



Malta  
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Association

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## Sanskrit: The Philosophy

*Michael Zammit\**

Life is not merely a biological event. Indeed it may be construed as a linguistic fact especially in the light of a philosophy that, rather than claiming sagacity, assumes to be but a way of life and discourse determined by the *eideion*, the vision of wisdom. The etymology of the word *philosophia* itself, *i.e. being friends with wisdom*, advocates this very project for *living* philosophy. On the other hand, philosophy is far too often associated with the formation of a critical and independent attitude, with a method of disciplined thought, rigorous and reflective, rooted in wonder, enquiry and indeed astonishment... a rather romantic approach! Certainly such efforts *do* constitute an arsenal of worthy endeavours, activities surely indispensable to the formation of the good citizen and as such necessary for active participation in the civic life, sporting a free and hopefully autonomous spirit. But, alas, in the final analysis, these are merely the means to an end, tools and instruments. What is the end, then?

The human being, all too keenly aware of its seeming ultimate limitation (call it death: *mrityum*) often lives in the combatant, Arjuna's stance, the broken-hearted general of *Bhagavad Gita* fame, prior to getting his hands dirty in the terrible events of the Great War in the 100,000-verse Sanskrit epic poem *The Mahabharata*. Life is laden with grief.

Arjuna knows he is destined to die here in the field of battle, the field that is life, the field of action (*Kurukshetra*). He knows that his near ones, those that he loves so dearly, will also die. In the effort of coming up against this limit and with a purpose to gain peace and serenity, he seeks advice from none other than Krishna, his uncle, his charioteer, but who is also a divine incarnation of the Absolute, the limitless Brahman.<sup>1</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> A. Sastry (1991), 292.



Greek terms, *philein*, mere friendship, and *storge*, nepotism, need to be transformed, be made intimate and transformed into *eros*, that love may strive towards that selfless and sublime form of itself, *agape*. The transformative *eros* in turn is ultimately what operates alchemically to transmute this lead into gold, the profane into the sacred form of love.

Incidentally, the term *eros* is derived from the Sanskrit seminal form (called *dhatu*) *ram* - a seed form that, as the Sanskrit master grammarian Panini claims, produces words (*eros* for one) called *pada* (lit. *stepping out* into the creation) that as the recitation of *dhatu* declares: *happens in the events of play, sport and generally being delighted*.<sup>2</sup>

In Sanskrit, all words can structurally be traced back to verbal seed forms (the *dhatu*) that are defined by the realms in which they become operative and manifest as speech forms, their constituent consonantal and vocalic phonemes, and some foundational vowel cluster that ultimately dissolves into the *a-kara*, i.e., the sound *a*, the first expression of that ultimately virile silence that is *pra-jñanam*, consciousness.

The creation is thought of as language, the manifest totality of gestures expressing something that enigmatically sounds very much like nothing at all; indeed, a sort of silence, not sterile, not a deadly silent word, but a step (once again, *pada*: a word) taken softly away from some witness, some vigour that subsists all that is human and thus creative.

In the midst of life, death manifests as all that which will not return. It belongs to the perfect tense, the time past in a linear chronology, a time over and done with. Finally, then, fear is the deep-seated terror in the face of the irreversible.

A well-formed language from all sides defies the linear. It is not (as Sanskrit declares) *prakriti* (i.e., natural) and, therefore, not a natural language (called *Prakrit*) at all. Like Euclid's geometry, Paninean Sanskrit is the result of an extraordinarily profound investigation into the ultimately ineffable springs of being human - an enquiry carried out, not in spatial terms (as with geometry), but in temporal metaphors, in terms of tense and mood.

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<sup>2</sup> S.R. Hill and P.G. Harrison (1991), 51.

How this wrought language of humanity's most ancient culture addresses the dismantling of the impediments to the availability of freedom (*moksha*) from the paralysis caused by ignorance and cupidity becomes an urgent reason for a detailed contemporary investigation of its philosophical underpinnings. Study of the Sanskrit language, then, manifests as not being merely for the sake of the spoken tongue, but to understand the Self... called *Atman*... the absolutely reversible... *Atman* from the *dhatu an* for 'breathing' and *man* meaning 'thinking'.

