Rhesis International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature

Speaking the Forbidden: *mlecchavāc* in *Mahābhārata* 1.135

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Abstract

In Indian xenology, the term *mleccha* refers to individuals who fall outside the social and linguistic norms of the *Āryas*. Scholars have examined its diverse applications, including its role in toponymy, religious taboos, and ethnic classifications. From a Brahmanical perspective, *mleccha* languages are often portrayed as distorted versions of Sanskrit, reinforcing ideologies of linguistic and social segregation – most notably through the prohibition against teaching Sanskrit to non-Āryas. In the *Mahābhārata*, Vidura secretly employs *mleccha* language to warn Yudhiṣṭhira of an assassination plot against the Pāṇḍavas. While this episode appears to contradict established linguistic norms, previous analyses have focused primarily on its narrative function rather than its normative implications. This paper seeks to expand the discourse on the *Mahābhārata*'s normative framework by reassessing the role of *mlecchas* in cultural adaptation and assimilation. Through a reexamination of Vidura's actions, it investigates whether this moment constitutes a violation of prescribed norms or can be justified within the conceptual flexibility of *āpaddharma*, which permits transgressions under conditions of existential threat.

Key Words – *Mahābhārata*; *mleccha*; *dharma*; diversity; norms

1. Introduction

Scholars consider the *Mahābhārata* a cornerstone of Brahmanism, deeply embedded in the socio-religious dynamics of ancient India, with its narrative often regarded as a vehicle for Brahmanical "propaganda", promoting Brahmin supremacy while delegitimising non-Brahmanical worldviews[1]. Within this framework, the epic reflects a cultural milieu in which the Sanskrit language was likely associated with higher social standing and religious legitimacy. For instance, the *ārya*/*mleccha*[2] opposition can be read as indicative of broader processes of Sanskritisation, through which Brahmanical elites asserted cultural and ritual hegemony[3]. Thapar (1971: 408-412, 435-436) has illustrated how distinctions between Indo-Āryans, who spoke Sanskrit, and indigenous populations were shaped by linguistic, cultural, and ethnic markers. The earliest differentiation was based on speech, as Indo-Āryans identified their own language as *ārya-vāc* while categorising non-Sanskrit speakers as *mleccha*. Over time, this linguistic divide reinforced social stratification, with Sanskrit functioning not only as a medium of ritual discourse but as a tool for maintaining hierarchical control. Political status, ritual purity, and territorial boundaries all contributed to the exclusion of *mleccha* populations, further legitimising Brahmanical authority. In this sense, mastery of Sanskrit and adherence to Vedic rites marked cultural integration, while their absence denoted individuals as *mlecchas*–barbaric and outside the bounds of Brahmanical order[4]. This boundary, both cultural and linguistic, defined who belonged within the Brahmanical fold and who remained an outsider[5].

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[1] In this context I employ the term "propaganda" in its original sense of promoting religious ideas, aligning with Hopkins' (1901: 398) observation that «[the *Mahābhārata*] did not become a specially religious propaganda of Krishnaism [...] till the first century B.C.». Pontillo (2016: 205, 231) similarly applies "propaganda" to describe Brahmanic reform during the transition from the *vrātya* system, stating that «the poem seems to be a literary version of Śrauta-Reform propaganda» (see also af Edholm 2017: 8). Szczurek (2023: 358) further observes that book 10 contrasts with the overt Brahminisation found in other books, suggesting the epic conveys «so-called Pāṇḍavas' propaganda». Ultimately, the *Mahābhārata* promotes Brahmanic teachings while marginalising non-Brahmanical ideologies, asserting Brahmin supremacy, and exploring complex themes, such as sacrificial violence, in relation to purity and devotion (see also Biardeau 1981: 94-95; Reich 2001: 163-165; Bronkhorst 2016; Fitzgerald 2023: 491-493).

[2] A technical disclaimer regarding the use of *mleccha-* in writing: I will visually distinguish the term whenever it is intended in its metalinguistic sense. However, this distinction will not apply when *mleccha* is used as an adjective.

[3] Srinivas (1952) defines Sankritisation as the adoption of upper-caste practices by lower castes to achieve "social mobility" (see Roy 2021: 316).

[4] Deshpande (1993: 64-65) illustrates how Sanskrit was instrumental in reinforcing hierarchical control, with *śiṣṭa* speakers dictating linguistic and ritual norms. The exclusion of *mlecchas* was legitimised through territorial and linguistic boundaries, as mastery of Sanskrit signified cultural integration, while its absence marked individuals as outsiders to Brahmanical order. The synchronic and diachronic preservation of Sanskrit within elite circles further strengthened its role in sustaining socio-religious stratification.

[5] The evolution of the concept is indicative of broader trends in cultural interaction and identity formation in the ancient world. For instance, there are notable parallels with the Greek βάρβαρος, including the potential etymology as an onomatopoeia (Dwivedi 2018: 1). In ancient Greek thought, «the concept of barbarism serves in the hands of the accusers as a rhetorical tool for marginalisation and othering of an unwanted and potentially destabilising religious group» (Antonova 2019: 211). Initially employed to denote speakers of non-Greek languages, the term βάρβαροι came to imply that such individuals lacked the capacity for rational thought, thus contributing to the formation of early European perceptions of other cultures. This multifaceted understanding of barbarism has persisted throughout history, exerting a significant influence on "colonial encounters" and shaping Western perceptions of other cultures (see for instance Davies et al. 1993: 66).

By taking into account the theoretical background of Indian xenology[6], the present paper focuses on the normative implications of the occurrence of the term *mleccha-* in MBh 1.135. In this episode, Yudhiṣṭhira, King Dharma, seemingly violates the normative injunction against speaking a *mleccha* language (MBh 1.135.6b *mlecchavāc-*), that is, a non-Āryan language. However, as I will explain, this transgression appears to occur under exceptional circumstances, providing a basis for the applicability of the concept of *āpaddharma* – one that plays a crucial role in classical Indian legal and ethical thought[7]. *Āpaddharma* refers to the law of exception or crisis, a codified framework that legitimises the temporary suspension of normative duties during times of emergency (*āpad-*). Far from being peripheral, *āpaddharma* is a core feature of Dharmaśāstra literature, allowing the moral and legal order to maintain its internal coherence under duress. The legitimacy (Bowles 2007: 81) to enact such exceptions lies with figures endowed with moral or political authority – such as sages, Brahmins, or dharmic kings – whose discernment ensures that the flexibility of the law does not collapse into arbitrariness (Chousalkar 2005: 126). In this sense, *āpaddharma* delineates the outer bounds of lawful exception, revealing how norm transgression can serve to reinforce rather than destabilise the overarching moral structure. In this sense, *Mahābhārata* 1.135 illustrates how the use of a proscribed language by exemplary figures such as Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira constitutes a temporary suspension of socio-linguistic taboos in response to a life-threatening political crisis. The survival of the *dharmarāja* is contingent on this breach – an exceptional measure that ultimately upholds the continuity of Dharma.

