

Aspects of India's Language Philosophy from Vedic Age to the Present Times

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Descartes says “man is man thanks to language”. Language is the greatest given gift to the human beings for expressing their feelings, desires, notions, thoughts, directions, instructions, wishes, hopes, happiness, sadness, anger, pleasure, disgust, love, hate, commands, requests, information, opinions and so on. Language is one of the natural wonders of the world. All communication and contemplation take place only in language. Animals, birds, and even insects do communicate with the other members of their group but they use only a limited number of sounds and signals. As Aristotle puts it, ‘Animal noises cannot be combined to form syllables. Moreover animal communication is context bound but human languages are context free.’

Human experiences are so tightly woven into language that we cannot imagine life without language. Language is full of mysteries and has always been a puzzle; that is why the study of language has been a part of general philosophy. Even in ancient India as well as in Greece, all philosophers were interested in the philosophy of language –its origin, growth, development, creation, the various aspects of language – sounds, word, sentences, meaning and how we use it. In ancient India, language was one of the fundamental concerns of philosophy and as J. S. Stall aptly points out, ‘At time almost excessive preoccupation with language on the one hand and

with philosophy on the other may indeed be regarded as characteristic of Indian civilization.' (Stall 1969, 463)

Language philosophy took into consideration both the performative and contemplative functions of language; the performative function includes ritualistic as well as communicative or transactional functions of language in the outside world; the contemplative function considered the use of language for the inward or private function, like meditation and introspection in the inner world. The importance given to the contemplative function may be due to the influence of spirituality and religion. In all knowledge systems in India, contemplation was always given an important role in all yogic systems. Even general philosophy in ancient India was more inward looking and it was thought that every outer phenomenon has a corresponding inner one. India's philosophers, particularly language philosophers like Patanjali (150 BC), and Bhartrhari (5th century AD) understood the limitation of communication in the outside world; consequently, they emphasized the importance of silence. After silence, the communicative functions in the outer world, the self withdraws into the inner world, where inner speech plays an important role. Through yoga and meditation the self must take the inward path and try to silence the chattering mind so that the right kind of interior is created. In other words, the contemplative function of language must lead on to the inner world and ultimately to silence and stillness of mind.

The western philosophical tradition was generally more outward looking and concentrated on the functions of language in the external world. Western philosophers have seen language in terms of its social aspects, observable manifestations, verifiability and empirical and pragmatic functions. They always focused on language as a means of expression, with emphasis on logic, grammar and rhetoric. Talking about this feature of Western philosophy, Matilal says,

For a long time in the west, philosophy was thought to be concerned with the established truths of a very general kind,

with metaphysics and ethics, with other truths to be arrived at through the power of reasoning. In this scheme philosophy of language occupied no important place. Since Descartes, it was noticed that the starting point of the subject was epistemology. Later, in the past – Fregean period, some analytical philosophers believed that “philosophy of language” in a specific sense, should constitute the starting point of philosophical studies. (Motilal, 1990: 3)

In modern linguistics, language is considered ‘a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, by means of which a social group cooperates.’ Bloomfield (1933) says that the totality of the utterances that can be made in a speech community is the language of that speech community and insisted that the subject matter of scholarly linguistic investigation should be limited to observable phenomena. B.F. Skinner claimed that human language could be explained in terms of ‘operant conditioning. Halliday’s view is that linguistics should be inherently oriented towards the social and Saussure’s concept of langue is that of a social construct that exists in its entirety in the collective mind of the speech community. Thus, the language philosophy of the west emphasized only the social aspect of language.

The Vedic and Pro-Vedic system:

The Phonocentric Tradition

From the beginning, various points of view (*darsanas*) about language, its nature, its origin, development, and how it is acquired were presented by Indian philosophers as part of the general philosophical tradition. Sound was considered sacred and the primary gateway to inner consciousness, freedom from pain and transcendence. The Vedic emphasis on the oral experience of the world was perhaps more religious than philosophical. Vedas considered speech divine and equaled *sabda* with *Brahman* (i. e. transcendental signified) and *Nada*

Brahman was taken as *AUM*, the primal sound, which is said to incorporate three levels of consciousness. For some *VAK* (i.e. Speech) was *Devi*. Portions of Vedic literature read almost like treatises on sound. It was the oral tradition, which passed on the sacred texts from one generation to another, from one parent to the child and from the teacher to the student, that plays a vital role in giving importance to sound and the study of phonetics in India. The homocentric / logocentric tradition was very prominent in the Vedic- upanishadic thinking; the spoken sacred word, it was believed, reveals divine truth and has the power to transform one's consciousness.

The insistence on preserving pronunciation and accent as accurately as possible is related to the belief that the potency of the *mantras* lies in the vibrations caused by the sound when pronounced since those are regarded as instrument for contemplation. The primal sound is referred to as *śabda-Brahman* – 'god as word'. Closely related to this is the concept of *Nada-Brahman* – 'god as sound'. *Nada*, a Sanskrit word meaning 'sound noise', is related to the term *nadi*, 'river', figuratively denoting the stream of consciousness –a concept that goes back to the *Rig Veda*. Thus the relationship between sound and consciousness has long been recorded in India's ancient literature. Vedic texts in fact describe sound as the prominent means of attaining higher spiritual consciousness.

The Philosophical Tradition:

Sankaracharya

For *Sankaracharya* there is a transcendental real that exists over and above language, namely *Brahma* and it exists over and from language; the *Brahman* can be seen or experienced only when language is transcended. Language is a part of *maya* (our worldly experience, an illusion) since it disappears when *Brahman*, the ultimate 'real' is experienced. According to him, it is only through language of *Veda* that one can realize

Brahman and to that extent language is to be valued. The 'revealed language' or the language of the *Vedas* is the only way of perceiving the 'real' and even the must be silenced for the 'real'. The characteristics of language are difference and unless one transcends language, the unification of the self with the ultimate identity cannot happen.

