* II.35.25–36.1 (on A3.1.26): *neha kaścit paro 'nugrahītavya iti pravartate / sarva ime svabhūtyarthaṃ pravartante /*

“In this world nobody takes action with the idea that somebody else should be benefited. [On the contrary] here everybody takes action for their own benefit.”

*Mbh* II.36.8–9 (on A3.1.26): *yadi tarhi sarva ime svabhūtyarthaṃ pravartante kaḥ prayojyārthaḥ / yad abhiprāyeṣu sajjante /*

“[Question] Then if here everybody takes action for their own benefit, for what purpose are they prompted to take action? [Answer] For the purpose of meeting a prompter’s wishes.”<sup>15</sup>

The point made by Pāṇinīyas is this. Everyone takes action for their own benefit. They perform an act with the desire of gaining benefits from performing the act. In this respect they have no dependence on others in the accomplishment of the act. In the situation conveyed by [4], Devadatta follows Yajñadatta’s wish to have the act of cooking brought to accomplishment by the former. But Devadatta does so precisely because he thinks that following Yajñadatta’s wish also results in conferring a benefit on himself.

Thus it is clear that in Pāṇinīyas’ view the desire to reap some benefit (*svārthalipsā*) plays an important role in taking action.<sup>16</sup> If we take this view into consideration, we may, therefore, reasonably say that to be an agent is to be one who takes action for one’s own benefit.

6. I have been so far concerned solely with an agent who is an animate being. One might argue that no inanimate thing can have such a desire with which it can become an agent. But as a matter of fact, it cannot be denied that an inanimate thing can become an agent as in utterances [2] and [3]. I will not elaborate on this point. Suffice it here only refer to following kārīkā:

VP3.7.103: *dharmair abhyudītaiḥ śabde niyamo na tu vastuni /*

<sup>15</sup>Uddyota on *MBh* ad A3.1.26 (III.95–96): *prakābhīprāyeṣv āsajjante / tadabhiprāyaṃ jñātvā taṃ nivartayanti /*

<sup>16</sup>*Prakāśa* on VP3.7.124: *svārthalipsayā sarvaḥ pravartamānaḥ parādhīnatāṃ pravṛtttau nāsādayati /*

*kartṛdharmavivakṣāyām śabdāt kartā pratīyate //*

“With reference to a thing as it is spoken of and not to a thing as it is, it is determined on the basis of the properties mentioned above [in VP3.7.101–2] whether it is an agent. When a speaker wishes to convey the properties of an agent with reference to a certain thing, the thing is understood to be an agent from the words.”

It is obvious that when a speaker intends to convey a certain thing as having the six characteristics described in the preceding kārīkā, VP3.7.101–102, the property of acquiring the power and so on,<sup>17</sup> the thing becomes an agent.

## 7. Conclusion

From what has been said above, it should be concluded that, as Patañjali has an insight into it, being an agent consists in being one who sets other kārakas into play. The agent’s setting them into play is preceded by his acquiring the power to perform his own activities which lead to the accomplishment of the main act. The acquisition of such a power is also preceded by his wish to enjoy the fruits of the act or to reap benefit from the act. Thus all the characteristics of an agent, described in 3.1–3.6, except that described in 3.3, are involved in his feature that he sets other kārakas into play (*pravartaka*, *prayojaka*).

We have to recall in this connection that Patañjali offers an analysis of the process involved in any action in six stages: *saṃpaśyatikriyā* ‘mentally conceiving something’ → *prārthayatikriyā* ‘wishing for it’ → *adhyavasyatikriyā* ‘deciding on a course of action’ → *ārambha* ‘undertaking the action’ → *nirvṛtti* ‘bringing it to completion’ → *phalāvapti* ‘obtaining the fruit of the action’.<sup>18</sup> There is no question that within the framework of this action process Pāṇinīyas try to define what an agent is.

## Abbreviations and References

A: Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*.

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<sup>17</sup>See § 3.

<sup>18</sup>See *MBh* I.330.23–331.1 and Joshi/Roodbergen [1975: 122–124].

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