The following sections explore these issues in detail. I will analyse the etymology and historical usage of *mleccha-*, situating it within ancient Indian discourses of linguistic impurity and non-Āryan identity (Section 1.1). Then, I will consider how orthodox Brahmanism[8] deployed the category of *mleccha-* to justify the marginalisation of those excluded from the *varṇa* system (Section 1.2). Building on this foundation, I will discuss the episode in MBh 1.135, examining how Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira, despite their moral exemplariness, transgress normative *ārya* boundaries by employing a *mleccha* language (Section 2). This raises critical questions regarding the elasticity of moral and legal norms in times of political instability. Finally, I will explore the broader normative implications of this transgression, including the ambiguity of the injunction, the accountability of the transgressors, and the role of political authority in mediating both the enforcement and suspension of norms (Section 2.1).

[6] Halbfass (1988: 172, fn. 1) employs the concept of "xenology" to examine Indian cultural perception and identity «as a term for attitudes towards, and conceptualisations of, foreigners».

[7] Although I acknowledge the extensive body of scholarship on the concept of *āpaddharma*, this paper primarily relies on recent studies that examine the concept from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. Notable contributions include Chousalkar (2005), Bowles (2007, 2018) – whose work represents the most comprehensive and in-depth analysis of this topic within the Brahmanical legal tradition – Francavilla (2021), and Moitra (2021), who argues that *āpaddharma* serves as a legitimisation of *dharma*.

[8] An anonymous reviewer has rightly pointed out the diversity of Brahmanical traditions and the potential value of non-Brahmanical perspectives. However, in this paper, I am concerned with analysing the *Mahābhārata* episode from the normative standpoint of Brahmanical legal and ritual traditions, specifically those associated with Vedic Brahmanism. In this context, with the term 'orthodox' I refer to the Veda-based practices and theological frameworks that grounded Brahmanical norms, as outlined by Bronkhorst (2007, 2011), without assuming the pan-Indian dominance of these traditions.

Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology, and Literature (ISSN 2037-4569)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13125/rhesis/6342
Special Issue *Dall'Anomia alla Norma*: 210-230, 2025

1.1. *Mleccha* in the historical context of Indian xenology

The Sanskrit term *mleccha-* is a masculine noun denoting a 'foreigner', 'barbarian', 'non-Āryan' or member of an 'outcaste race', carrying connotations of impurity, while also referring to individuals unable to speak Sanskrit and or follow prevailing social customs associated with Brahmanical traditions. Concerning its etymology, Pisani (1939: 57) noted similarities between *mleccha-* and the Pāli *milakkha-* suggesting a Proto-Indo-European origin for the former, distinct from the latter. However, Parasher (1984: 98), Parpola (1975: 216-220) and Houben (2018: 8) have argued in favour of a Dravidian origin. Furthermore, the term's presence in Middle Indian variants is highlighted by Halbfass (1988: 176), who also observes its use to mark exclusion based on religious and taboo differences, representing outsiders as violators of fundamental norms. Such individuals are devalued, embodying 'foreignness' and 'otherness'. From a diachronic perspective, the term *mleccha-* has acquired negative connotations, reinforced social boundaries and preserved Brahmanic cultural and religious purity as a narrative construct[9]. Indeed, the purity/impurity distinction was often used to categorise individuals, particularly those who had "fallen" from their social status, rather than fixed, objective traits (Olivelle 2011: 24). In this context, the use of *mleccha-* to signify linguistic and social impurity is not merely an expression of inherent differences but a strategic mechanism for maintaining social hierarchies, becoming a tool for maintaining social order by distinguishing between those who conform to Brahmanical norms from those who do not. Historically, the term has changed from denoting a specific non-Indian group to a broader designation for outsiders. As the concept of *mleccha-* evolved, it became increasingly tied to the political landscape. For instance, the adoption of Sanskrit by political authorities – including the Śaka rulers – demonstrates its increasing significance as a language of governance and legitimacy, reinforcing the broader context of the «Sanskrit cosmopolis» (Pollock 2006: 67). Indeed, the promotion of Sanskrit as the "correct" language of politics helped solidify Brahmanical control and marginalise those outside the Brahmanical cultural and linguistic fold (Bronkhorst 2011: 50; 2016: 4). This linguistic shift reflects broader patterns of cultural and linguistic adaptation, reinforcing Sanskrit's role in shaping Āryan identity through elite endorsement, while contributing to shifts in societal bilingualism and linguistic prestige (Houben 1996: 2).

Understanding how this concept evolved over time requires examining the key historical and cultural factors that shaped it. Scholars have identified two distinct cultural matrices within Indo-Āryan sources, challenging the idea of a singular, "homogeneous" Vedic culture (Candotti-Pontillo 2019: 7). These matrices are believed to stem from two migration waves that occurred between 2000 and 1500 BCE. The first wave, occurring around 2000 BCE, is associated with the adoption of bull-carts transportation methods

[9] Sapir (Mandelbaum 1963: 146-147) emphasises that linguistic categories are neither neutral nor purely descriptive but shape perception through structured contrasts and graded distinctions. This principle applies to Indo-Āryan classifications, where *mleccha-* functions as an ideological marker that reinforces cultural boundaries. Lincoln (1989: 25-26) similarly argues that myth is not merely a coding device but an active force in shaping social hierarchies, serving political agendas by legitimising exclusions and mobilising groups. In this sense, both linguistic classifications and myth function as mechanisms of boundary maintenance, framing outsiders as subordinate within dominant cultural frameworks. Similarly, Douglas (2001 [1966]: 22-23) argues that purity and impurity function as relational concepts necessary for maintaining cultural boundaries. She emphasises that sacred classifications require continuous reinforcement through separation, mirroring how the designation of non-Āryan speech as *mleccha* operates as a form of boundary maintenance, marking outsiders as impure.

and the construction of fortifications (Parpola 2020) and is attributed to migrants from the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) in Central Asia. Rather than a simple migratory influx, these groups appear to have gradually assimilated into the socio-cultural framework of the BMAC, facilitating a complex process of linguistic and cultural transmission[10]. The integration of these migrants into local populations was a gradual process, fostering sustained cultural exchange[11]. The second wave, dating to around 1800 BCE, involved northern steppe populations and introduced rituals associated with the Soma cult, including worship of Indra and evolving funerary practices (Parpola 1988: 36). These migratory influences contributed to long-term cultural transformations rather than abrupt disruptions. However, the interpretation of Indo-Āryan migrations has been a subject of debate, as questions surrounding their scale, nature, and impact remain contested. While early models framed these movements as a singular conquest, more recent scholarship challenges this binary framework, emphasising a gradual and multi-layered process shaped by migration, acculturation, and cultural exchange. For instance, from a historiographical perspective, colonial scholarship often framed the Āryan "invasion" theory as a justification for European racial superiority, while contemporary nationalist movements have sought to reinterpret it to assert indigenous Aryan origins[12]. More recent studies challenge this binary framework, emphasising archaeological and linguistic complexities that disrupt simplistic migration models and, rather than a singular conquest, scholars increasingly highlight the gradual and multi-layered nature of Indo-Āryan movements, where migration, acculturation, and cultural exchange played mutually dependent roles in shaping regional identities. This reconsideration has led to renewed critiques of earlier methodological prejudices and a broader reconsideration of how migration shaped cultural transformations[13].

