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SANSKRIT AND THE SACRED LANGUAGE

Some semantic aspect of the « language of the gods »

« For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life » (St. Paul, 2 Corinthians, 6).

Among the many analytical forms of contemporary linguistics which have developed into an extraordinary plethora of « sciences of the word » we are unfortunately obliged to register an almost total lack of research into a language which is undoubtedly peculiar, but certainly not to such an extent as to deserve to remain « off-side » in the field of specific studies. I refer to the language of the sacred, in particular, not mainly in a theologico-religious sense (as I. T. Ramsay has done in his *Religious Language*¹), but rather as the reality and expression of a linguistic « activity » which was so important in the past and still is in human society.

This neglect on the part of scholars might be explicable if it were merely a question of a series of high-flown or formal concepts similar, for example, to the philological excogitations in which many apologetics of antiquity satisfy their own whims². If we bear in mind, however,

1. London, 1967. In fact, the analysis of the sacred in the book of Ian T. Ramsey is limited only to the sphere of Christian theology and in the direction of logical empiricism in a common sense. Nevertheless, the attempt to apply to biblical models such terms of meaning as « probability », « key-word », « total engagement », is of no little importance in connection with « revelation-intuition »: see, for example, the concept of « illumination » as « something that springs » — which is very similar to the Indian *sphota*.

2. It is a question of that « verbal superstition » of which Ogden and Richards accuse medieval religious thought (Scholastics), in that it created artificial and conservative structures upon no valid « scientific » basis (*The Meaning of Meaning*, ch. 11, London, 1923). Indeed, the authors make fun of the magic languages of primitive peoples in which a certain link is pre-supposed between *nomina* and *numina*, on account of « the power of the word ». But they do not stop to ask themselves *why* mankind has been « hypnotised » by such language for thousands of years, down to the XX century — or whether this « obsession » may not contain some element that remains *indecipherable* for so-called « normal » language. Their passion for analysis leads them, in fact, to consider all the great concepts in the history of philosophy, from Heraclitus to Hegel, in the same way, without taking into account the fact that there may indeed be something man finds « inexpressible » in his

that meanwhile and almost contemporaneously with the birth of the new linguistics and closely related to it, a new science, no less weighty and significant, has appeared in the West, the science of myths and symbols pertaining to « religious experience », as William James said — then this neglect becomes paradoxical, to say the least. In fact, nowadays we realise that all religions, whether primitive or cultured, written or unwritten, are founded on real and proper « primary structures », universally valid and semantically coherent. This fact leads, in the field of linguistics itself, to a better integration of what has been called metalinguistics³ and to a deeper knowledge of some aspects of psycholinguistics in relation to the sacred. Indeed, we may affirm that the sacred itself was only waiting, as it were, for just this type of sonico-phonemathic analysis of words and signs, for now, in the light of the new linguistics, the very myths and symbols appear even more eloquent in content. The « power of the word », that is to say, is rendered even more effective, not only insofar as it constitutes a creative intuitive process in the sphere of mytho-poetics, — it is revealed in outward forms established in the sphere of « revelation », as being the expression of an innate tendency in man towards the « supra-natural », a term to be understood in its etymological sense. In fact, if « everything is language », as symbolic logic affirms, then a return to the sources of the sacred means the rediscovery — as I shall show — of a peculiar dimension of cognitive activity, split, as it is, into the formal and the informal or into the « physical » and « more-than-physical », which is, at bottom, the tendency to expand the frontiers of the real ever wider, precisely as modern philosophy of science is teaching. When this activity is translated in terms of « sacred » and « profane » perception Indian thought and the Sanskrit language call it *apara* and *para* cognition; the

relationship to the Beings; neo-empiricism, whether logical or not, will never be capable of grasping what real religious language — (from that of primitive peoples up to the mystics) — is trying to express. The authors do grant some recognition to Indian thought, however, in which the « sacred » is represented as *experience* of the Beings; this is the point at which the analysis of the sacred requires another type of consideration, since in the intervening period the very language of the « primitives » has become an object of primary importance for modern linguistics, as I shall show.