The master *vyakaranani* Panini never even uses the term Sanskrit in his brilliant effort to codify the language.<sup>3</sup>

He uses two terms: *bhasha*, the spoken language and *chandas*, a text in verse. What he codifies, therefore, is the spoken. He takes a non-historical, rather structural view of this tongue.

“Through this document Panini appears to us as being a follower of the Vedic [*dharma*] possessing a great literary knowledge, gifted with an undisputed scientific genius and coming to possess in this way an acute linguistic awareness”.<sup>4</sup>

It seems likely that Panini flourished sometime near to the 4th century B.C., and so great was his achievement, that it came to be considered to have had divine origins like the ancient Veda literature itself, the direct inspiration of *Vac*, speech personified as goddess.

Like the Neo-Platonic *logos*, *vac* much earlier was recognized as *The Word*, the supreme source of the Universe, the Creative Principle symbolized in the resounding sacred incantation of the seed syllable *Om*, regarded as the basis or *bija* (the seed) of all *mantras*, the root-syllable of origination and dissolution. Thus the *Mandukya* Upanishad declares: *Om iti etad aksharam idam sarvam*:

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<sup>3</sup> Pāṇini and S.C. Vasu (1962).

<sup>4</sup> P. Filliozat (2000), 25.

“As all these objects that are indicated by names are non-different from the names; and as names are non-different from Om; so Om is verily all this.”<sup>5</sup>

When faced with a multitude of natural languages, what can the human genius do? How to respond?

The democratic retort is to lump them all together and declare the resulting amalgam to be the one tongue as per the rich ancient Greek language. On the other hand, one may choose some one language from the many, declaring *that* as *the* official *lingua franca* thereby creating a hierarchy of languages and demoting all the other (now inferior) tongues to the status of dialects.

Only after having been used extensively in its oral format, and after being elaborately honed, perfectly constructed and refined, possibly distilled from the natural languages, the *Prakrit* themselves, into its ultimately elaborately cultivated literary and generally civilized forms, did the language come to be called *Sanskrita*, the well-formed - a sort of software underpinning – as the ancient philosophical heritage would declare – the complex gestural dynamic, that constitutes the very nature of the cosmos. Panini’s *Ashtadhyayi* (the *Eight Meditations*) in 4000 *sutra* aphorisms, therefore, becomes the detailed record of the Sanskrit using meta-linguistic codes that vocally trace the ever-becoming, the eternal transience of Nature, *bhu* through to the ever-lasting presence of what the *Rig Veda*<sup>6</sup> calls a pregnant silence, as expressed by the *dhatu* (the seminal form) *as* (pronounced like the English term, *us*)... *lit. is-ness*.

Sanskrit, therefore, is other than the common natural languages, the *Prakrit*. It is the language of the highly educated men and women meaning to access the occult knowledge of the *Veda*, a language that does not merely speak *about* the cosmos, but stands as the very foundation for it, its (so to speak) software. Sanskrit therefore teases out the insight that, as the mirage does not exist apart from the light that forms it, and as the laptop does not exist apart from its software, so also the manifest creation

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<sup>5</sup> Śaṅkarācārya and Gambhirananda (1966), 179.

<sup>6</sup> S. Ghosh (2002).

does not exist apart from the names and speech-forms, *namarupa*<sup>7</sup> that articulate it.

Also known as *The Veda of Praise*, the ancient *Rig Veda* consists of a collection of hymns, about 1,028 arranged in ten books called *mandalam*, cycles. In the Indian tradition, the *Rig Veda* acknowledged to be a record of divine revelation, is *seen* as well as *heard* by the inspired seers, the *rishi*. The term *veda* from *vid* carries the sense of wisdom, deep and everlasting, inbuilt into the very fabric of the cosmos. In turn, the *Rig Veda* becomes itself the greatest source of information about early Indian social, political, religious and linguistic development.