The socio-cultural and linguistic impacts of Indo-Āryan migrations were profound and complex, shaping regional identities through long-term processes of acculturation and exchange. Recent scholarship emphasised Āryas' integration into existing cultural landscapes, where they gradually distinguished their identity in relation to *dasyu*s or

[10] Parpola (2008: 33) argues that the BMAC acted as a conduit for linguistic and cultural transmission, allowing Indo-Āryan speakers to integrate rather than displace local populations, and draws a parallel with the Akkadian infiltration of Sumerian civilisation, suggesting a similar mechanism of acculturation rather than conquest. Similarly, Staal (2000: 366-367) identifies linguistic traces of BMAC influence in Indo-Āryan vocabulary, reinforcing the role of sustained cultural exchanges in shaping early Indo-Āryan identity.

[11] As Witzel (2019: 7) demonstrates, the spread of Kuru-Pañcāla traditions in the late Vedic period exemplifies how migration facilitated long-term Sanskritisation and socio-political transformations rather than abrupt displacement.

[12] From a historiographical perspective, colonial scholarship framed the Āryan invasion theory as a justification for European racial superiority, while nationalist movements have sought to reinterpret it to assert indigenous Āryan origins and challenge hierarchical narratives (Fosse 2005: 435-436).

[13] Archaeological evidence debates the traditional invasion model. Lal (2005) and Shaffer-Lichtenstein (2005) argue that interpretations conflating language, race, and migration are rooted in colonial scholarship rather than material evidence. Instead, the continuity between late Harappan and early Vedic material culture suggests a long-term process of adaptation rather than sudden shift. Danino (2016) critiques racialised migration theories, emphasising identity formation through sustained exchanges rather than conquest. Witzel (2019) and Pollock (2006) similarly argue for a dynamic Indo-Āryan identity shaped by gradual acculturation. Genetic studies (e.g. Walimbe 2016) further support continuity between Harappan and later populations. Ramesh (2023) highlights extensive trade and cultural links between BMAC and the Indus Valley Civilisation. These interactions suggest Indo-Āryan migrations unfolded within an interconnected landscape shaped by diffusion rather than violent incursions. This re-evaluation reframes Indo-Āryan movements within a framework of continuity and transformation, reinforcing *ārya*- and *mleccha*- as ideological constructs shaped by shifting socio-political dynamics.

*dāsa*s (Halbfass 1988: 175-180; Parpola 1988, 1994: 149-159, 2012). This process of self-definition played a central role in establishing a social hierarchy that positioned the Āryans above other groups. The socio-cultural and linguistic impacts of these migration waves shaped a distinct Āryan identity, one that was both asserted and reinforced through exclusionary mechanisms. As this identity evolved, so did the conceptualisation of *mleccha-*, which served not merely as a linguistic marker but as a broader ideological tool of differentiation. The emergence of *mleccha-* within Brāhmaṇa texts around 800 BCE (Thapar 1971: 409; Halbfass 1988: 175) matches the increasing stratification of *ārya-* as a hierarchical category. Initially, *ārya-* conveyed notions of belonging and cultural pre-eminence[14], but its meaning gradually became more relational, defining itself through contrast with those excluded from Brahmanical norms. Some scholars' perspectives suggest that as *ārya-* became an increasingly hierarchised identity, *mleccha-* correspondingly evolved into a designation that reinforced ideological exclusion, categorising those outside Brahmanical traditions as impure outsiders in both cultural and political spheres. This socio-linguistic evolution was deeply linked with Brahmanical reform efforts, particularly through the Sanskritisation process, which positioned Sanskrit as the dominant language of governance and legitimacy (Pollock 2006: 67). The *Mahābhārata*, like other epics, reinforced Sanskrit's primacy – not just as a language but as a tool for regulating identity boundaries. As Sanskrit became the marker of Brahmanical authority, non-Sanskritic traditions were increasingly marginalised, with *mleccha-* signifying exclusion from Brahmanical norms. This linguistic hierarchy cemented the Āryas as a symbol of socio-religious supremacy while ensuring *mleccha*s remained both linguistic outsiders and ideological opponents within an expanding Brahmanical order.

1.2 The orthodox view on *mleccha*s

The stigmatisation of the *mleccha*s can be traced back to the actions of orthodox Brahmans, who sought to protect their social system and values. This was primarily driven by a desire to maintain a hierarchical structure that organised society into distinct social classes, particularly the *varṇa* system. This order extends to the political sphere, with the Brahmins advising rulers and maintaining an alliance between Brahmans and *kṣatriya*s to benefit both, thereby reaffirming the privileged role of the Brahmins in society (Bronkhorst 2011: 39). Any external factor was perceived as a potential threat to this established order (Parasher 1978: 187). Indeed, the *mleccha*s were considered

[14] The semantic evolution of *ārya-* is highly debated (Bader 1985; Pirart 1998; Maggi 2018; Benedetti 2023). Bader (1985) interprets *ārya-* as a contrastive term akin to Latin *alius* and Greek ἄλλος, emphasising relational otherness rather than a fixed ethnolinguistic identity. Pirart (1998) instead situates *ārya-* within a ritual and ideological framework linked to *rtá-* and *āryati* ('to pay homage'), reinforcing its socio-religious significance. Maggi proposes a layered model of alterity – «inscatolamento della nozione di alterità» (2018: 86) – in which *ārya-* denotes external distinction while *arí-* refines foreignness within an already stratified group. More recently, Benedetti (2023) emphasised *ārya-* as originally a social classifier – denoting freemen and nobles rather than ethnic groups – aligning with Indo-European cognates. The honorific and ideological extensions of *ārya-*, evident in Buddhist and Jain texts, support its broader function beyond mere ethnicity, reinforcing Pirart's (1998) conceptual link to *rtá-*. Maggi shows how the Ṛgveda (IX, 79) further illustrates the relational hierarchy by employing *anyá-* to signify an "other" in contrast to *arí-*, demonstrating the iterative structuring of exclusion. Bader also highlights the recurrence of this pattern in Sanskrit formations such as *ár-aṇ-a-* ('foreigner, distant') and *ár-aṇ-ya-* ('place that is 'other,' distant" > 'forest' and 'desert'), highlighting how linguistic encoding of separation mirrored socio-political distinctions.

inherently «"impure" and "polluting"», justifying their exclusion from Āryan social and religious spheres (Halbfass 1988: 181; Doniger 2014)[15]. Ancient texts frequently portrayed the *mleccha*s as bestial (*paśudharmin*) and morally or physically inferior, reinforcing their dehumanisation and rationalising their marginalisation. In Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (3.13.3-4), for instance, a section on the rules regarding slavery makes a clear distinction between *mleccha*s and Āryas[16]. Indeed, *mleccha*s were allowed to sell or pledge their children without it being considered a transgression, whereas Āryas, adhering to Vedic traditions, were strictly prohibited from becoming enslaved under any circumstances. This proscription served to reinforce the privileged status of the Āryas, safeguarding their social and cultural purity and thereby ensuring their continued dominance within the societal hierarchy. The *Arthaśāstra* passage illustrates how legal instruments were used to perpetuate social stratification and uphold the superior position of the Āryas. Ultimately, these groups were initially viewed as the «ontological "other"» (Bhattacharya 2020: 2) in stark contrast to the «civilised» members of society: This process of othering served to justify the exclusion and the denial of equal rights. However, over time, this rigid categorisation seemingly evolved. As the process of state-building intensified and religious and social structures expanded, groups previously considered entirely foreign began to be integrated into the social framework, although in subordinate roles. By defining the *mleccha*s as outsiders who did not speak Sanskrit or follow Hindu customs, the Brahmans reinforced their own cultural and linguistic hegemony, ensuring that Sanskrit and Vedic traditions remained central to Āryan identity. Consequently, the language of the *mleccha*s was stigmatised as a marker of their barbarism and a key symbol of their exclusion from the civilised Āryan society.

