

SOUND, WORD AND MEANING – SANSKRIT AND THE CLASSICS

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The great family of Indo-European languages which are understood to have been spoken in the land of India, and of which Vedic Sanskrit is the Indian branch, existed as far back as the middle of the second millennium B.C. The Vedic language prevailed across a millennium and stretched over a vast area, the Indo-Gangetic plain.¹ Only from the third century B.C. were the various Indo-Aryan speeches documented for us by inscription of the emperor Aśoka. When the great grammarian Pāṇini standardized the Sanskrit language at around this time, Sanskrit became the language of a vast outpouring of artistic, scientific, poetic and philosophical expression.

What is remarkable about Sanskrit, as Filliozat maintains is that, from the very beginning, speakers of Sanskrit were able to be self-conscious witnesses of their own speech:

All language exists as a knowledge as well as a state of awareness in the minds of individual speakers... In the case of Sanskrit, we are very well informed about it. Well-read Indians, with very keen linguistic awareness, have taken care to formulate how they represented their spoken language to themselves. This representation is an integral part of the language as a component of the conscious linguistic knowledge of the speaker.²

What follows is a fleeting glimpse into the world of Classical Sanskrit, and a sense of the breadth with which this extraordinary language

¹ P. S. Filliozat (2000) 15.

² P. S. Filliozat (2000) 7.

operates. The word *Veda* is derived from the seed-form *vid* which means 'knowledge'.³ From *vid* we have *wissen* in German and *wisdom* in English.

To begin with, language in Sanskrit is looked upon as a *divinity*, and of this notion, we find the earliest formulation in the *R̥g Veda* (ca 2000 B.C.) and then much later, in the Upanishads (ca. 500 B.C.). *Śabda* is eternal – *śabda* being human speech, or, as we would have it, 'the Word'.⁴ Around the notion of *śabda* has evolved an entire philosophy of knowledge – that is, speech-generated knowledge⁵ because *śabda* is a creative power – an energy (*śakti*) or force placed above everything else – a creative force which has itself brought forth the universe.

In the *R̥g Veda*, *Vāc*, the Word, speaks thus:

I am the ruler who brings treasures together, who understands; of those who receive worship, I am foremost . . . Whomever I love, him I make powerful... a seer, a sage... I pervade heaven and earth. It is I who have birth to the Father on the summit of this [world].⁶

R̥g Veda 10:125

Of course, this is reminiscent of the Greek 'In the beginning was the Word.' But the *Atharva Veda* goes one step further, and identifies *Vāc* with *Virāt*, the cosmic being or the universe. What this means is that, from its very etymology, the word 'speech' – *vāc* is shown to be embodied in the universe as its luminous, nourishing, creative, ruling principle of energy.⁷ *Virāt* means 'to govern, to shine forth' and 'to be sovereign, excellent and pre-eminent'. So, already, from the start, the notion of language takes on a *universal* meaning.

But, to go back to *śabda*. *Śabda* is also *sound*. The system of Sanskrit states unequivocally that it is the sound which is, in fact, the causal form

³ M. Monier-Williams (1956) 963/2.

⁴ M. Monier-Williams (1956) 1052/2.

⁵ A. Padoux (1990) 3.

⁶ A. Padoux (1990) 7-8.

⁷ A. Padoux (1990) 8-9.

of everything in the universe.⁸ Language, after all, is made up of sound and, in Sanskrit, it is sound that enable us to get in touch with the essence of things.⁹ Sound in Sanskrit is of a very special nature. The sounds of Sanskrit are free of distortion.¹⁰ They are pure and original, and their creative power is therefore intact. They reveal what is called the *rasa* – the sweet taste of goodness, which only the connoisseurs enjoy, for it is always hidden behind the apparent form of things.¹¹ Only the erudite gets access to this *rasa* which is flowing in all things and which is the Absolute Himself.

How is this? We are suggesting that what is available in Sanskrit is a system, unparalleled in its refinement and intelligence, which effectively does two things:

1. It reveals words where the sound itself carries the creative force (*śakti*) and where the creative force is the meaning. Here, meaning and sound are directly connected. These are the mantras. There is no parallel to this in the Classical languages.¹²
2. It offers us a variety of so-called ordinary words, which, when examined in their unspoken seed-form (*dhātu*) and semantic form (*artha*) convey meanings which reverberate from subtlest levels to the causal world.