3. I am using the term « meta-language » in its etymological sense and not as it appears in the analyses of Hilbert, Carnap or Tarski — that is, as a stage beyond or above « common » language, as in the expression « meta-history », « meta-empirical » and even « meta-physical ». A language dealing with the values which are contained in the sacred: in fact the ontic symbols in such a language are « covered » only in part by the signs, therefore they need a reference to sound-symbols beyond the uses of conventional linguistics, as is the case in the Indian *śabda-sphoṭa*. These are the terms every religion or « mystical » experience adopts to illustrate a kind of « crypto-type », as Whorf suggests (cf. note 24), but sacred metalanguage, in addition, expresses « total semantics ». It is synonymous with the Greek Logos, understood as the active principle of everything, that is, of meta-physical reality, and not only as « discourse », « reason » or « logic », as it was to appear later in Western thought.

nāma-rūpa, the names and forms, appear simultaneously in the guise of models of « interior » and « exterior » languages, by means of a process which gathers from the « signs » one and the same meaning at the root of « events ». The foregoing observations, however, have brought us to the core of our subject, although it would require further preliminary suggestions on an historico-cultural basis.

Sanskrit and the Oral Tradition of the Vedas

The concept *deva-nāgarī* designates the written language of the gods, since its literal meaning is « urbane writing »: the *language* of the gods is known as *deva-bhāṣa*. This expression appears for the first time in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a poem in which the action takes place during the period of Aryan expansion among the « monkey » populations of the South. This double nominal characterisation belongs to the age when Sanskrit had not yet been split into two branches, the archaic-vedic and « the perfect language » (*samskr̥ta*) of the classical era.

At one and the same time it defines, in India, the distinction between the cultured religion of the Aryan « nobles » and the beliefs of the native peoples. Within the intervening historical period we have to take into account at least three stages of stratification, and not only as the orthodox Hindus define them. In fact, we find the « primordial » stage of the conjectural Veda, in existence *before* the Aryans came down into the peninsular, a stage belonging to the Indo-European family, which had not yet divided into the avestic and vedic, etc.; we also find the sanskrit-vedic stage of the Hymns composed within the confines of the Aryavārtha and then throughout India as a result of Rama's exploits, etc.; and finally the Brahmanic stage, that is to say, that of a tradition which appears in the *Purva-Mīmāṃsā* as a heritage of dogma to be preserved in a sacro-linguistic sense. For the purposes of the analysis now concerned the question is a general linguistic problem, however, since it is impossible to state where, when and how the concept of a sacred spoken language or written tongue came into being. Nevertheless, we can proceed by means of « interior » analysis, and this is where modern linguistics can come unexpectedly to our aid.

At this point another aspect of the problem presents itself, one not taken very seriously by Western scholars. I refer to the « eternity of the *Vedas* ». Myths undoubtedly have their own validity even in the field of notions, as the « historiography » of the language teaches us. What does « the sacred word » represent if not its perennial quality, after all? All the languages of those peoples who have given great religions to the world are « languages of the gods » or of God himself. The word of Allāh is expressed in Arabic, the sacred language *par excellence* of Islamic culture⁴, Ancient Hebrew is the sacred language of the Old

4. See « *Ideals and Realities of Islam* » by SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR, London, 1966.

Testament, of Moses and David. By means of an historical « translatio » Latin became the « perfect » language of the Christians, although Greek was the original language of the founder-fathers of the Gospel in expansion. Homer's gods speak Greek, an Indo-European language, as are both Latin and Sanskrit. The gods of the vedic pantheon and later Buddha himself, spoke Sanskrit, which only a little later became « democratic » in the *prakṛti* and the *pāli*. The highest philosophies elaborated around the *Logos*, from the pre-Socratics to Plato, are conceived in the same Indo-European idiom.

As far as Sanskrit is concerned, however, we must point out at the very beginning that it is not only the twin or at least the oldest cousin among the Indo-European languages but is also the one richest in expressions and representations of the sacred — and to such an extent that it has been more able to preserve its original concepts⁵ than any other historically recorded language. This language contains an astonishing sacred and profane literature, still not easily assimilable in the West. The *devanāgarī* characters (born of the older *Brāhmī* writing, possibly mesopotamian), have transmitted for 4000 years, without a break, thousands of philosophical, juridical, social and even medical texts, almost all of them in verses with an unmistakable rhythm⁶.

5. Zimmer writes as follows upon the philosophical quiddities of Sanskrit: « The gist of any system of philosophy can best be grasped in the condensed form of its principal terms... Indian thought is excellently adapted to such an approach; for all of its terms belong to Sanskrit and have long served in the everyday language of poetry and romance as well as in such technical literatures as that of medicine. They are not terms confined to the strange and unfamiliar atmosphere of the specialised schools and doctrines.

The nouns, for example, which constitute the bulk of philosophic terminology, stand side by side with verbs that have been derived from the same roots and denote activities or a process expressive of the same content. One can always come to the basic meaning through a study of the common uses of the word in daily life and by this means ascertain not only its implied shades and values, but also its suggested metaphors and connotations.