The socio-cultural implications of the linguistic and ethnic disparities that shaped orthodox perspectives on the *mleccha* ethnic group and their language are evident. Three key texts provide insights into these socio-cultural and religious practices and the

[15] The concept of impurity and exclusion is a recurring theme in Hindu culture, with beliefs about ritual purity and impurity being used to justify the social stratification and exclusion of certain castes (Harper 1964). The notion of "inherent" impurity provided a rationale for the marginalisation of these groups from the social and religious spheres of the Āryans. However, attempts to identify of the Āryans or trace the origins of the caste system through DNA analysis have thus far been inconclusive, as the term *ārya* represents a linguistic and cultural category rather than a biological one (Thapar 2014; see previous footnote 14). In this sense, the retrospective application of the term "Hindu" to ancient authors and traditions is historically complex and widely debated. As Lorenzen (1999: 35-36) demonstrates, "Hindu" initially emerged as a geographical designation under Persian influence, referring to inhabitants beyond the Indus River rather than a religious community. The term gradually acquired religious connotations, especially under Muslim rule, where it was increasingly used to distinguish religious identities. However, it was during the colonial period that British scholars systematised the diverse traditions of South Asia under a singular category, consolidating Hinduism as a formal religious identity. Within this historiographical debate, Sweetman (2003) has underlined the constructed nature of Hinduism as an analytical category, arguing that the colonial and missionary discourses played a significant role in shaping perceptions of a unified Hindu tradition.

[16] AŚ 3.13.3-4: «*mlecchānām adoṣaḥ prajāṃ vikretum ādhātuṃ vā || na tv evāryasya dāsabhāvaḥ ||*» 'It is not an offence for *mleccha*s to sell an offspring or keep it as a pledge. But there shall be no slavery for an Arya in any circumstances whatsoever' (tr. Kangle 1972: 271). About this passage, Olivelle (2013: 208) further specifies that «an Ārya [i.e., "a child who is still a minor" (see Olivelle 2013: 613)], however, can never be reduced to slavery». For further insights, see the remarks of Arrianus (*Ind.* 10.8-9) on the absence of slavery among the Indians: «εἶναι δὲ καὶ τόδε μέγα ἐν τῇ Ἰνδῶν γῇ, πάντας Ἰνδοὺς εἶναι ἐλευθέρους, οὐδέ τινα δοῦλον εἶναι Ἰνδόν. Λακεδαιμονίοισι μέν γε οἱ εἵλωτες δοῦλοί εἰσι καὶ τὰ δουλων ἐργάζονται, Ἰνδοῖσι δὲ οὐδὲ ἄλλος δοῦλός ἐστι, μήτι γε Ἰνδῶν τις» 'This also is remarkable in India, that all Indians are free, and no Indian at all is a slave. In this the Indians agree with the Lacedaemonians. Yet the Lacedaemonians have Helots for slaves, who perform the duties of slaves; but the Indians have no slaves at all, much less is any Indian a slave' (tr. Robson 1966: 335).

linguistic disparities they describe: the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (1000-900 BCE, Müller 1966 [1885]), the *Vasiṣṭhadharmasūtra* (300-100 BCE, Olivelle 2000), and Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (200 BCE, Kielhorn 1880)[17]. The *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* characterises the *mleccha* language as unintelligible, associating it with barbarians and Asuras (ŚB 3.2.1.24). This depiction suggests that the language was to be avoided by the Brahmans and strengthens the notion of linguistic impurity linked to the *mlecchas*, thus deepening the social divide between those who spoke Sanskrit and those considered outsiders:

> ŚB 3.2.1.24: *tatraitām api vācam ūduḥ | upajijñāsyāṃ sa mlecchas tasmānna brāhmaṇo mleched asuryā haiṣā vāg evam evaiṣa dviṣatāṃ sapatnānām ādatte vācaṃ te 'syāttavacasaḥ parābhavanti ya evametadveda ||*
> 'Such was the unintelligible speech which they then uttered, – and he (who speaks thus) is a *mleccha*. Hence let no brahman speak *mleccha* language, since is the speech of the Asuras. Thus, alone he deprives his spiteful enemies of speech; and whosoever knows this, his enemies, being deprived of speech, are undone.' (tr. Eggeling 1966 [1885]: 32, slightly modified)

> VDh 6.41: *na mlecchabhāṣāṃ śikṣeta ||*
> '[He,] should not learn the language of barbarians'. (tr. Olivelle 2000: 269)

In the ŚB, linguistic purity is not merely a matter of effective communication; it is intricately linked to notions of social status, cultural identity, and religious allegiance. The use of a polyptoton, comprising the nominative singular *mlecchaḥ* and the verbal root √*mlech*-, stresses the pejorative connotations associated with individuals who engage in the use of an unintelligible (*upajijñāsya*-) or foreign language. It is noteworthy that the denominative verbal root is listed in Pāṇini's *dhātupatha* as denoting the act of uttering incoherent language. The text explicitly advises Brahmins against using such language, equating it with the speech of the Asuras (*asuryā vāc*), and the proscription of "barbarous language" reflects an effort to preserve the purity of the Vedic tradition, thereby reinforcing the distinction between those aligned with Vedic culture (the insiders) and those associated with non-Vedic or foreign cultures (the outsiders). This proscription aims to delegitimise the enemy's language, effectively stripping it of significance and meaning. For those who transgress this rule by speaking the forbidden language, there is an implicit assumption of contamination.

This notion is more clearly articulated in the second passage from the VDh, which has been the subject of various studies exploring the socio-linguistic and political implications of such regulations (e.g., Squarcini 2008; Pollock 2011). Additionally, the concept of purity is also addressed in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, where he emphasises the contrast between 'correct' and 'incorrect' (*apaśabda*-) words when discussing a barbaric language, and the use of 'corrupt' words is seen as hindering the desired positive outcome of the ritual, thus underscoring the relevance of grammatical proficiency and accurate speech for the Brahmin:

> M 1.2 ll. 7-9: […] *tasmād brāhmaṇena na mlecchitavai nāpabhāṣitavai | mleccho ha vā eṣa yad apaśabdaḥ | mlecchā mā bhūmety adhyeyam vyākaraṇam ||*

[17] For the sake of brevity, the present paper focuses exclusively on the aforementioned sources. Other sources that prohibit the use of the *mleccha* language are the *Āpastambhadharmasūtra*, the *Gautamadharmasūtra*, and the *Viṣṇusmṛti* (see Squarcini 2008: 143, fn. 21).

> 'Therefore a brahmin must not speak barbaric language. ('must not speak barbaric language' means:) must not use corrupt words. *Mleccha* 'barbaric language' indeed is (the same as) *apaśabda* 'corrupt speech'. So that we should not become *mleccha* (users of) 'barbaric language', grammar is to be studied'. (tr. Joshi 1986: 38)

Patañjali regarded grammar as a fundamental element in the transmission of correct word usage and the accumulation of religious merit, particularly within the context of ritual practice. As posited by Joshi (1989: 268) and Cardona (2007: 24), the *apaśabda*-language, identified as *mleccha*-, could be a reference to Prakrit. Conversely, Houben (2018: 9-10) hypothesises that it may in fact refer to an earlier variety of Indo-Āryan. The explicit discouragement of the learning of barbarian languages reflected the socio-cultural norm of preserving linguistic purity and avoiding foreign influences.

