

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SANSKRIT GRAMMAR

Language is possibly the most important aspect of human social life and interaction that we know of today. Although scientists have studied various languages and their sources for ages, they have never found another animal on this planet that is able to communicate quite the way humans can, exchanging abstract ideas and conceptual representations through words alone. Since ancient times, the Hindu tradition in India has paid close attention to the use of language in everyday life, and how it is able to effortlessly convey meanings, thoughts, impressions, beliefs, and other complex notions that can be demonstrated in no other manner. Language was so important to Hindus that they incorporated it directly into their spiritual practices, and it became yet another medium for reaching their ultimate goal, *moksa*: realisation of the Ultimate Truth within oneself.

Although there have been hundreds of languages spoken across India since ancient times, the Hindus selected Sanskrit as the language in which to write their spiritual literature. Obviously then, Sanskrit must be considered an extremely important aspect of the Hindu tradition, so important that some Hindus believed in a deified language, the goddess Vac. According to her myth, the world was created through her divine speech, and the Sanskrit used today is merely a part of that language she spoke (Coward 3). Others believed, according to what is written in the Brahmanas, that the Indian warrior god, Indra, was the first to create coherent language when he analysed speech utterances in terms of their parts and created a grammatical structure (Coward 13). However, the Hindu grammarians who studied Sanskrit held a more practical view of the language, and put a great deal of time and effort into examining its subtleties. Most of the Hindu grammarians studied how the grammar was initially constructed, including the most famous grammarian, Panini. He is believed to have lived between the 7th and 3rd centuries BCE, and was

the author of the oldest surviving literary work on Sanskrit grammar, the renowned *Astadhyayi* (The Eight Chapters) which lays down the entire structure of Sanskrit grammar in roughly four thousand *sutras* (Coward 111). Although Panini's contribution to the composition of the Sanskrit language is unsurpassed, the *Astadhyayi* is foremost a linguistic analysis, and Panini did not spend much time discussing the actual philosophy *behind* Sanskrit.

When we do examine the philosophy behind Sanskrit, we see that language was often related with the life-cycle of the universe, and there is no better example than that of the Hindus' most sacred *mantra*, *Aum*. For Hindus, the entire creation and destruction of the universe can be represented by the utterance of this one monosyllable, and although it may be difficult for some people to immediately grasp this concept, the explanation for how it works is actually quite elegant. *Aum* is said to encompass all spoken language because the "A" syllable begins at the back of the mouth—where all language must begin—and then the whole word ends with a "fourth" syllable, silence (Prattis 83). If language is used as a metaphor for the universe, then *Aum* is that essential element that holds the cosmos together; when it stops, the universe will stop as well. Hindus identify *Aum* as "a primordial sound, inherent in the Universe" (Prattis 82) and "it denotes the super conscious state of *Samadhi* or *Turiya*" (Prattis 83).

This description of *Aum* as a cosmic concept is related to the *sphota* theory of language, which is spoken of extensively by another grammarian, Bhartrhari. Although Bhartrhari was not the grammarian who originally invented the *sphota* theory, he comments on it extensively in his work, the *Vakyapadiya*, which explains how sentences are meaningful to us despite differences in accent, speech tempo, and so forth. The *sphota* theory also states that individual words cannot have meaning when they are uttered on their own; it is only when they are ordered together into a coherent sentence that they take on meaning. Sentences are also unable to gain meaning without

the active participation of both the speaker and the listener. Both individuals must understand the sentence in order for it to make sense, or the language merely becomes gibberish. When the sentence is thought of by the speaker and understood by the listener, they work as a single unit, and only then does meaning erupt from the words and enter the minds of both individuals (Coward 10-11). Where the *mantra*, *Aum*, is concerned, the meaning of the Ultimate Truth will supposedly issue from the sound of *Aum* while it is chanted. People seeking the Truth are both the speakers and listeners of this *mantra*, and they have only to grasp the meaning before they are able to fully understand the Ultimate Truth and achieve spiritual liberation.

Patanjali, another very famous Hindu grammarian, was careful to emphasize the fact that language is special; it is not some everyday commodity that can be created and destroyed at will, but rather an ever-changing means of communicating with one another. He had a famous notion, known today as “Patanjali’s Potters Principle,” which roughly states that “if you want pots, you go to a potter, but if you want words, you don’t go to a grammarian” (Staal 27). What he meant by this was that languages are more significant than regular, everyday commodities like pots. Words cannot just be made up on the spot by a grammarian like a pot can by a potter, but rather, new words come into being as a language evolves. Patanjali also made it clear that grammarians were not the creators of languages, but merely the analysers of it. It was not the grammarians who decided whether something in a language was “right” or “wrong” but the people who spoke that language instead. He said that if a man wanted to learn about how a language was put together, then he should see a grammarian, but if he wanted to learn a new language altogether, the only way would be to go to where that language was spoken and simply listen to it himself (Staal 27).

Language and speech has had a tremendous amount of influence on Hindu thought and philosophy. The amount of time, thought, and effort that Indians have put into creating and preserving their elegant Sanskrit is astounding to other cultures who have never viewed language as anything more than a simple means of communication. Hindus understand that this unique type of expression is not something to be taken for granted, and they revere language as something that can actually help them achieve that crucial goal they strive for throughout their lifetimes, knowledge of the Ultimate Truth of both the universe without, and the true Self within.

REFERENCES & RECOMMENDED READING

Coward, H.G. & K. Kunjuni Raja (1990) *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: The Philosophy of the Grammarians*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Prattis, J.I. (2002) “Mantra and consciousness expansion in India.” *Journal of Ritual Studies*. Vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 78-96.

Staal, Frits (1982) “Ritual, grammar, and the origins of science in India.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. Vol. 1, no. 0, pp. 3-36.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Sanskrit grammatical structure

Hindu grammarians

Panini

Patanjali

Bhartrhari

The *Astadhyayi*

The *Mahabhyasa*

The *Vakyapadiya*

The *sphota* theory of language

Mantras

Meditation using mantras

Mantras used in rituals

Ancient languages

Noteworthy, Related Websites

<http://sanskrit.gde.to/dict/>

<http://www.sanskrita-bharati.org/newsite/index.php>

<http://www.sanskrit.org/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit_grammarians

http://www.sanatansociety.org/indian_music_and_mantras/sounds_of_tantra_mantras.htm

http://www.dalsabzi.com/Mantras/mantras_intro.htm

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