All of which is in striking contrast with the situation in the contemporary West, where by far the greater number of our philosophical terms have been borrowed from Greek and Latin, stand detached from actual life and thus suffers from an inevitable lack of vividness and clarity... Each case, each authority for the term, every author, period and school, must be taken by itself. But the Indian vocabulary is so closely connected with the general usage of the civilisation that it can always be interpreted through the way of the general understanding. By reviewing the whole range of the values covered by any Sanskrit term one can watch Indian thought at work, as it were from within... It is only by referring continually to the Sanskrit dictionary that one can begin to perceive something of the broader backgrounds of the phrases that for centuries have served to carry the living burden of Indian thought » (*Philosophies of India* Part I, pp. 42-43, Cleveland, 1956).

6. In order to appreciate fully the contribution made by Indian culture see *The Concept of Culture* by V. RAGHAVAN (Bangalore, 1971) and also his *Sanskrit, Essays on the Value of the Language and Literature* (Madras, 1972).

For a more specialised treatment see ch. III and IV. « The Legacy of Sanskrit » and « The role of Sanskrit in Indian Culture ». The concept of culture, in fact, is connected in India with the formation of the notion of the *Rta-Dharma* and therefore of the *Samśkarās* (cf. *Hindu Samśkarās* by RAJ B. PANDEY (Delhi, 1969).

Finally, Sanskrit is the depository of a grammatical science whose philological and linguistic richness cannot be capped by any other language in ancient civilisations.

We are therefore faced with the following question: *what* has made all this possible? Is the notion, popular or not, of a « language of the gods » merely formal, or does it conceal some element which defies linguistic analysis? It is an undeniable fact that not even the comparative method of studies of Indo-European languages, practised so eagerly and so skilfully by the founders of Indology, have sufficed to resolve the enigma. It has left in the dark a vast area of the *mnemonic* contents of archaic vedic, a field which can be illuminated nowadays thanks to the semantics of sound⁷.

One of the few recent scholars of sacred language, Walter J. Ong, offers us some support for the elucidation of the problem in his book *The Presence of the Word*⁸. The roots of sacred language lie even deeper than the history of religions and grammar in a classical sense can grasp. Even religions are transient if we compare them with the *Logos-Vāc*, the Word which transcends all the diachronic-synchronic delimitations of the spoken-written message. We are carried back, by no means fortuitously, to the language of primitive peoples, to the cultures Ong calls audio-oral, in whose genuine *humus* the word was a direct and living process « from the voice to the ear », whereas after the invention of the alphabet in Western civilisation human « sensory » perception was transformed into a perception-communication of the « visual » or optical, a perception strongly indebted, in its turn, to objective externalisation. Ancient peoples, that is, derived their « revelations » directly from sound. This fact explains the semantics of the sacred which linked the *word* to the *sign* in a conative process of the image or rite, as being at one and the same time « significance » and « significant »⁹.

This theory of the « sensory », which partly precedes the specific *forma mentis* of every culture in the history of civilisation and even the philosophy of various human groups without the art of writing, is more or less a continuation and amplification of Benjamin Lee Whorf's intuitions in *Language, Thought and Reality*¹⁰, where his elucidation of the Hopi pueblo leads him to conclude that in the sphere of notion-speech there are no « cultured » and « primitive » modes in the act of coining metaphors or general knowledge of the world-as-reality. Everything depends upon the particular formation of the concept of space

7. Such comparative metode is best illustrated, for example, in the work of E. BENVENISTE « *Origines de la formation des noms en indo-européen* », Paris, 1935. See also « *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes* » by A. MEILLET, Paris, 1936.

8. New Haven, 1967. See also: « *In the Human Grain* », New York, 1967 and « *The Barbarian Within* », New York, 1962.

9. « *Le langage cet inconnu* » by J. JOYAU, Paris, 1969. II Part, ch. 1.

10. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956, with a rich introduction by John B. Carroll.

and time, which are translated differently in the mind of the Hopi or the mind of the common Western man. A European, for example, views time as past-present-future and we believe that this view is based upon an intuition which is universally valid. Ong, on the contrary, shows that this view is still due to the ancient heritage of universals of Aristotle, corresponding with the concept of objective and objectivating *physis* whose image — («nature viewed as a mass of objects») — is handed down as far as Newton¹¹. In the wake of Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis¹², Ong avoids the danger of losing himself in that agnosticism which is concealed behind the scenes of this type of mentalistic-linguistic relativism. On the contrary, he seizes the occasion to afford us a proficuous illustration of sacred language. Indeed, he shows that if «the history of religion, so far, has contributed relatively little to the study of the word as such», we should do all we can and as quickly as possible, to deepen our knowledge of oriental religions, which are of major importance for the elucidation of the subject.