I will give one or two examples:

1. **Sanskrit** *ātman* – the soul, principle of life and sensation, the self, derived from the seed-form *at* which is to be known in the realm of *sātatyā-gamane* – uninterrupted going, wandering, pervading; or derived from the seed-form *an* which is to be known in the realm of *prānane* – breathing.

⁸ B. K. Matilal (2001) 49.

⁹ This does not refer to mantra which will be discussed subsequently.

¹⁰ This is because the language, from the time of its codification by Pāṇini, has not undergone any substantial change despite the lapse of time.

¹¹ S. M. Jaiswell (2014) 35.

¹² P. Douglas (2013) 74.

Greek ὁ ἄτμος – smoke or steam, derived the root ἄω – to blow.

Latin *anima* – the vital principle, the breath of life, the soul.

2. **Sanskrit** seed-form *jñā* – to know, to acknowledge, to recognize as one's own; to be experienced in *avabodhana* – knowing, in *māraṇa* – killing, in *toṣaṇa* – satisfying, in *niśāmana* – observing, in *niyoga* – ordering, directing.

Greek γινωσκω – to ascertain, to know

Latin *nosco* – to know

In Sanskrit, words are said to be of the nature of light. Language is *bhāsa* from the noun *bhāti* – splendour, *knowledge*. In their function, therefore, in their ability to reflect all three worlds – the material world of matter, the mental world of concepts and forms, and the spiritual world – words are akin to consciousness.

But we will go one step further. In Classical Sanskrit, grammarians identified the *vowel sounds* as the conscious element.¹³ The fourteen vowels are called the *svarā* literally 'the shining ones' from the seed-form *svr* – to shine, and moreover, on a different plane, they are an imitation or a reflection of the sixteen *mātrikā*, described in classical philosophy of language as, '[T]he basic measures which give rise to the forms and qualities of this creation at the causal, subtle and physical levels; the natural laws, the will of the Absolute'.¹⁴

Svarā, the vowels, are the consciousness. They are so called because they embody life and breath, unimpeded. The consonants, *vyanjanā*, which limit them are akin to matter.¹⁵ Since vowels are made up of pure breath, without contact in the vocal apparatus, each one of the nine vowel sounds would be lengthened indefinitely unless the consonant puts a stop to the sound and thereby fixes the measure of the sound. Language in this way is an imitation of the creation – the substance of the

¹³ P. Douglas (2013) 30.

¹⁴ P. Douglas (2013) 29.

¹⁵ P. Douglas (2013) 31.

alphabet is the substance of the creation – consciousness plus matter – the stuff all things are made of.¹⁶

From *svarā* to *vyanjanā*, we are naturally led to another, as it is termed, ‘imperishable’ aspect of the Absolute and of language – the basis both of speech and of creation. This is *akśara* – ‘the syllable’, but also ‘that which does not flow out or perish, the indestructible.’¹⁷ As early as the *Ṛg Veda*, *akśara* is the sacred, original all-powerful – we would call it ‘phoneme’ – the smallest division of the word.¹⁸

Incidentally, thanks to de Saussure, who identified the phoneme through his study of Sanskrit, this is also the source of the system of Western linguistics. But mark the way Sanskrit approaches it:

When the first dawns were gleaming, the great thing, the *akśara*, is born which leads to the transcendental language.¹⁹

Ṛg Veda 10.71.3

As to the sacred nature of *akśara*, the Upanishads could not be more emphatic. The *Chandogya Upanishad* states, ‘*Akśara* is the foremost of all essences, the supreme essence, the most excellent.’ The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* declares, ‘*Akśara* is the Absolute, the imperishable, the unconditional, the foundation and basis of everything’.²⁰

But the natural question at this point is – having affirmed the sacred and eternal nature of language, how might language be taught so that the knowledge might serve as an instrument of transformation at the most profound level?

¹⁶ Although Plato’s *Cratylus* considers, to some extent, the nature and origin of words, we do not ever come across any profound reflections on the nature of the basic sounds of the alphabet in classical literature.

¹⁷ A. Padoux (1990) 13.

¹⁸ A. Padoux (1990) 14.

¹⁹ A. Padoux (1990) 13.

²⁰ A. Padoux (1990) 13.