John Muir, in his five-volume work, claims that “the Sanskrit Rig Veda provides far more illustrations of the workings of the human mind, in the period of its infancy, upon matters of religion, than can be found in any other literature whatsoever”.<sup>8</sup> The reference to the mind’s infancy is of course gratuitous and superfluous, mere pompous prattling. This Vedic prototypical tongue seems to have been in the main the language of the Aryan races believed to have originally settled in the Indus/Sarasvati region of N.W. India before relocating to the banks of the Ganges when these former rivers somehow dried up, and this was a highly sophisticated civilization at that. These peoples later migrated, spreading into Iran (derivative of Aryan of course) India and eventually Europe c. 2000 to 1700 B.C. In turn, from this prototype evolved the principal languages of Northern India and those comprising the Indo-European group including Ancient Greek and Latin. Although not widely used, what came to be called Sanskrit today is by no means a dead language, let alone a primitive one or the fruit of a mind in its infancy! It is still studied, taught, and used extensively in India, but also in several other centres of learning and universities throughout the world.

As already mentioned, the earliest standard Sanskrit investigation into the dynamics of language to go on record is Panini’s *Ashtadhyayi* (*lit.* The Eight Meditations) - a masterpiece composed of some 4,000 rules (*sutrani*) and even by India’s British rule, regarded as *one of the most*

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<sup>7</sup> Śaṅkarācārya and Gambhirananda (1993), 181.

<sup>8</sup> J. Muir (1860), 2.

*remarkable literary works of all time... [N]o other country can produce any grammatical system at all comparable to it, either for originality of plan or for its analytical subtlety.*<sup>9</sup>

Panini's work enumerates the technical terms used in his investigation, the rules for their interpretation and application, which in turn he presents as a kind of recitation... an incantatory collection of *suṭrani* (aphorisms) that capture and trace the natural history of the Language that he never calls Sanskrit, the well-formed. The sounds of this language, which incidentally, he never associates with any geographical location, are present as *akṣharam*, indestructible; and the script in which they are written, their place of residence, he calls *deva nagari* – the abode of the divinities.

The term Panini uses for what he does is not *grammar* either. Rather he claims to be doing *vyakarana*, which actually means dismantling, undoing or, perhaps as we might wish to say, *deconstruction*. Panini's genius, therefore, does not *explain* language in terms of *graphein* (writing) at all. Rather he investigates language as a detailed process of dissolution, a *re-(a)nunciation* that is applied primarily to the analysis of the spoken tongue and then generally to the philosophy underpinning his *opus magnum*. After declaring the identity of names, *Om* and the *all this (sarvam, as it is termed)*, the *Mandukya Upanishad Commentary* I quoted earlier continues by stating: *And as the Supreme Brahman is known through the relationship subsisting, between name and its object, It, too, is but Om.*<sup>10</sup> It is this subsistent relationship of name and its object, which becomes Panini's focus. The question is: what then is the object of a name?

The Sanskrit term for *object* is actually *karma*, (*lit.* action); and Panini defines *karma* as *that most desired by any agency (karta, the subject)* that in turn, since it (*karta*) carries the ability to deliver, assumes the responsibility for what is done as expressed by the verb (*kriya*). Therefore the objects (*karma*) of seeing are sights, of hearing, sounds; and the object of name is to distinguish and separate one thing from another.

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<sup>9</sup> W. Monier (1978), 172.

<sup>10</sup> Śaṅkarācārya and Gambhirananda (1966), 180.