To what conclusion are we led when we consider similar theories concerning audio-oral or mnemonic cultures in the ancient world and among primitive peoples? First of all, we may sum the matter up by saying that they represent a kind of «archaeology of the word», not as a «nostalgia for the origins» (Eliade, etc.), but as a real and proper semantic rediscovery of the «all-living» in nature-reality. This reverses the classical tag *verba volant scripta manent* (which is the formula of a written culture). On the contrary, it is the *spoken* word which better preserves the continuity of a tradition, while the *written* word not only weakens it but also falsifies it. Returning once again to the multi-millennarian continuity of Vedism-Hinduism we are now able to evaluate both the myth of the «language of the gods» and the so-called «eternity of the *Vedas*», in a more articulated and pertinent fashion than before.

We must state in advance that these concepts, however, rest in their turn upon three further realities with a linguistic significance that is modern even for us today. The first concerns the oral transmission of the *Vedas*, a transmission carried down unerringly even to our own times,

11. W. J. ONG, *op. cit.*, ch. «Objectivity and Subjectivity».

12. This is the name given to the ethno-linguistic theory of the two scholars, which leads to mentalistic relativism. It was Sapir — a great student of American-Indian cultures — who urged Whorf to study the Hopi. In our day these ideas have been developed by Geneviève Calame-Griaule in the essay *Ethnologie et langage: la parole chez les Dogons*, Paris, 1965. Dominique Zahan, the socio-linguist, in his essay *La dialectique du verbe chez les Bambara*, Paris, 1963, states that the Sudanese Bambara «consider language a physical element», etc. Whorf devoted himself largely to Indian disciplines during his last years: he lived in India and was a friend of Fritz Kunz, an expert on Indian philosophy, who encouraged him to write the essay *Language, Thought and Reality*, pub. in the review «The Theosophist», Madras, Jan. 1942.

a phenomenon which has astonished the students of Indology¹³. The second leads us to that « obsession » of the exact pronunciation of the vedic *mantrā* which takes a concrete form in a real and proper sonic grammar (*chanda and śikṣā*). The third records that strange transformation which the *śabda*-sound undergoes in the Darshana systems as it becomes a category of proper thought, that is, a *pramāṇa*. In Nyāya logics the *śabda-pramāṇa* is, in fact, not only a « verbal testimony » of the sacred — (as in the Mīmāṃsā) — but is a valid source of knowledge in general and even a component part of the Indian form of the syllogism.

All this has been possible because, first of all, the Aryan-Hindu tradition has always preserved the « primitive » method of oral and direct communication from master to pupil. That is to say, « verbal testimony » lies at the basis of a mnemonic culture which considered its sacred texts « eternal », and therefore in no need of writing as a transmitting sign (indeed, it abhorred the written word). There is a functional relationship between these three realities, with the synonymy of a « word » and « sign » at its source; the word « primordial », considered as among primitive peoples a synonym of a physical element, suffices in itself, possessing, as it does, the capacity to model a certain « truth » without any extraneous formal ingredient. This is how Sanskrit, as a *medium*, appears to traditionalistic Brahmans (and possibly also to the native peoples), to be a « sacred language », the language, if not of the gods, at least that of the « initiated » in a people which has imposed upon the world such a unique thematic of the sacred as « total semantics ».

In other words, we are faced with a « primitive-cultured » religious framework which, nevertheless, is expressed in a *conscious* manner, in a surprisingly organic kind of *grammatical gnosis*. This may possibly explain why vedism has attracted and is still attracting so many scholars, to such an extent that it has become a specialised branch in the study of Hinduism, whereas the *Vedas* have been considered by some literal translators of the texts as a kind of « shapeless and fantastic mass of ritual imaginings » (Bergaigne, Oldenberg, etc.). This heritage also explains the existence of grammarians of Panini's standing and, later, the many theorists of the *śabda-sphoṭa* or the *Śabda-Brahmavāda*, such as Patañjali, Bhartṛhari, Mandana Miśra and others, who carried the *śruti* of the Indian *logos* to unimaginable heights which are scarcely to be scaled even in India; in our opinion, however, it is of prime importance in modern linguistics.

13. See the extracts translated from Max Müller concerning the exact pronunciation of the *Vedas* in my book *Il pensiero Vedanta*, pp. 111-13; *idem*, *Lo spirito dell'India*, ch. *Civiltà mnemonica*, pp. 43-59.

