This article explores the way in which Madhva (1238–1317), the founder of the Dvaita Vedānta system of Hindu thought, reformulates the traditional exegetic practice of nirukta or “word derivation” to validate his pluralistic, hierarchical, and Vaiśnava reading of the Rgvedic hymns. Madhva’s Rgблhάśya (RB) is conspicuous for its heavy reliance on and unique deployment of this exegetical tactic to validate several key features of his distinctive theology. These features include his belief in Viśṇu’s unique possession of all perfect attributes (gunaṇiparipuṇṇaṇa) and His related conveyability by all Vedic words (sarvaśabdācacyatva). Such an understanding of Vedic language invokes the basic nirukta presupposition that words are eternally affiliated with the meanings they convey. But it is also based on Madhva’s access to a lexicon entitled Vyāsa’s Nirukti with which his critics and perhaps even his commentators seem to be unfamiliar. While the precise status of this text is the subject of ongoing debate, Madhva’s possession of special insight into the sacred canon is established in part by his unique claim to be an avatāra of the wind god Vāyu and a direct disciple of Viśṇu Himself in the form of Vyāsa. 

Thus, Madhva’s use of nirukta invokes his personal charisma to challenge not only conventional understandings of the hymns but traditional exegetic norms. Madhva’s provision of an alternative tradition of nirukta provoked sectarian debate throughout the Vijayanagara period over the extent to which one could innovate in established practices of reading the Veda. Articulating the Veda’s precise authority was a key feature of Brahmin debates during this period and reflects both the empire’s concern with promoting a shared religious ideology and the competition among rival Brahman sects for imperial patronage that this concern elicited. By looking at how two of Madhva’s most important commentators (the 14th-century Jayatīrtha and the 17th-century Rāgahendra) sought to defend his niruktis, this article will explore how notions of normative nirukta were articulated in response to Madhva’s deviations. At the same time, however, examining Madhva’s commentators’ defense of his niruktis also demonstrates the extent to which Madhva actually adhered to selected exegetic norms. This reveals that discomfort with Madhva’s particular methods for deriving

1 Vyāsa’s Nirukti is one of several “unknown sources” cited in Madhva’s commentaries whose exact status continues to be debated. Some scholars (e.g. Rao, Sharma, Siouve) maintain that these texts are part of a now lost Pañcarātra tradition that Madhva is attempting to preserve. This may be true for many of these citations. However, in addition to claiming to be both an avatāra of Vāyu and Viśṇu-as-Vyāsa’s student, Madhva states in several places (e.g., VTN 42, RB 162) that the canon has suffered loss during transmission and that only Viśṇu can reveal it in its entirety. Thus, it is possible that Madhva intends texts like Vyāsa’s Nirukti to be viewed as part of an ongoing and corrective revelation, a notion that is compatible with many Vaiśnava traditions (Halbfass, 1991: 4).
words stemmed, in part, from a more general ambivalence towards this exegetical tactic whose inherent open-endedness threatened to undermine the fixity of the canon’s very substance: its language.

KEY WORDS: sarvaśabdavācyatva, guṇaparipūrṇatva, yogārtha, rūḍhi, vidvārūḍhi, ajñarūḍhi, avāntaratātparya, mahātātparya

INTRODUCTION

By arguing that all words of the Vedic mantras can be derived to convey a property of the infinitely qualified Viṣṇu, Madhva uses nirukta to place a sectarian overlay on the hymns, which are conventionally understood to praise a plethora of divine beings for their distinctive cosmic functions. Furthermore, by justifying this interpretation via a source that some of his commentators seem to defend against charges of invalidity, Madhva appears to depart radically from traditional readings of the mantras. Yet, on closer examination, Madhva’s niruktis also offer a subtle set of theories about the relationship between Vedic language and the ultimate reality of Brahman, whom Madhva identifies with Viṣṇu. These theories not only nuance critical features of Madhva’s thought but also position that thought more precisely vis-à-vis other exegetic traditions.

By retaining the hymns’ conventional meanings as praising a variety of innately qualified deities as an avāntaratātparya or “subordinate purport,” Madhva at once buttresses his realistic pluralism and places his particular interpretation on a continuum with others. Indeed, by claiming that the hymns convey simultaneously this subordinate purport and the mahātātparya or “great purport” of Viṣṇu’s supremacy, Madhva argues for the layered multivalence of Vedic language. On the one hand, such a view of the Veda’s epistemological functioning helps to embed Madhva’s distinctive brand of dualism in

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2 I address this issue in greater detail below.

3 Sarma (2003) consistently and correctly resists applying the labels “dualism” or “Dvaita” to Madhva’s thought because these terms are not used by the system itself and obscure its emphasis on plurality and realism. Indeed, Madhva believed that the Vedas taught the truth of pañcabhedā or the five-fold difference between 1. souls and Brahman, 2. matter and Brahman, 3. souls and matter, 4. one individual soul and another, 5. one form of matter and another. However, as Zydenbos (2001) indicates, the term “dualism” or “dvaita” still has some efficacy in conveying Madhva’s basic division of reality into that which is independent (svatantra), (i.e., Brahman) and that which is dependent (paratantra) on Brahman for its existence, (i.e., souls and matter). It was for this reason that the system was labeled Dvaita by others, a label that distinguishes it from the monist and quasi-monist thought of Madhva’s two major Vedāntin predecessors, Śankara and Rāmānuja.