Name indicates some thing and in turn makes it communicable. The English term *name* is obviously derived from the Sanskrit *naman* from the seed form *nam* that carries the sense of *giving what is deserved*. The *karma* of *naman* thus is definition.<sup>11</sup>

Panini, it seems, is the first to have described the deconstruction of the Sanskrit language in terms of its *block structures*, as also how sentences are recursively built from smaller phrases, and eventually from individual words and word elements. This is traced all the way down to the most basic humanly produced vocal patterns of sound, the consonants and the vowels, and finally to silence. In turn, he creates a meta-language that tracks the emergence of speech systematically all the way from any first disturbance of silence. This happens in a realm where the attitudes reside, called *pashyanti*, a free witnessing stance which he identifies with the vocalic vowel modifications of *a*, the natural phonetic expression of the very basis of human awareness. Concurrently, the path of the deconstruction of speech is kept open, enabling the linguistic possibility of a return to silence to be structurally traceable from any utterance. It is possible, therefore, by means of the Sanskrit *vyakarana*, to step-by-step resolve all speech acts, through the words used, and their parts, to some sequence of vowel sounds that in turn may be experienced as so many modifications of *a-kara*, the primitive *a* (as in the word *art*) sound, that is, in turn none other than the original expression of consciousness... at least for the human being. No wonder that Krishna declares in the Bhagavad Gita that of all the *aksharani*, i.e., the indestructible sounds possible to the human creature, he is the *a*-sound, the *a-kara*, i.e., the *a*-modification of presence (*as*) of awareness: *aksharanam akaro'smi*.<sup>12</sup>

This methodology is simply not conceived of for any other language, and enables the Sanskrit *vyakarana* technique and its linguistic analysis to recover and discover its real roots in the ancient philosophical reflections of the *Veda*, the primal wisdom and their attendant Upanishad.

The contemporary examination of this language is still yielding new results. It recently became the inspiration for the study and development

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<sup>11</sup> S.R. Hill and P.G. Harrison (1991).

<sup>12</sup> A. Sastry (1991), 273.

of what have come to be known as Context-free grammars. Context-free grammars are important for describing the structures of sentences and words in natural languages, and in computer science for describing the structures of programming languages as well as other artificial languages.

To return to the *well-formed* language, therefore, the goal of the *vyakaranin* (the deconstructionists, call them *grammarians* if you wish) and of their philosophy is not mere intellectual knowledge, but a striving for the direct experience of ultimate truth... philosophical (as in *a way of life*) truth. *Satyameva jayate*: nothing but the truth (*satyam*) surely succeeds.

The Sanskrit, therefore, claims that a knowledge of *vyakarana* (deconstruction) necessarily leads to correct articulate speech which does not convey mere *meaning*, i.e., in the last analysis a geometrically inspired notion that identifies *significance* with the *mean* between some *thing* and the *word* that denotes it. Rather, the relationship subsisting between name and its object turns out to be some *wealth*, some *value*. The Sanskrit term for what we would call *meaning*, *artha*, is from the seminal *dhatu ri, ar, and ra*, to reach, to move, to reach for some merit, some value, all cognate with, of course, the Greek *aristos* and *arête*, the striving for excellence. Here, then, is the opportunity that enables one *to see* (*darshan* for *vision*) and to appreciate wealth, excellence and reality (*sat*). In turn, the term *darshan* is also used to refer to the various Sanskrit schools of philosophy as so many varied ways of life.

These, therefore, are some features that set the Sanskrit philosophies and their linguistic analysis apart from modern Western perspectives. The Sanskrit *vyakarana* does not merely address itself to the analysis of language through the *grammatical rules*, as we would want to conceive of them, though that is certainly also present and important. Nor does *vyakarana* merely theorize about how speech conveys *meaning*, though that is also done in Panini's system. Rather, *vyakarana* insists by means of its deconstructionist methodology, that we ought not to be satisfied with mere intellectual certainties, but that we should strive to transform our language-based investigation of life and becoming, into a direct and unmediated experience of truth, call it *presence*, call it *silence*. The Sanskrit *vyakarana* (from *karana* for tool, and *vya* which carries the sense

of expansion) is wrought as a tool to provide for this discipline, as so beautifully captured in the sense of the ancient *Upanishadic* literature.

### *Om Tat Sat*

“Having bowed to the shining Sarasvati, goddess of wisdom, knowledge and music (consort of Brahma) I salute that which, by the reflection of the light of knowledge, is brought in the end, to inward perfection, and as revealed through Panini”.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Pāṇini and S.C. Vasu (1962).