

Language and Truth



Paul Douglas

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'	ṇ	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
ḷ	lry in 'revelry'	ṣ	sh with tip of tongue in roof of mouth
e	a in 'late'	m̐	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 5th 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 5th century CE., described the first step in language as a flash of consciousness called a *spṛoṭa*, 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." ' (*Kāthaka 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 12th to 13th centuries in China and greatly developed in the 15th 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 4th 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 4th 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 13th 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