The basis of the Word-Vāc

By no mere chance do the 16 volumes of the *Études védiques et paninéennes*¹⁴, by the great and impassioned master of Vedism, Louis Renou, begin with a chapter dedicated to the « Power of the word in the *Rgveda* »: this is almost a programme in itself and is a reply to those who have doubts concerning the importance of the vedic tradition based upon the *Verb-Logos*, deliberately designated by the *ṛṣi* as the foundation of all human knowledge. Since, if Hinduism is founded upon the *Vedas*¹⁵, we may affirm that the *Vedas* themselves are based upon the *Vāc* as substance of the sacred sound. The poetical inspiration of the *Vedas* is, in fact, an « audio-visual » revelation, experienced by the *Rṣi*-seers, as their very name implies. At this point another dispute arises in India itself, between traditionalistic Brahmans and cultural pandits concerning the *ṛṣi* themselves who, just because they appear to be mere « vehicles » (*vahana*) of the primordial tradition, are considered *anonymous*, even though the name of each one of them is given, by himself, in the texts. This is only another way of saying that the Word is not dependent upon the person uttering it, even if the « inspired » are the tutelary geniuses of a sacred element which has had such resonance throughout the ages.

In order to understand this conflict of notions we must go back once again to the languages of the « primitives ». The thought of the *ṛṣi* is undoubtedly an « elementary » or « pantheistic » representation of the world-as-reality but by now other paths have taught us the difference between « primitive » and « modern ». If Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis, linked with Ong's notion of the « sensory » is true, then, in the light of the new school of linguistics, we are now in a position to be able to penetrate the synchronic-descriptive image of the sacred language in the *Vedas*. As it is, in the very oral-audial cultures themselves the sacred and profane are not separate, for the « magic word » plays a primary role even in everyday life, in work, agriculture, hunting, not to mention the ceremonies connected with birth, initiation, marriage and death. What were the effects of such a « linguistic creation » in the area of « primordial » Sanskrit? The concepts of the *Vedas* provide a rare synthesis between the « animistic naturism » of the primitives and a « cultured » philosophy on an extremely high intellectual level: this is due to the fact that the *Manas* (Mind) has always been considered a sixth sense by the Indians. The *Vāc*, therefore, expresses at one and

14. LOUIS RENO: *Études védiques et paninéennes*, Paris, 1955-67.

15. See the somewhat embittered observations by Louis Renou in *Le Destin du Veda dans l'Inde, Etudes*, VI. The essay was also publ. in India, *Destiny of the Vedas in India*, Delhi, 1965.

the same time the world-as-reality and the faculty of speech¹⁶. For example — if Time for the Hopi is a kind of « eternal present », that is, a system of unfixed relationships (as it is with the mystics)¹⁷, then the eternal itself is not that « pre-established harmony », set up once for all, as it was conceived to be from the time of Aristotle until the discovery of generalised relativity in our own day: on the contrary, it is a « virtual eternity », always in act, in the process of becoming. In the field of linguistic morphology this leads not only to different temporal-spatial configurations, but also to a greater number of grammatical forms of the descriptive-expressive view of Nature and the Real. The infinite of the vedic-archaic verb possesses no fewer than 11 synonyms, whereas it is reduced to *one only*¹⁸ in the « perfect » Sanskrit of the classical and post-paninian period. Our languages, « cultured » and rationalised to the fullest extent, have been impoverished by the invention of writing and the alphabet, as Ong never wearies of telling us. The new linguistics, which emphasise the spoken word, have led to a revision of the illusion of the « alphabet », a revision beginning with De Saussure and continuing even in the field of philosophy (Wittgenstein, Ryle, etc.). « Without writing » says Coomaraswamy, « the memory is perfect »¹⁹.

The intensive objectivation of a civilisation orientated wholly towards the outward appearance of things has reduced the semantics of inward perception to very little, in an inverse ratio to the invention of the myriads of artificial objects produced by technology, objects whose names are merely *descriptive*. For this reason, if we want to rediscover the authentic value of words and speech, we are obliged to go back to the « primitive » languages, there, where we may hope to exhume the « origin » of speech itself *in illo tempore*²⁰.

This is the reason why such students of Vedism as Renou insist upon analysing the poetico-sacred concepts implied in the « strange » tradition of the ṛṣi-seers, for whom « the word... is... *rāṣṭrī devānām*...

16. Cf. *Etudes*, I. 1: « Words indicating the act of 'thinking' are usually adopted to designate the product of such thought in the poem, in the words uttered: for instance, *mati and dhī* ('to say' and 'to think') are united in the *vācō matim* (I.8.56,6)... and in the *vācāh... masīya* » (10.53,4).