These guidelines aimed to safeguard Sanskrit and its associated cultural and religious traditions, reinforcing linguistic and ritual purity. They also reflect a broader effort to preserve Brahmanical integrity against external influences, demonstrating how language served as a crucial medium for transmitting and sustaining religious and cultural values[18]. By avoiding foreign languages, individuals were encouraged to uphold their cultural and religious heritage, reinforcing social cohesion and a shared community identity. The ŚB's depiction of *mleccha* language as barbaric, along with the VDh's injunction against learning it, reflects Brahmins' efforts to safeguard their social system and values. By framing *mleccha*s as impure and their language as contaminating, Sanskrit texts reinforced ideological and practical boundaries that upheld the hierarchical structure of ancient Indian society[19]. The depiction of *mleccha* speech as incoherent and impure was not merely a linguistic judgment but a broader ideological strategy aimed at preserving cultural hegemony and delineating social boundaries. In this sense, by restricting access to Sanskrit and branding non-Āryan languages as markers of barbarism, Brahmanical traditions reinforced their privileged status and safeguarded the exclusivity of their religious and intellectual authority[20].

This concern with maintaining socio-linguistic hierarchy also manifests in legal discourse, particularly in the tenth chapter of the *Manavadharmaśāstra*, which addresses mixed categories across three distinct discourses[21]. Within this structure, MDh 10.45 emerges as a key passage in the final section, presenting a symbolic criterion that

[18] See Squarcini (2008: 139): «The medium of language (*bhāṣa*) was therefore one of the principal distinguishing devices in the Brahmanical regulatory project shared by the majority of the authors of classical *dharmaśāstra*s. Hence, the discourse on the 'language of the *ārya* (*āryavāc*) – carried forward for centuries in the Brahmanic sources – is particularly eloquent regarding the mutual relationship between authority and its social regulation».

[19] This exclusion was rooted in the Mīmāṃsā doctrine, which framed non-Sanskrit languages as incapable of referencing universal realities, positioning Sanskrit as the sole legitimate medium of knowledge and reinforcing socio-linguistic stratification (Pollock 2011: 32). Moreover, Deshpande (1996) illustrates how priestly Sanskrit, despite being adapted for vernacular audiences, remained a tool for reinforcing Brahmanical authority. While phonetic modifications made it more comprehensible, Sanskrit maintained its hierarchical status, marginalising vernacular languages and sustaining social divisions.

[20] The Brahmanical conceptualisation of the *yuga* system, with its narratives of moral and social decline, highlighted hierarchical distinctions while integrating external influences into its worldview (Eltschinger 2020: 47-48). As Eltschinger demonstrates, depictions of the *kaliyuga* – marked by ritual impurity, foreign invasions, and dharmic deterioration – functioned as ideological mechanisms to legitimise exclusion and maintain Brahmanical control.

[21] For a comprehensive examination of these three discourses, see Olivelle (2005: 58): «There are, however, not one but three discourses on mixed classes, and they are not always in agreement. Some suspicion, therefore, may be directed at the second and third re-tellings of the origin of the mixed classes».

differentiates *mleccha*s from other groups – a mechanism explicitly designed to minimise contact and reinforce cultural separation:

> MDh 10.45: *mukhabāhūrupajjānāṃ yā loke jātayo bahiḥ* |
> *mlecchavācaś cāryavācaḥ sarve te dasyavaḥ smṛtāḥ* ||
> 'The castes that are outside those that were born from the mouths, arms, thighs, and feet in the world, all those, whether they speak a non-Ārya or an Ārya language, are remembered as *dasyu*s'. (tr. Giudice 2023: 15)

The passage draws a clear distinction between speakers of the refined *āryavāc*-, who are integrated into the Vedic social order, and those who speak *mlecchavāc*-, who are excluded from it and labeled as *dasyu*s. According to this verse, anyone not born into the symbolic divisions of the primordial being – representing the four *varṇa*s – is classified as an outsider. Even if such an individual were to adopt the *ārya* language, their non-Vedic lineage would still mark them as *dasyu*. Historically, the term *dasyu* strengthens notions of Vedic superiority while legitimising the marginalisation and exclusion of non-Vedic groups.

2. Speaking a forbidden language: A violation of the norm in *Mahābhārata* 1.135

The sole occurrence of the verbal root √*mlech*- in the *Mahābhārata* appears in a passage warning against the adoption of non-Āryan practices (MBh 2.53.8). The narrative unfolds Dhṛtarāṣṭra sends Vidura to summon the Pāṇḍavas to the infamous dice game. In response, Yudhiṣṭhira expresses his reservation (MBh 2.53.2-4, 8-10), invoking the hermit Asita Devala (MBh 2.53.6-7), who asserts that «victory on the battlefield is superior to that won with the dice» (Brockington 1998: 164-165):

> MBh 2.53.8: *nāryā mlechanti bhāṣābhir māyayā na caranty uta* |
> *ajihmam aśaṭhaṁ yuddham etat satpuruṣavratam* ||
> 'Āryans do not speak foreign languages or use deceptive magic: an honest fight, not crooked, is the vow of a true man'. (My translation)[22]

Yudhiṣṭhira's words reflect earlier Vedic injunctions, drawing a clear distinction between the actions an Ārya may rightfully undertake and those deemed inappropriate. Furthermore, the text identifies the key traits that mark a person as not Ārya: speaking a foreign language (*mlecchanti bhāṣābhiḥ* 53.8a) and engaging in deception or illusion (*caranty* 53.8b literally 'behave' or 'act') through *māyā*-. Notably, the use of the verbal root √*mlech*-, defined by Monier-Williams as 'to speak indistinctly (like a foreigner or barbarian who does not speak Sanskṛt)', combined with the instrumental *bhāṣābhiḥ*, which denotes a common or vernacular language as opposed to Vedic or Sanskrit,

[22] van Buitenen's (1975: 128) translation of the first verse reads: «No Aryans speak in riddles nor work with tricks». The focus on "riddles" and "tricks" in van Buitenen's translation may serve to emphasise the perception that individuals outside the *ārya* group were regarded as deceitful or morally inferior, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical and exclusionary structure of ancient Indian society. In this context, the concept of *ārya* transcends the confines of mere linguistic or ethnic categorisation, delving into ethical behaviour and moral integrity. This notion is further exemplified by the exclusionary practices that contributed to the formation of the caste system.

conveys the notion that a non-Āryan language is considered barbaric[23]. In this context, Yudhiṣṭhira's attitude aligns with the socio-cultural norms that, as discussed, reject the customs and language of non-Āryans. Despite his reservations, Yudhiṣṭhira ultimately accepts the invitation, deferring to Vidura's judgement and affirming that he could not transgress (*ati*-√*kram*-) the command (*niyoga*-) of a venerable elder (MBh 2.76.4)[24]. Yudhiṣṭhira's words serve as an "epic" restatement of Vedic injunctions, yet his participation in a dice game – an act he deems unfit for an Ārya – reveals a striking tension. This contradiction, wherein he simultaneously upholds and transgresses normative boundaries, is particularly relevant to this paper: the violation of the prohibition against speaking a *mleccha* language in the *Mahābhārata*.