Sri Aurobindo:

Sri Aurobindo (1873-1950), an objective idealist philosopher, whose philosophical ideas came to be known as Integral Vedanta, feels that language is the dynamic foundation out of which self-consciousness, culture and religion arise. Aurobindo looks at language as operating on two planes: the inner, spiritual, intuited one and the outer, social-cultural material one. Sri Aurobindo incorporates into his thought an evolutionary principle and feels that in the early state of language the spoken word is more dominant than its idea-sound determining sense but later on the idea becomes more important –the sound secondary. He says that language is grounded in root sounds that contain the possibility for a multiplicity of signification to evolve i.e. diversity in oneness.

Language in Sikhism:

Sikhism views language as a means to attain divine experience. In fact, they consider the *Sabad* (the divine word) as synonymous with the almighty. For Guru Nanak, language is a medium through which the divine expresses itself. And the *Sabad* or the *Nam* is a form of divine communication. Guru Nanak's emphasis is wholly upon the concept of word as the vehicle of revelation. The word is described by him more in terms of what it does than what it actually is. For him, it is an experience to be felt rather than intellectually understood. Word hence, is the revelation of God, and the only proper object of man's contemplation. In his view again, the word partakes of

the infinity of God, but is sufficiently within the reach of man to be understood and followed.

The Buddhist School:

The period from 600 or 500 BC to 200 AD is an interesting period during which a great variety of ideas, ideologies and theories developed, new philosophical systems like dualism, pluralism, relativism, skepticism and even irrationalism, and nihilism. *Buddhist* philosophy emerged primarily as a natural reaction to the Brahminic Vedic tradition. The Buddha said there is no *atma* or soul (Dasgupta, vol.1:93)

Reality or existence for the Buddhist is in a constant state of "flux". The Buddhist view of language also refutes the Vedantic belief in a transcendental 'signified' or the Brahman. A word according to them means something because of convention.

From the Buddhist perspective, language is only instrumental and not intrinsic. Spiritual realization is in one sense, beyond language but language still participates in it. Derrida believes that language participates in the reality it manifests but Nagarjuna argues that any such participation must ultimately go beyond the limits of language.

The Jaina School:

Mahavira (599-527 BC) or contemporary of Buddha has come to be known as *anekantavadi* (i.e. One who believes in spiritual pluralism) declares that 'Reality is Relative'. The philosophy of Jainism is based on three basic principles: *anekantavada* (i.e. Non absolutism or manifoldness), *Nayavada* (the theory of standpoints), and *Syadvada* (the dialectic of conditional or seven-fold predication). Jain philosophy clearly states that truth is a relative phenomenon, perception is multi-angular and knowledge has no boundaries. So all alternatives must be considered as possibilities and there is no ultimate truth. Unless one is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, it is not

possible to view all alternatives and no one has all these abilities.

Anekanta emphatically states that nothing can be affirmed absolutely as all affirmations are true under certain circumstances, conditions and limitations. For example a flow pot or a table or a gold ornament is a substance (*dravya*) in a particular shape only under certain conditions and only in one sense of the term. As is well known, this shape and substance can change under different conditions, may be broken, burnt or taken to another planet. That is what *Anekantavada* says: 'all affirmations are true only in a limited sense and all things passes on infinite number of qualities and each of which can be affirmed only in a particular sense'. If this is true of physical objects like a pot or an ornament, one can easily imagine the state of abstract concepts, symbolic systems like language, meaning signified etc.

In recent years, the theory of relativity of Albert Einstein, a highly complex scientific theory, has been compared with the philosophical theory of relativity in Jainism. Both theories state that an object is not what it appears to be from one point of view and that the other points are not distortions or deviations. Albert Einstein himself remarked, "We can only know the relative truth, the real truth is known only to the universal observer." (Cosmology old and new: 13) According to *Anekanta*, applied to construct a theory of language, a text is a symposium of words and every word is a symposium of meanings.

'The doctrine of *Syadvada* holds that since even the contradictory characteristics of an infinite variety may be associated with a thing, affirmation may be made from whatever standpoint (*naya*) cannot be regarded as absolute.' (Dasgupta 1992, vol 1:179). Knowledge has no boundaries and it is impossible to know everything since there will always be something unknown.

From a poststructuralist point of view any language (which is a symbolic system) exhibits the following feature: uncertainly, plurality, indeterminacy, free –play, difference, deference etc. that is why it is important to affirm any meaning.

The East and the West:

Oh east is east and west is west
And never the twine shall meet,
The earth and sky stand presently at
God's great judgment seal.

But the situation at that time was different. Globalization, information technology and the internet, the rise of post colonialism and multiculturalism, the borderless world and such other factors have changed the perceptions. Modernism originated in a war- shattered and (allegedly) God- forsaken space, where old-world consolations – religion, humanism etc- seemed lost, while language as a medium of communication, seemed at that time to be the only recuperative factor for mankind, a factor that could drive home the spiritual message. It is in this milieu that a whole range of language –centered enterprises were launched, whose endeavour was to discover and exploit the potential of language. Several language centered enterprises came to be launched: linguistics, applied linguistics, linguistics philosophy, specifically logical positivism of Wittgenstein, Russell et al., speech act theory of J.L. Austin, modernism, experimental writing (in literature), Formalism in literary studies, etc. The sole aim of these enterprises was to make better use of language as an instrument of communication –so that it can efficiently perform its recuperative function. The same theory, long before, was asserted by the Indian language philosophers who pointed out that through yoga and meditation, it is possible to transcend the limits of language and achieve ‘emancipation.’

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