17. WHEORE, *op. cit.*: « *A model of the universe of the Americo-Indians* ». « For the Hopi the objective-subjective causal world is re-united in a spiritual and not a spatial sphere ». « We are accustomed to consider these ideas as forming part of animistic or vitalistic beliefs, or of the transcendental unifications of experience, or the intuition of these ultraperceptible manifestations the mystic experiences, or which are employed in mystic and occult systems of thought ».

18. Cf. my book *La Parola e il Silenzio*, Rome, 1970, note on p. 217.

19. Cf. COOMARASWAMY: *Oriental Wisdom and Western Culture*, New York, 1975.

20. Ong, however (*op. cit.*), has an optimistic view of the « destiny of the word » in the coming Western civilisation, tending, as it does, towards the « transformation of the sensory » into a totally sonic or « electronic » culture; this phenomenon is already under way with the gradual supersession of our merely technical civilisation. Indeed, he believes that even the sacred will be invigorated when the crisis of written forms and visual culture has been successfully solved.

mandrā, or the ancient *vāco daīvyam*, the miraculous, immortal Word which will resound anew in every generation (*yād vas citrāṃ yugēyuge nāvyaṃ ghōṣad āmartyam*), and which the poet requires us to keep within ourselves, to preserve (*dīdhrytā*) (1.139,8)²¹.

The term *manisā* indicates inspiration as *prā-vāc*, that is, revelation or human utterance manifested through Agni, the god of revelation *par excellence*; this revelation of the Vāc, however, is suitable only « to the advised man » (*grtsa*) and « strong » (*tavās*); but it is the root of the verb *dhi* « which is called the creator of all forms » (1-2-3). The *ṛṣi* (Rishi) are always careful to point out that their chant is a *nāman*, an hereditary and memorised poem, as in the Hymn 8.21,2, where the word *gir* (actual) is in contrast with the *pitṛnām... mānabhiḥ* (the ancestor-fathers). The authors of the *Vedas* distinguish their own new chant (*nāvya*) from that of the ancients, whose ideal model they follow: the opposition between the « ancient » and the « new » is made even clearer in the verse 1.110,1... *tatām/tāyate* and through the contrast between the epithet *jāmi* in the *jāmi brāhmāṇi* (7.72,3), that is, « the poem of tradition » (*idem* 2).

But the *ṛṣi* presents vedic thought as light, above all. Therefore « the problem of certain synonyms is not merely one of linguistics » (*idem*, 3, p. 6). In disputing certain interpretations of a limited literal scope Renou emphasises « the ambivalence... to be found at the basis of Vedic thought and semantics ». That is: is it possible to rediscover the genuine meaning of the magico-ritual inspiration of the *ṛṣi* in terms which are purely tecnico-verbal? This is what the undoubtedly illustrious grammarians in the West were doing during the first phase of discovery of the *Vedas*, and even in India itself Pāṇini did so, preceded by Sāyaṇa. For this very reason they failed to discover clearly the revealed semantics of the chants and often stumbled over « obscure » verses, which they considered to be mere verbal tricks. If, on the other hand, « the concept of *arkā* (light or song) and *arkasokā* (flame in the form of hymns) clearly indicate that Agni is the matrix of spiritual light = *ketū*, then words are *mātāraḥ*, « creative mothers » (8.6,20) and the *ṛṣi* « are those who attain their own poetical inspiration by *ṛtam*, *ṛtam āsusāṇāḥ* ». The language of the *Vedas* is therefore *gūhya*, i.e. secret. Therefore the word is *ājara*, that is, not subject to ageing, it is *akṣāra*, undying, « the mighty vocal found at the origin of time ». Renou goes on to say, however, that it is the word *brāhman* which characterises the esoteric composition of the *Vedas*; the *raūdrām... brāhma* (10.61,1) is « the formidable word »...; *brāhman* and *vāc* are coextensive, « the first understood... as the prototype of the *sphoṭa* in comparison with *pada* » (10,

21. We quote from Renou's text because in a certain sense it is the most recent and the most « modern ». As he says himself, one may also go back to the interpretations of Thieme, Dumézil, Benveniste or Gonda. For the *Vedas* in the original see the re-print in 3 vols. with confronted texts, ed. by Griffith (Varanasi, 1960-61), or texts publ. and ed. by the Vedic Research Society.

p. 12). « In a work of this kind it is silence, the inexpressible, which is more important than the thing uttered, whence derives the essential role of the *brāhman* as the « officiant of silence » (*idem*).

Before being *saṃskṛta* the Vedic tongue was rich in a diversified symbology, superior to rational perfection, and therefore abounded in images, conceits and metaphors organically implicit in both visible and invisible — or rather, formal and informal — reality. Gonda, in fact, has restored their sacred aura to the various key-words of the *Vedas* which, apparently being obscure, transcend even the « aesthetic » form in which they are expressed²².

