

# Language and Truth

A study of the Sanskrit language and its  
relationship with principles of truth

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## Pronunciation Guide

Almost all Sanskrit words appear in italics in the text and may then be sounded in accordance with this pronunciation guide.

a	final a in 'Rāma'	ñ	n in 'bungalow'
ā	a in 'dart'	c	ch in 'church'
i	i in 'it'	ch	chh in 'beachhead'
ī	ee in 'peel'	ñ	n in same mouth position as ch
u	u in 'pull'	ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh ṇ	tip of tongue in roof of mouth
ū	oo in 'pool'	v	w
ṛ	ri in 'Krishna'	ś	sh
ṛ	lry in 'revelry'	ṣ	sh with tip of tongue in roof of mouth
e	a in 'late'	m	nasal only through nose before a sibilant
ai	y in 'my'	ḥ	breath at end ( <i>visarga</i> ) e.g. ah
o	o in 'open'		
au	ow in 'vow'		

The aspirated consonants eg kh, jh, th, dh are sounded with breath through the k, j etc.

All other letters are written and sounded as in English.

Emphasis should be placed on long vowels and on short vowels which are followed by conjunct consonants. For example the first 'a' of *pratyaya* is emphasised because it is followed by two consonants.

## Introduction

THE aim in this book is to explore what relationship there may be between language and truth. That deceptively simple word, 'truth', can be understood in various ways, but for the purpose of this book, it is taken as understood in the philosophy of Advaita (Non-dualism). More particularly, a good part of the book discusses ways in which one language, Sanskrit, can be seen as embodying the principles of Advaita.

I took up the study of Sanskrit some thirty years ago, having been led to this by the Advaitic teaching of Śrī Śāntānanda Sarasvatī, Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math from 1961 – 85. This teaching was given in conversations\* with Leon MacLaren, founder and former leader of the School of Economic Science in London. In particular I was struck by one statement: 'The grammatical rules of Sanskrit are also the rules of the creation.' This has been an enduring interest while studying the language, but it took some time to realise the obvious fact that the statement can only really begin to be critically examined and understood when there is a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit grammar. That has necessitated penetration of the master Sanskrit grammarian, Pāṇini, whose classic work, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, with nearly 4000 sutras or succinct statements of law, was composed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. That study has proceeded slowly but steadily in the company of fellow students in the School, and much has been appreciated along the way. It may therefore be worthwhile setting down what has been discovered to provide a staging post on the way to a full understanding of the statement and its practical application.

\* These conversations are unpublished and the rights are reserved.

We have been guided in these studies by the words of Śrī Śāntānanda Sarasvatī, who has made a number of mind-provoking statements about the Sanskrit language. For example:

‘Sanskrit has all its words full of spiritual significance.’

‘The truth was originally declared through the Sanskrit language, and it still holds the truth in its original form.’

‘Sanskrit is refined and truly natural for it contains original laws and original sounds and their combinations.’

I would like to thank Annick Hardaker, Helen Harper, Brian Hodgkinson, and Reverend Dr Stephen Thompson for providing me with very helpful comments on drafts of the book, and for their encouragement. I must also thank S M Jaiswal for the inspiring lead he has given over the years in investigating the philosophy of the Sanskrit language, and acknowledge that the vision and teaching of Leon MacLaren in my initial years of Sanskrit study have provided a firm foundation and direction for all later studies.

## Chapter 1

# Different premises on which language may be founded

1.1 Various views and explanations of language have been expressed over the ages. Each depends on the premise on which it is founded. It is not the purpose of this book to investigate these premises, but it may help set the scene to give a brief description of how language is seen from certain premises, including particularly the Advaitic premise.

### **Advaita**

*Advaita* is a Sanskrit word which translates as Non-duality. The Advaitic premise is that reality or truth is one, totally still, yet all-pervasive, pure, omniscient, partless, conscious and self-existent. The apparent multiplicity of the world is not real. In truth it is one. The seen is no different from the seer, as in a dream. The multiplicity is in name and form only. These forms reflect the unity to a greater or lesser extent, as in humans, animals, plants and stones. Our true nature is identical with the nature of the One Self. The nature of the One, the Self, the Absolute, God, Brahman, is existence, consciousness and bliss – *sat, cit, ānanda* in Sanskrit. The universe appears as an expression of the nature of the Absolute, through the powers or forces of the Absolute. This manifestation has three stages or worlds: causal or spiritual; subtle or mental/emotional; and physical/material. When any of these terms are used in this book, they refer to the relevant world.

## 1.2 An Advaitic View of Language

How then can there be an Advaitic view of language? In the same way as there is an Advaitic view of the world. This oneness is expressed by sound in the natural language. The sounds we can hear in human language are not that natural language, but are reflections of it, however distorted.