Let us now examine how the following passage from the *Mahābhārata* directly illustrates the transgression of the norm set forth in VDh 6.41. The episode known as 'The Fire in the Lacquer House' (MBh 1.124-138, van Buitenen 1973: 274-275) recounts Duryodhana's plot to assassinate the Pāṇḍavas by trapping them in a highly flammable lacquer house. Initially unaware of the danger, the Pāṇḍavas were warned by their uncle Vidura, who advised vigilance against poisoning and arson (MBh 1.133.29). Upon entering the house, Yudhiṣṭhira noticed the scent of ghee mixed with lacquer (MBh 1.134.14-15), heightening his suspicions. Vidura soon confirmed the threat by secretly dispatching a sapper (*khanaka*-), who delivered a covert warning in *mleccha* language – remarkably understood by Yudhiṣṭhira. Realising the imminent danger, the Pāṇḍavas quickly devised an escape plan[25]:

> MBh 1.135.1-8:
> *vaiśaṃpāyana uvāca* |
> *vidurasya suhṛt kaścit khanakaḥ kuśalaḥ kvacit* |
> *vivikte pāṇḍavān rājann idaṃ vacanam abravīt* || 1 ||
> *prahito vidureṇāsmi khanakaḥ kuśalo bhṛśam* |
> *pāṇḍavānāṃ priyaṃ kāryam iti kiṃ karavāṇi vaḥ* || 2 ||
> *pracchannaṃ vidureṇoktaḥ śreyastvam iha pāṇḍavān* |
> *pratipādaya viśvāsād iti kiṃ karavāṇi vaḥ* || 3 ||
> *kṛṣṇapakṣe caturdaśyāṃ rātrāvasya purocanaḥ* |
> *bhavanasya tava dvāri pradāsyati hutāśanam* || 4 ||
> *mātrā saha pradagdhavyāḥ pāṇḍavāḥ puruṣarṣabhāḥ* |
> *iti vyavasitaṃ pārtha dhārtarāṣṭrasya me śrutam* || 5 ||
> *kiṃcic ca vidureṇokto mlecchavācāsi pāṇḍava* |
> *tvayā ca tat tathetyuktam etad viśvāsakāraṇam* || 6 ||
> *uvāca taṃ satyadhṛtiḥ kuntīputro yudhiṣṭhiraḥ* |
> *abhijānāmi saumya tvāṃ suhṛdaṃ vidurasya vai* || 7 ||
> *śucim āptaṃ priyaṃ caiva sadā ca dṛḍhabhaktikam* |
> *na vidyate kaveḥ kiṃcid abhijñānaprayojanam* || 8 ||
> 'Vaiśaṃpāyana said: «A skillful sapper, who was a friend of Vidura's, said to the Pāṇḍavas when they were alone (*vivikte*): "I am a highly skilled sapper, and Vidura has sent me here with orders to do something good for the Pāṇḍavas. What can I do

[23] See also Parasher (1979: 116): «The Brahmanic propaganda through literature and oral tradition of mythical stories, perpetuated the idea of a foreigner as a *mleccha*. Only they, the *Brahmanas*, could judge when the speech and behaviour of these people would cease to be regarded as those of a *mleccha*».

[24] See Fleming (2020: 7) for a detailed summary of the ethical dimensions addressed in the *Dyūtaparvan* and its legal analysis.

[25] Roy (2022: 71) includes this episode in the section devoted to "Dharma deeds" performed by Vidura, who is regarded as a figure who, along with Yudhiṣṭhira, embodies *dharma.*

> for you? Vidura told me in secret (*pracchannam*). 'Have all confidence in the Pāṇḍavas and bring them your best effort!' So what can I do for you? On the night of the fourteenth of this dark fortnight Purocana will set fire at the door of this house of yours. I have heard, Pārtha, that Duryodhana has resolved to burn alive those bulls of Pāṇḍavas with their mother. And Vidura told you something in a *mleccha* language. Pāṇḍava, and you told him 'Yes': that is why you (can) trust me". Said Kuntī's son Yudhiṣṭhira, ever-persevering in truth. "I recognise you, good man, as a friend of Vidura, pure, trustworthy, and always fiercely loyal. No sign of recognition (*abhijñānaprayojanam*) from the sage is necessary"'. (tr. van Buitenen 1973: 289-290, modified)[26]

The text conveys an atmosphere of secrecy, emphasising the need for concealment from the broader community, a theme that first appears in the opening verses. In these verses, the sapper discreetly delivers Vidura's message to Yudhiṣṭhira, as indicated by the locative singular *vivikte* (< *vi*-√*vic*- 135.1c), meaning 'separated' or 'kept apart'[27]. A further reference emerges through Vidura's covert instructions to the sapper, inferred from the adverbial accusative *pracchanna*- (135.2a), meaning 'secretly' or 'covertly'. This secrecy culminates in the final task: delivering news of Duryodhana's plot using *mlecchavāc*-, a *mleccha* language. The second key point pertains to the apparent violation of prescribed norms. One might argue that if *mleccha*- refers solely to an unintelligible code-shared by Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira–stemming from the primary sense of the verbal root–then Vidura is not technically transgressing the norms by using a forbidden language, nor is Yudhiṣṭhira by understanding it. In this context, the *mleccha* language functions strategically as a signal of recognition (*abhijñānaprayojana*- 135.8d 'reason for confidence'), serving two purposes: (a) ensuring the message reaches Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas, and (b) preventing interception by adversaries[28].

However, I argue that a violation does indeed occur. Diachronic analysis of *mleccha*- in the selected sources consistently reveals a strong non-Āryan connotation[29], never a

[26] A few clarifications are needed to justify my intervention in van Buitenen's translation. First, I do not interpret the *karmadhāraya* compound *puruṣarṣabhāḥ* (135.4b) according to its lexicalised meaning of 'best or most excellent of men', or 'bull-like', as van Buitenen does. Instead, I follow Mocci and Pontillo's (2019: 17-18) reading, based on Pāṇini's *Aṣṭhādhyayī* 2.1.56, which assumes the constituents are co-referential. Secondly, I have chosen to retain the Sanskrit term *mleccha*- when referring to the language used by the sapper (*mlecchavacāsi* 135.6b).

[27] The term under discussion is not frequently encountered throughout the *Mahābhārata*; indeed, the majority of instances pertain to ascetic performances. Aside from the aforementioned case, the term appears as a noun on 16 occasions in the *Mahābhārata*, with 11 instances in the locative singular (MBh 1.200.16; 3.6.6; 3.38.2; 3.261.20, 47; 12.18.6; 14.46.31; 14.69.18; 16.5.1, 11). The locative singular is employed on six occasions (MBh 1.158.4; 12.269.12; 12.314.23; 12.319.1; 12.346.3; 12.349.4). Of particular interest is the locative *vivikte*, which is used in what appears to be a legal context (MBh 1.200.16). Here the *ṛṣi* Nārada engages in a private discourse with the Pāṇḍavas about the complexities of their marital union with Draupadī, their *dharmapatnī*.