Much else may be clarified in the light of a similar reconstruction of the « crypto-typical » language, as Whorf says²³. The Word has its roots in Being and it is the Word which « becomes » being and existent, *Dasein*, as Heidegger would say. Therefore, Renou concludes, « to translate the *Vedas* is not only to betray them, but certainly means to belittle or diminish them » (*idem* 19, p. 22). The Sanskrit in which they were conceived, with its phonic-semantic abundance, truly appears to be the most suitable among ancient tongues for the representation of the sacred word on the brink of the hermetic (and the hermeneutic): not only as a formal manifestation, that is, but also « as a real and proper science of language » (Renou, ch. entitled « The problem of the elipse in the *Ṛgveda* », p. 29, vol. 1).

The creative word and sonic-linguistic monism

There is still another aspect of the sacred linguistic of the *Vāc* which we shall only touch upon, since it permeates as a norm the bases of the whole philosophy of the monistic Vedānta up to the undying *Phonema* of Bhartṛhari. Once again — if the symbolic logic connected with Whorf's hypothesis implies that every form of human knowledge may be reduced, at bottom, to a linguistic modality, including science with « the logical syntax of the real » as its base (Carnap), then the conception of the One-All (advaitic or not) is a co-participator in this vision of the *Vāc*. In India, however, we find the concept so specifically and abundantly illustrated that it goes beyond the boldest flights of Graeco-Christian thought. In the essay which lends its title to the collection Whorf writes: « The idea, so extraneous to the modern world, that nature and language are intimately related, was known for centuries to nu-

22. Cf. GONDA, *The Vision of the Vedic Poets*, The Hague, 1963.

23. Cf. WHORF, *op. cit.*, the essay *Linguistic Analysis of the Thought of Primitive Communities*, pp. 50-72. Also *Grammatical Categories*, pp. 73-88. Here we find the theory of the *crypto-type*, a perfect model of which would be the OM, for instance.

merous high cultures whose historical continuity has been more lasting than that of Western culture. One of its aspects in India is the idea of the *mantram* and *mantric art* »²⁴.

We must return, therefore, to that synonymity between *Vāc* and *Ātman-Brahman*, whose connection Renou confirms as « revealed » in the thought of the *ṛṣi*, in order to assure ourselves that a structural synthesis does exist between them; in the *Vedas*, in fact, the word is incarnated in the elements manifesting the cosmos, including the human senses, in a hierarchy of invisible beings who descend towards those actualizing the visible. Thought is therefore synonymous with breath, which in its turn renders possible a correspondence between body and cosmos on the one hand and between the elements and the gods themselves on the other hand (who are the *Arūpa* of the *Rūpa*, as Whorf rightly observes).

The Word of the Mesopotamic-Jewish Genesis is only *descriptive*: that of St. John is escatologico-prophetic. The *Vāc*, the creator of the One-All, on the other hand, is analytico-functional, coinvolved as it is in a general philosophy of being. In Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadiya* it becomes *Sphoṭa-Brahman*, the essence of the world-as-reality. The emanation of the ancient *Puruṣa* in the Sāṃkhya is duplicated in the *Prakṛti*, as a direct heritage from the Vedic *Puruṣa-Sūkta*. But there is a subtle vibration descending from the *Mahat* (the Mind of Brahman), which subsequently becomes the world, and at the same time « speaks » in the vibrations of the human *manas*, and therefore of the *buddhi*, the cognitive intellect.

This sonic-spiritual monism is « all-pervading », and it is by no mere chance that the supreme name of Viṣṇu derives from the root *viṣ*-to expand. The « three steps » of the Vedic Viṣṇu (*trivikrama*) is transformed in some texts into three syllables: « Viṣṇu with three syllables conquered the three world »²⁵. For Bhartṛhari the *Sphoṭa* will be the OM itself, « the highest unity of Sounds ». In this way, one may finally conceive of the *Vedas* as eternal, together with the *Kalpas*, which are everlastingly reconstructed (with the same *ṛṣi*), after each *pralaya*-destruction of the world. There is one single « speaking chain » in every reborn generation, which « realises » the sacred *mantras* (the *Gāyatrī*, etc.), and the *ṛṣi* — even if they are identified — remain anonymous, just as our medieval artists did. The *Vāc*, having become the super-entity *Sphoṭa* « sprays » out both the Manifestation and the Word, simulta-

24. See the observations on this theme, ch. « Language Mind and Reality », *op. cit.* But his stringent analysis of the matter should be read as a whole.