The system is *Śabda Brahman* – Speech is Brahman. Brahman is a form of the Word which is most remarkable²¹ which is used throughout the Vedic writings to refer to the Supreme Reality, and which, as early as the R̥g Veda, is identified with the Word as co-extensive with it: ‘as much as Brahman did expand, as large is the Word.’²²

So what is *Śabda Brahman*? The study of language for Sanskrit entailed, at the very beginning, a ‘birth into the Brahman’ because the student, termed a *brahmacarin*, is one who practises Brahman, and this is a process of profound transformation.²³ How does this transformation occur? It happens through a definite process of seven steps. These constitute eight psychological states²⁴ which start from the state of the physical and external sound and from the grammar.²⁵ Here, grammar means Pāṇini and note that all the grammatical elements of Pāṇini are essentially oral, and depend entirely on the training of the student’s memory.

The second stage happens at the mental level – *madhyamā* – which is the cause of physical expression. *Madhyamā* looks towards the third stage – clarity and purity at *paśyantī* – that is, in the realm of the emotions. Ultimately, the student enters into the Supreme Reality and simply manifests purity and goodness at *parā*. *Śabda Brahman* is now complete. Speech and Brahman have merged. One might now have a little insight into Bhartṛhari’s famous words:

Grammar is the door of freedom, the medicine for the diseases of language, the first rung of the ladder that leads up to realization of

²¹ A. Padoux (1990) 6.

²² R̥g Veda 10.114.8.

²³ P. S. Filliozat (1992) 77.

²⁴ The eight psychological states experienced by the student of language are: 1. The desire to listen, which demands one-pointed attention, 2. Hearing of the word – *śravaṇa*, 3. Apprehending with the mind – *grahana*, 4. Memorisation – *dhāraṇa*, 5. Reflection and seeking the application of the teaching, 6. Refined comprehension with discrimination of nuances, 7. Full and complete entry into the reality of the meaning. Cf. P. S. (Filliozat), 78.

²⁵ P. S. Filliozat (1992) 78.

supernatural powers, and the straight royal road for those who seek freedom.²⁶

Śabda Brahman will have done its work when the student arrives at an awareness of speech as the Principle, the Absolute Brahman. All ignorance is then undone.

One final observation on *Śabda Brahman*. The four stages in the discipline of the Word which have just been described correspond to the four parts of the Word.²⁷ The *Ṛg Veda*, long before the intricate and brilliant exposition of the *Māndukya Upanishad*, says:

The Word is measured in four quarters which are known to those endowed with intelligence. Three remain concealed and motionless; human beings speak the fourth quarter of the Word.

Ṛg Veda 1.164.45

The fourth quarter is the spoken word – *vaikharī*. The third, the mental realm, seems to originate below the larynx – *madhyamā*, and in the second, the realm of emotion, words come from the heart – *paśyantī*.²⁸ When the Word is spoken from the area of the navel, it is at its most effective and creative – at *parā*.²⁹ It is worth noting at this point that our investigation into language in the context of Greek and Latin tends to stop at the fourth quarter – speech on the tongue, and does not go any further.

The system of *Śabda Brahman*, as we have seen works backward through these four levels of speech. This is an essential part of Sanskrit grammar. Incidentally, we learn that there are still pundits today who choose to live the ideal of their ancestors. The aim of the Sanskrit pundit is to equip his innermost being, and, in the end, to be independent of

²⁶ P. S. Filliozat (1992) 65.

²⁷ A. Padoux (1990) 21.

²⁸ A. Douglas (2013) 61.

²⁹ P. S. Filliozat (1992) 118.

books and external aids. His duty is eternal and his responsibility is to the whole of humanity.³⁰

We have spoken of two types of words in Sanskrit – ordinary words which rely on the system of *dhātu* and *artha* to be understood, and special words – mantra. Some explanation follows regarding mantra.

As we are aware, mantra is exclusively Sanskrit phenomenon. The distinguishing quality of mantra is its power.³¹ Here, and here alone, the sound carries force and force is meaning. Of course, the force of a mantra will show itself in different ways because it is the nature of mantra to have many meanings, just like the single master-key which opens many doors. Vedic mantras are called ‘natural’ words – or, if you like, special words – as they are not created but experienced, or seen, by the wise.

What does this term mean, ‘natural words’? Particular sounds or words which *cause* things to exist are natural words. The measure of vowels within the sound, together with the consonants, create original language which affect both the physical world and the inner world of ordinary man, as well as his metabolism. Thus, word as mantra has power to transform – both on individual and universal level. Pierre-Sylvan Filliozat maintains:

The power of Sanskrit mantra in Vedic ritual is considered as having the ability to accomplish the presence of the divinity with its true essence . . . Sanskrit has in exclusivity [this] transcendental power.³²

This is called transcended speech or transcendent speech. At this point, speech and Sanskrit are identical. The power of *mantra* is considered as the distinguishing quality of Sanskrit.³³

Linguistics in India developed from the fifth century B.C. and with it the philosophy of language. Pāṇini’s system of 4,000 sutras lays down the laws which regulate the generation of all types of words, by starting from the smallest element, the phoneme or *akṣara*, proceeding to the

³⁰ P. S. Filliozat (1992) 29.