[28] Indeed, van Buitenen's (1975: 289-290) translation may appear to endorse this interpretation, as he translates *viśvāsakāraṇam* (135.6d) as 'password', which he also adopts for *abhijñānaprayojanam* (135.8d).

[29] The noun *mleccha*- occurs 65 times in the *Mahābhārata*. In the majority of instances, *mleccha*- is used to refer to 'foreigners' who are subsequently to be subjugated or foreign allies of the two opposing factions during wartime (see Brockington 1998: 209-211): MBh 1.62.5; 1.202.8; 2.27.23; 2.27.25; 2.28.44; 2.29.15; 2.31.10 2.47.12; 2.48.33; 3.48.19; 3.145.12; 3.186.29; 5.22.21 5.49.26 5.158.20; 6.10.12; 6.10.63,64; 6.41.103; 7.25.17; 7.69.30; 7.87.17; 7.95.13; 7.95.36; 7.98.23; 7.103.22; 7.165.30; 8.17.9; 8.31.22; 8.51.19; 8.59.10; 9.1.26; 9.2.18; 9.2.36; 9.19.1; 9.31.3; 12.4. 8; 12.65.14; 12.162.28; 13.109.1; 14.72.24; 14.83.30. The remaining instances employ an extremely negative connotation of the *mlecchas*, more closely aligned

neutral meaning such as 'unintelligible' or 'ciphered' language. Instead, the term denotes foreigners or those of low birth and caste, outside the *ārya* fold. This raises a critical question: such a transgression alters the normative framework governing these linguistic boundaries? From a linguistic perspective, the text employs the same compound as MDh 10.45a, and a *śloka* from a later redaction – omitted from the text constituted by the Critical Edition (MBh 97*.1-2 after 1.2.83) but included in all Northern recension manuscripts and in two Southern recension manuscripts (i.e., T_1 of the Telugu version and G_7 of the Grantha version) – provides a concise account of Vidura's actions in the opening chapters of the first book – a summary of the entire *Mahābhārata*:

> MBh 97*.1-2 after 1.2.83: *hitopadeśaś ca pathi dharmarājasya dhīmataḥ* |
> *vidureṇa kṛto yatra hitārthaṁ mlecchabhāṣayā* |
> 'There, on the way [to Vāraṇāvata], Vidura gives crucial information, using a barbaric language, for the welfare of the wise king Dharma'. (My translation)

This instance of *mlecchabhāṣa*-, referenced in VDhŚ 6.41, affirms that the language used is non-Āryan and highlights the normative breach committed by Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira. Their transgression challenges the rigidity of linguistic purity, revealing moments where practical necessity overrides ideological prescriptions. These exceptions raise broader questions about the role of Sanskrit in defining socio-political boundaries. In this light, the Paninian grammatical tradition – often viewed as a neutral linguistic framework – appears deeply embedded in ideological concerns. As Dundas (1996: 145-146) suggests, Pāṇini's privileging of the *śiṣṭa* (the 'learned' elite) over the Vedic language itself was an extraordinary assertion of nativism. This choice may have been driven by a combination of factors, including intellectual curiosity, a scientific breakthrough in linguistic analysis, or even a defensive strategy by Brahmin scholars seeking to assert cultural continuity in a shifting socio-political landscape. Patañjali, in particular, expresses concerns about *mlecchas*, indicating anxieties over linguistic and cultural boundaries. This unease echoes broader tensions within the *Mahābhārata*, where language functions as a marker of identity and hierarchy. The prohibition against speaking *mleccha* languages, as seen in MBh 2.53.8, reflects an effort to delineate Ārya identity through linguistic purity, reinforcing social and political structures. However, as the case of Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira demonstrates, these norms could be strategically transgressed in exceptional circumstances, such as the preservation of *dharma*.

2.1 Normative implications of using a proscribed language

This episode must be situated within the historical and ideological framework of the *Mahābhārata*'s composition, defined by the interactions between *kṣatriya* rulers and Brahmanical authority. As Biardeau (1981: 76-79) demonstrates, the text acknowledges tensions between royal and sacerdotal power but ultimately reinforces their hierarchical yet cooperative relationship, emphasising kings as protectors and patrons of Brahmanical traditions while reaffirming their shared responsibility in maintaining cosmic and social order. Figures such as Yudhiṣṭhira embody the tension between normative rigidity and pragmatic necessity, providing insight into how *dharma* is negotiated within crisis scenarios. The linguistic transgression enacted in MBh 1.135, wherein Vidura

with the Vedic corpus, and thus depict them as impure peoples of low birth: MBh 1.79.13; 1.165.36,37; 3.61.2; 3.188.29,45,52,70,93; 7.68.37,42,44,46; 7.87.37; 8.27.91; 8.30.70,80; 12.59.103; 13.112.108; 16.8.61.

communicates in *mlecchavāc* to warn Yudhiṣṭhira of an impending assassination attempt, presents a unique challenge to the authority of Vedic norms. Since both Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira are regarded as paradigmatic figures of *dharma*[30], their involvement in this violation raises three interrelated questions concerning (1) culpability, (2) normative ambiguity, and (3) sovereign discretion:

(1) The responsibility for the norm's violation is distributed unevenly. Vidura is directly culpable for employing the *mleccha* language, whereas Yudhiṣṭhira may be considered indirectly implicated by virtue of his ability to comprehend it. This creates tension with his later assertion that Āryas do not engage in *mleccha* speech (*na mlechanti bhāṣābhiḥ*, MBh 2.53.8a). Nevertheless, since the norm prohibits speaking, not understanding, he technically avoids violation. The text states only that he affirmed Vidura's message (*tvayā* […] *tathety uktam*, 135.6a), without specifying the language in which this reply was uttered. Furthermore, an additional passage omitted from the text constituted by the Critical Edition (MBh 97*.1-2 after 1.2.83) explicitly attributes the transgression to Vidura alone. Ultimately, this violation is contextually mitigated – Vidura's use of *mlecchavāc* is essential for ensuring Yudhiṣṭhira's survival and, by extension, the preservation of Dharma. As Douglas (1966: 3) demonstrates, pollution beliefs function both as mechanisms of control and instruments of coercion, reinforcing normative structures while allowing for flexibility in crisis situations. Similarly, Moitra (2021: 134-135) highlights that the concept of *āpaddharma*, legitimising transgressions under extreme conditions, enables the adaptation of normative codes without undermining their authority. Within this framework, Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira's involvement in the linguistic breach exemplifies how socio-linguistic taboos, though ideologically entrenched, can be pragmatically overridden when existential necessity demands it.

(2) The second issue concerns the precise scope of the prohibition. Normative sources such as ŚB 3.2.1.24 and M 1.2 ll. 7-9 appear to restrict the ban on *mleccha* speech to Brahmins. On these grounds, one might argue that no violation occurred, given that neither Vidura nor Yudhiṣṭhira belong to the Brahmin *varṇa*. However, the epic itself complicates this picture. Despite his genealogy, Vidura is repeatedly identified as the embodiment of Dharma and aligned with Brahmanical values. Moreover, MBh 2.53.8 significantly expands the scope of the prohibition, extending it beyond Brahmins to encompass all Āryas, thus transforming a caste-based rule into an ethno-linguistic norm. In this broader interpretation, both Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira – regarded as Āryas – stand in breach of the injunction, which now appears less narrowly legal and more related to cultural and societal values. This ambiguity gives emphasis to the ideological function of the *mleccha-* category: it delineates not merely caste boundaries but the cultural margins of the Brahmanical order.