The world is an expression of the substance of the One as name and form. This creative process begins with Om (ॐ), the original causal Word, sound or vibration of energy. The opening statement of the *Māṇḍūkya* Upanishad says: ‘The Word ॐ is the Imperishable; all this its manifestation. Past, present, future – everything is ॐ. Whatever transcends the three divisions of time, that too is ॐ.’ Originally there is only one word or vibration, yet this word continues to sound throughout the universe. There are obvious parallels with the opening statement of the Gospel of St John, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’, and at the material level with the view of astrophysicists that the universe began with an enormous explosion of energy which is still vibrating and expanding. Bhartṛhari, a language philosopher who lived in India in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE., described the first step in language as a flash of consciousness called a *sphoṭa*, literally, ‘an explosion in consciousness’.

The universe is said to be spoken into existence. ‘God indeed was one and alone. Speech was his own being. Speech was the second to him. He said, “Let me send forth this speech. She will go and become all these various things.” ’ (*Kathaka Saṁhitā*) ‘All transformation has speech as its basis, and it is name only.’ (*Chāndogya* Upanishad 6.1.4) A twentieth century exposition of this was given by Śāntānanda Sarasvatī: ‘Brahman is the word and the word is Brahman. The consciousness first originates as word. The subtlest form becomes coarse. The word is subtle

and things are coarse.... World comes out of the word and, having existed, it will merge into the word as systematically as it appeared from the word' (1991 Day 5). This is why creation is said to be formed with and maintained by the natural language, the grammar of which is the natural law, *dharmā*.

The sound or vibration of energy which gives rise to everything in this universe arises in consciousness and is eternal. The sounds arising through air as in human speech, are in space and are transient. Human language is a reflection of the natural language, even though it may be a distorted one. In human language words, said to be eternal in essence by Bhartṛhari and other Advaitists, find expression in stages, from the subtlest level to the final stage of speech. In this system the sentence is an expression of the unity, one indivisible whole, while the analysis of the parts of a sentence and of individual words is just to help with understanding. Close attention to pronunciation and grammar is necessary for appreciation of subtler levels of meaning and spiritual significance. With this close attention the all-pervading consciousness becomes more apparent.

In this view, the form and sound of a language determines how far it can express and reflect the truth. Language lawfully formed has the capacity to reflect the natural laws of the universe. Sound is held to be of fundamental importance, and the qualities of sounds in the basic elements of a language, such as its alphabet, therefore go a long way to determining the real differences between languages, and their capacity to reflect the truth.

### **1.3 Views of Language in the West**

In the West, the Middle East and the Far East greater emphasis has been given to the written word, in contrast to the Indian subcontinent. Indeed the word 'grammar' originally meant 'the

art of writing'. Much attention has been paid to the calligraphic arts in Christian, Islamic and Chinese civilisations, even after printing was originally invented in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in China and greatly developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the West. On the other hand, the science of phonetics was much more highly developed in the Indian sub-continent in the millennium before Christ. Four of the six branches of the Veda, called Vedāngas, are concerned with language, the first being pronunciation or phonetics, the second chanting or metrics, the third grammar, and the fourth etymology.

Among the earliest known views on language expressed in the West are those to be found in the writings of Plato and Aristotle in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Very broadly the Platonic view could be classified as rationalist and the Aristotelian view as empirical. In the Platonic dialogues, the theory is developed that visible objects are passing representations of long-lasting or everlasting ideas. A particular car lasts for a certain time and then is destroyed or disintegrates, whereas the word 'car' continues, and while it continues further physical cars can be created. If truth is equated with eternity then the word 'car' is closer to truth than a physical car, and in a way is the cause of the physical car. Aristotle took the view that the relationship between words and objects consisted of resemblance and convention. Words represent objects, and there is a convention about which words represent which objects. Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE, reiterated the view that words represent, and signify, objects.

Mediaeval philosophers were interested in what thought and language are, and how they arise. There were two main theories about thought. The Aristotelian view, held by the earlier philosophers such as Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was that the mind takes on the same form as the things represented, and presents likenesses or pictures of them. A table in a room

and in the mind are the same thing under two different forms of existence. Words describe this thing. Later mediaeval philosophers, such as Ockham in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, held that intuitive cognitions produce concepts which have objective existence in the mind and are caused by the objects they represent. Again words are descriptive. In both views the world holds a multiplicity of objects, whether physical or mental, and there are a multiplicity of minds experiencing them.

#### **1.4 An Empirical View of Language**

With a decline in the authority of the Church, modern Western philosophy began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza, who used reason as their guide, and were therefore called rationalists. However by the end of the seventeenth century this view, which produced a number of conflicting philosophical explanations, was being discredited. The view which emerged in striking contrast both to the rationalist and Advaitic views, and which has continued to the present day, is the empirical view. This is based on the premise that the world and its multiplicity are real, with all knowledge coming initially from sensory experiences of the world. Language is derived from this source and is not innate. For example John Locke, the 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher, believed that simple ideas come directly from sensory experience, and complex or abstract ideas, such as 'man' or 'beauty' are based on a number of simple ideas. Complex ideas are made by abstracting common characteristics from special characteristics of individual things, for example, experiences of different men from which one deduces the idea of 'man'. These ideas all derive ultimately from sensations either from within or from outside the mind. To the empiricist words are articulated sounds used as signs or