³¹ P. S. Filliozat (1992) 117 ff.

³² P. S. Filliozat (1992) 119.

³³ P. S. Filliozat (1992) 119.

generation of seed-forms, *dhatu*, and the application of *pratyaya*, what we would call 'affixes', to form *pada*, words and beyond that, the generation of derived words. The system of *kārake* – the six factors of action which make use of the case-endings but are *not* the case-endings is intricately and precisely governed by Pāṇini's Sūtras. Knowledge of language thus comes with knowledge of the richness and beauty of words.

There is no denying the beauty and allure of classical languages in the West, but if ever there existed a system of laws which regulated how stems acquire their affixes to become words that can be used in sentences, this system has been lost. The student is given no explanation.

We have started with *śabda* as referring to the Word. It stands also for a linguistic utterance which gives rise to a special type of knowledge, which is to be distinguished from perception and inference. We are very familiar in the West with the Socratic manner of dialectic as a means of eliciting truth and it is easy to see how the traditional system of *śabdabodha* – knowledge from linguistic utterance – both confirms the Socratic method and refines it, raising it to a different level altogether. For *śabdabodha* rests on eight specific and distinct elements which lay out for us, with unerring precision, the causal mechanism of knowledge, triggered off by the spoken word.

This helps to understand why *all* the grammatical elements of Pāṇini are designed to be an auditory system and they, in fact, function, like memorized knowledge. This is a small part of the most precious treasure of the Sanskrit pundit. The Sanskrit pundit easily retrieves each word instantly for he has memorized texts from a very young age, e.g. the *Mahābhārata*, possibly the longest epic of humanity, one hundred thousand śloka where character at times have ten different names, an epic having different levels of meaning.

What has been described is merely a fragment of the system of learning Sanskrit. I will end with what Śāntānanda Sarasvatī said in 1973 which deserves some reflection:

Whatever one sees in the creation has a counterpart in the *akṣara* sounds of language . . . *ka* stands for happiness and *kha* stands for space ... In short, all these sounds have certain qualities held within

them and use of these qualities in certain measure produces certain effects.

But to understand this, one would have to learn the grammar and all the laws held in the Sanskrit grammar.

Glossary

<i>śabda</i>	sound, word, speech
root <i>śabd</i>	to sound, to call, to invoke (in <i>āviṣkāra</i> – speaking, calling, revealing)
<i>virāt</i>	to reign, rule, govern; to shine forth; sovereign, excellent, pre-eminent; ruling far and wide
<i>rasa</i>	the best or finest part of anything
root <i>ras</i>	to roar, reverberate, to sound, to praise (in <i>āsvādana</i> – tasting; in <i>sneyhana</i> – delighting)
<i>bhāṣā</i>	speech
root <i>bhāṣ</i>	to speak, to announce
<i>bhāti</i>	light, knowledge, splendour
root <i>bhā</i>	(in <i>dīpti</i> – shining)
<i>svara</i>	sound, vowel
root <i>svr</i>	to resound, to shine, to praise, to sing
<i>akṣara</i>	imperishable, unalterable, a syllable
root <i>kṣara</i>	melting away, waning, perishable
<i>Brahman</i>	expansion, growth, the one divine essence, the Self-existent, the eternal
root <i>bṛh</i>	(in <i>udyamana</i> – growing, increasing, expanding; in <i>śabda</i> – sounding)
<i>mantra</i>	sacred formula addressed to an individual deity; prayer; song of praise.
root <i>man</i>	(in <i>avabodhana</i> – considering; in <i>jñāna</i> – knowing, thinking)
<i>Atman</i>	the soul, principle of life and sensation, the self
root <i>at</i>	(in <i>sātatyā-gamane</i> – uninterrupted going, wandering, pervading)
root <i>an</i>	(in <i>prānane</i> – breathing)

root <i>jnā</i>	to know, perceive, apprehend; to acknowledge; to recognize as one's own in <i>avabodhana</i> – knowing; in <i>māraṇa</i> – killing; in <i>toṣaṇa</i> – satisfying; in <i>niśāmana</i> – observing; in <i>niyoga</i> – ordering, directing).
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