(3) Finally, the episode foregrounds the issue of sovereign discretion in the suspension of normative codes. Both Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira are portrayed as moral exemplars whose actions typically reinforce, rather than subvert, the law. Vidura's violation is overt, but Yudhiṣṭhira's conduct occupies a liminal space, raising the question of whether a figure identified as *dharmarāja* may suspend the very norms he is tasked with upholding. Notably, Yudhiṣṭhira's familiarity with *mleccha* speech is never framed as sinful. When

[30] For an examination of Vidura as a figure embodying the principles of *dharma*, see the recent studies by Hegarty (2019), Roy (2022), and Srinivasan (2023), as well as numerous works on Yudhiṣṭhira as the embodiment of *dharma*, and on the *Mahābhārata*'s understanding of *dharma* itself. In the present paper, however, I primarily refer to the works of Hiltebeitel (2001, 2011), Chousalkar (2005) and Bowles (2007).

he reaches the afterlife in Book 18, his brief sojourn in hell is attributed solely to his strategic lie to Droṇa – not to his involvement in speaking the *mlecchavāc*[31]. The silence on this latter point is telling: it suggests that, in the moral narrative of the text, the use of a forbidden language during an existential crisis is not considered a stain upon his Dharma. This discussion also highlights the notion of the Law as a dynamic entity capable of transcending established norms. Such flexibility allows the legal system to adapt in response to extraordinary circumstances without negating the fundamental principle itself, as its application may be subject to contextual shifts. Yudhiṣṭhira's status as *dharmarāja* grants him the authority to overrule conventional norms, albeit solely in circumstances where the preservation of *dharma* is jeopardised. This is exemplified in the attempted assassination depicted in MBh 1.135. This notion finds congruence with the *āpaddharma*, which Bowles (2018: 246) defines as a situational justification made in time of crisis:

> This core principle is simply that, when prevailing circumstances render the pursuit of one's normal activities impossible, […] one may adopt the activities of a lower social class for the duration of the problematic circumstances.

By reading the episode of MBh 1.135 through the lens of *āpaddharma*, this study reveals how a moment of transgression – understood as the strategic use of *mlecchavāc* – serves not as a breakdown of normative order, but as a testament to its flexibility. In exceptional circumstances, the suspension of socio-linguistic taboos by legitimate figures such as Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira enables the moral system to accommodate crisis without negating its core values. The episode thus invites reflection on the boundaries of *dharma*, the role of sovereign discretion, and the structural elasticity of the Brahmanical legal order. The circumstances surrounding Duryodhana's scheme to assassinate the Pāṇḍavas exemplifies a state emergency that disrupts the «normal activities» that the Pāṇḍavas might otherwise have pursued, including the fulfilment of a royal invitation to Vāraṇavata. With the continued existence of *dharma* at risk, Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira are compelled to «adopt the activities of a lower social class», including speaking a *mlecchavāc* – typically forbidden – to plan for survival. The *āpaddharma*, as outlined in the Dharmaśāstra texts, involves Brahmins assuming specific roles within lower castes when conditions are not conducive to their traditional duties. The permissibility of such transitions is delineated by specific conditions (Bowles 2018: 249). In circumstances deemed extreme, the transgression of established norms is not merely permitted but is considered as essential for maintaining order and justice. In such cases, the survival of the *dharmarāja* is contingent on these transgressions, which can be regarded as temporary deviations or exceptions to the norm. The authority wielded by Yudhiṣṭhira and Vidura, in their roles of significant influence and responsibility to uphold *dharma*, serves to reinforce the foundational status of the norm, whilst allowing for its flexible implementation. This is evidenced by MBh 2.53.8, which highlights the misconduct of the Kauravas regarding Ārya behaviour. Consequently, the use of prohibited language is not merely a linguistic transgression; it also acts as a catalyst for deeper reflection on the core principles of societal order and the intrinsic values that sustain it.

[31] I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the anonymous reviewer who brought this episode to my attention. For a comprehensive examination of Yudhiṣṭhira's trials on his journey to heaven, see Adarkar (2005: 120-2); Austin (2008: 284-5, 2011: 117-9).

3. Conclusions

This paper has examined the ethical and normative complexities embedded within the *Mahābhārata* episode of the lacquer house (MBh 1.135). Set at a critical juncture where the survival of the ruling system, embodied by the King, is at stake, the episode presents Yudhiṣṭhira and Vidura, faced with an imminent threat, deliberately choosing to communicate in a non-Āryan language. This act directly contravenes the established norms outlined in foundational Brahmanical orthodox texts (ŚB 3.2.1.24; VDh 6.41; MDh 10.45; M 1.2 ll. 7-9), as well as in the *Mahābhārata* itself, which reflects Brahmanical reform propaganda (e.g. MBh 2.53.8). The ambiguity inherent in these prescribed norms has been analysed. While texts such as the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* limits the prohibition of *mleccha* language primarily to Brahmins, it remains uncertain whether such restrictions apply to figures like Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira, who occupy complex social positions that do not align neatly with conventional caste categories. As individuals associated with the preservation of law and order, they exist in a liminal space that complicates the ethical evaluation of their actions. Examining how normative constraints may be reconsidered in moments of existential threat suggests a degree of flexibility in moral principles when survival is at stake.

However, in this paper I have argued that their actions may be understood within the framework of *āpaddharma*, as outlined in the Dharmaśāstras. In this context, the use of a *mleccha* language – typically proscribed – could be interpreted as a pragmatic measure necessary for safeguarding the king and his lineage, thereby challenging rigid interpretations of ethical norms. The concept of *dharma*, rather than functioning as an immutable doctrine, instead appears to be a multifaceted principle shaped by context and circumstance (Bowles 2007; Hiltebeitel 2011). The *Mahābhārata* illustrates this adaptability through the responses of characters like Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira, who, when confronted with significant dilemmas, navigate complex ethical terrain (e.g., the dice game, Fleming 2020). Their engagement with *mleccha* speech in a moment of crisis further underscores *dharma*'s contextual nature. In their efforts to safeguard *dharma*, they even resort to the use of a *mleccha* language. Furthermore, the *Mahābhārata* does not present *dharma* as a static code but rather as an evolving concept, characterised by challenges and ambiguities. A detailed examination of its philosophical and normative dimensions suggests a «recurring Brahmanical pattern» (Hiltebeitel 2011: 201, 204) that is evident in both the *Mahābhārata* and *Mānavadharmaśāstra*. This perspective provides insight into *dharma*'s inherent dynamism – one that resists rigid categorisation and adapts to shifting realities.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

AŚ	Kauṭilīya's *Arthaśāstra*. Ed. and tr. Kangle (1965-1972).
Ind.	*Indica*. Ed. and tr. Robson (1966).
M	Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*. Ed. and tr. Joshi (1986).
MBh	*Mahābhārata*. Ed. Sukthankar, Belvalkar, and Vaidya (1933-1971).
MDh	*Manusmrti.* Ed. and tr. Olivelle (2005).

ŚB *Śatapatha-brāhmana*. Ed. Eggeling (1963-1978) [1882-1900].
VDh *Vasiṣṭhadharmasūtra*. Ed. and tr. Olivelle (2000).

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