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► **To cite this version:**

Emilie Aussant. Elisa Freschi and Tiziana Pontillo "Rule-extension strategies in Ancient India: ritual, exegetical and linguistic considerations on the tantra-and prasaṅga-principles". *Journal of South Asian Languages and Linguistics*, 2017. halshs-02004017

HAL Id: halshs-02004017

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02004017v1>

Submitted on 1 Feb 2019

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Book Review

Elisa Freschi and Tiziana Pontillo. *Rule-extension strategies in Ancient India: ritual, exegetical and linguistic considerations on the tantra- and prasaṅga-principles*. Frankfurt am Main etc.: Peter Lang, 2013, xii, 177 pp., ISBN 978-365-30304-8-8.

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The book under review is the result of a joint work discussed and shared by both authors, a preliminary short version of which appeared as Freschi & Pontillo 2012.

The book includes a table of contents, acknowledgements (xi), a general introduction (1-5), three sections (a. *tantra*, 7-64, b. *prasaṅga*, 65-129, c. Śābara and Bhartṛhari and thereafter, 131-155), conclusions (157-160), a list of abbreviations (161-162), a bibliography (163-174) and an index (175-177).

The general framework forming the focus of the book is the set of technical devices, or metarules, which govern Indian *śāstras*, i.e. texts dealing with erudite or technical knowledge, being of recognized authority or commenting on an authoritative text. Most of these śāstric texts were composed by members of the Brahmanical priestly and intellectual elite, and represent didactic textbooks consisting of collections of aphorisms (*sūtra*). They regulate all kinds of human practices and provide models and justifications for these practices. Whereas such cultural codes exist in every society, the ancient Indian culture is characterized by the fact that secular life as a whole was encoded in those “cultural grammars”, as Sheldon Pollock (1989: 310) calls them, at a relatively early date (around the beginning of the Christian era). The number of these texts, the wide range of disciplines they cover and the form they have taken represent a hallmark of the ancient Indian culture.

One characteristic feature of these śāstric texts is that they resort, in a common manner, to technical devices or metarules (often not explicitly stated) which regulate the formulation of the *sūtras*, so as to make them both economic and systematic. Some of these technical devices are related to the way of representing succinctly both the general instruction and the specific rules or, to put it differently, the archetype and its modifications. One of the methods developed by ancient Indian scholars consists of extending a unit from the place it really occupies (i.e. within a general instruction) to specific rules—without undue over-extensions.

Freschi and Pontillo’s book aims at providing a detailed study of two patterns of rule-extension, *tantra* and *prasaṅga*, which account for the actual functioning or effect of a unit that is absent. Their study focuses on three textual traditions of ancient India, Kalpasūtra (ritual), Mīmāṃsā (exegesis) and Vyākaraṇa (grammar). Unsurprisingly, *tantra* as well as *prasaṅga* express various meanings in the disciplines under study in the book, and the reader is grateful to the authors for the accurate reconstruction of the semantic development they propose for both terms. Regarding *tantra*, Freschi and Pontillo note that two meanings of this term seem to be more frequent than the others: (i) “basic procedure or structure” and (ii) “single performance of an element which remains valid, or which applies to all elements, without being repeated”. The authors determine the general meaning of *prasaṅga* as “what

happens automatically, unless one blocks it” and propose to translate the term by “involvement”. The book ends with a section devoted to the use of both terms made by the exegete Śabara (5th century?) and the grammarian Bhartṛhari (5th century): in their works, *tantra* and *prasaṅga* clearly constitute a terminological pair referring to two distinct mechanisms of rule-extension.

Freschi and Pontillo’s book will be of great interest for those studying metalinguistic terminology and devices, as well as for those studying the semantic development of terms in ancient sources.

References

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