labels for ideas. There is no natural connection between the sounds and the ideas.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the increasing scientific emphasis on empirical forms of investigation, the empirical view of language grew in strength. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical schools of thought such as logical positivism (sometimes called logical empiricism) concentrated on the investigation of language. Such philosophers were concerned with identifying the truth or otherwise of statements, but as their premise was that a proposition only has a meaning if there is in principle a means of verifying it, they rejected all theological, metaphysical and ethical statements as lacking in meaning. One famous conclusion of A.J. Ayer was that no proposition can be more than a probable hypothesis. It is a little ironic that his most famous book was entitled *Language, Truth and Logic*, very similar to the title of this book, but with a very different perspective.

Some modern linguists have extended the empirical premise to grammar, and regard the structure and form of language as deriving from common usage. How language is used and developed in ordinary speech is the determining factor for what is correct usage. Grammatical rules are only significant if they are in common use. If they are not normally used, they are not relevant. In this way dialects are given full acknowledgement, and grammar reflects common usage, rather than the other way round. Laws of grammar in this sense are more customs than laws, and liable to frequent change.

### **1.5 A Rationalist View of Language**

In the last half century there has been a radical turn away from such views of language in some quarters. One significant trend has been a reconnection with the rationalist approach

of Descartes and Kant for example and, even further back, of Plato. The premise here is that the essence of language is innate in all humans. Its source is within, not without.

The most famous exponent of this view, currently, is Noam Chomsky, who has introduced concepts such as ‘universal grammar’ and ‘generative grammar’. For him the human mind has the inherent knowledge of, or ‘competence’ in, a universal grammar common to all humans. It is the genetic component of the language faculty of humans. The individual then learns to use and express this in a particular language or languages through particular grammars. Language is seen as a ‘mirror of the mind’ in the sense that it mirrors and expresses the innate properties of human intelligence. All human languages must conform in some way with the universal grammar, as this grammar is directly related to how the mind works. It is interesting to note that this bears some similarity to Bharṭṛhari’s philosophy of language in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Iyer, in his study of Bharṭṛhari, says: ‘The central idea of his philosophy, that the ultimate Reality is of the nature of the word, which presupposes consciousness, has resulted in the notion that all of us are born with the source of valid knowledge and of speech within us.’<sup>1</sup>

One of Chomsky’s descriptions of universal grammar is ‘the conditions that must be met by the grammars of all human languages, and this includes universal phonetics (sound) and universal semantics (meaning).’<sup>2</sup> Universal and particular grammars are linked by generative grammar, where concepts such as ‘deep structure’ and ‘surface structure’ are used. For example, the two sentences, ‘He is eager to please’, and ‘He is easy to please’, have the same surface structure, but a different deep structure. Who is doing the pleasing?

Recent developments in genetics have given support to this view that language structure is innate in humans, with the

identification of a human gene which shapes the larynx in such a way that breath passing through it can be controlled by the mind to form speech. Individuals with damage to this gene are unable to speak properly. The gene is believed to have arisen through mutation about the same time as humans became a distinct species. When humans subsequently began to develop specialised social and creative activities, these have been seen as indications of the development of speech.

## **1.6 Another modern view of language**

Even such a brief glimpse of some different views of language as this would not be complete without some mention of the most significant language philosopher of the last century, Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his first book, the *Tractatus*, he maintained the view that words, or rather sentences, were pictures of the real world, the structure of the world determined the structure of sentences. This led him to conclude that only statements of fact were meaningful, and ethical, artistic and philosophical statements had no real meaning. In his later works he put forward a contrary view, that the structure of our sentences determines our view of the world. Here language is analogous to a tool, not a picture. From this perspective he argued that language is one among many forms of human activity and that words and sentences are deeds, their meaning being their 'use', 'function', 'aim' and 'role'. Their use is settled by publicly agreed rules, there being no such thing as a private language. For example, the sentence 'This is a king', referring to a chess piece, will only convey more meaning than a particularly shaped object if the hearer knows what a board game is, knows the concept of a chess piece and has learnt to play chess just from observation or also knows the rules of the game. He spoke of 'language games' and of language as 'part of a form of life', 'an

outward social phenomenon'. He spent much time examining individual words such as 'mean', 'know', 'beautiful', 'expect', 'pain' and 'toothache', in a way which supported this view. This bears some similarity to discussions in the Platonic Dialogues about 'justice', 'courage', 'temperance' etc. although his discussions, unlike Plato's, led to meanings dependent on use, not meanings dependent on an idea and supported by reason.

### **1.7 Where next?**

Each of these views of language leads to a different way of approaching the question of how language is related to truth. We will follow the Advaitic approach, and start with an initial comparison of how different languages measure up to that approach.

#### **Notes**

- 1 *Bhartrhari* K A S Iyer Deccan College 1992
- 2 *Language and Mind*, Third Edition, Noam Chomsky Cambridge University Press 2006