25. J. GONDA, *Aspects of Early Vishnuism*, ch. VII « The three strides ».

neously²⁶. The Puranic ideas emphasise this onto-cosmological function, renewed in the universal and individual-collective *Karman*²⁷.

The « total » semantics of the sacred is therefore a coherent constant in Indian thought, capable of uniting religion and philosophy, linguistics and cosmology, « common » language and « revealed » language. In fact, there are three more aspects of the *Śabda-Sphoṭa*'s symbol of the One-All and of the Sanskrit alphabet with its sonico-phonic basis. The structure of sound in the tantric texts (which retrace the ancient quadruple angle of the *Vāc* of the *Rgveda* 1.146 (verses 46-64) is divided into four distinct models: *Para-Pasyanti-Madhyana-Vaikhari*. The *Para-pada* is the sound without vibrations (*anahata*) and corresponds to the state of *samanyaspanda*, pre-creative or potential-virtual; the *Pasyanta-Pada* is sound already mental, of the causal *manas*; the *Madhyana-Pada* is the subtle-median sound associated with the human *buddhi* and is expressed in language in general through the *buddhi*; the *Vaikhari-Pada*, finally, is the « normal » *śabda*-sound, the means of communication and the concrete aspect of speech.

This is the way by which the language of the sacred becomes a thought-and-spoken activity, then written, with « spaces » between its intimate and secret components, which unfold but also re-unite the various superior and inferior levels of the Indian *Vāc-Logos*.

In order to grasp the existence of these intermediate spaces it is necessary to return to Yoga techniques or to Zen practices, in which the « silences » have their own peculiar character. What does « to make thought silent », or « to empty one's mind » mean? When the speaking-chain of the single individual ceases, the resultant silence in meditation — *dhyāna*, « awakens » the *siddhi*-powers concealed in the informal *logos*. From this proceed or flow the germ-word, the seed-word, of the OM and the Vedic chant²⁸, as well as certain forms of rhythmical hypnosis, as in the Indian *japa*²⁹ or in the repetition of the sacred name of some favourite god (*Rām-Rām*, *Allā-i-Allā*, etc.). The discipline of the rosary among Christian and Buddhist monks, the Amen chanted at the beginning and the end of every prayer, as well as the psycho-physical healing magic of the Shaman, etc. derive from the same source.

26. The word *sphoṭa* is derived from *sphuṭ* meaning to erupt, spray or explode, cf. K. KUNHANNI RAJA, *Indian Theories of Meaning*, Madras, 1963, ch. *The Theory of Linguistic Symbols*, pp. 95-148.

27. « *The Indian Theogony* » (A comparative study of Indian Mythology from the *Vedas* to the *Purānas*) by SUKUMARI BHATTACHARIJ, Cambridge, 1970. Also, in italian: « *Mito e filosofia nella tradizione indiana* » by CATERINA CONIO, Milano, 1970.

28. For the Vedic chant cf. MARIUS SCHNEIDER: « *Il significato della musica* » ital. version Milano, 1970. For « primitifs », Part III deals with the « music of things, the drum » and « harmony between man and nature ». For the *Vedas idem*, 3: « Joy and Praise: the essence of the hymn ». « The real creative force » or « the primordial sonorous substance » is the *Vāc*, the Latin *vox*, etc.

29. *Yoga-Sūtra* I,28: *taj-japas tad-artha-bhavanam*.

All this is possible in Indian linguistics of the sacred only because, on the one hand, at the foundations of « crude » reality there is a vibration of energy-matter (the *Sakti* and the *Prana*³⁰), and, on the other hand, because the human being — like every other being — is linked with the principle of physical and supra-physical synonymies which govern the whole universe. In other words, there is that archi-original harmony between the creative word on the different planes of reality and the ontico-psychic « sacred » language, capable of expressing this same reality in revelation. The embryo of every grammar of being is jealously concealed in the imponderable quality or essence of the living spirit, which links up the One with the All: woven not idealistically but unifyingly into the world of phenomena.

If there were no such harmony neither revelation nor common practical cognition would be possible. It is sound-vibration (*śabda-spanda*) which rules supreme over every language, whether interior or exterior, sacred or profane, communication between the individual and the beings or among the « many ». In the ancient substrata of speech there is no clear differentiation between the « primordial » word and the word of discourse: the Indian concept of the *Vāc-Sabda-Sphoṭa* integrates mytho-poetical linguistics with historical and socio-relational linguistics. By so doing it restores the dignity of audio-oral or mnemonic semantics, but by no means eliminates the other types of classical linguistics.

30. The great theory of vibration reappears even in the most recent researches of Western science, cf. HANS JENNY: *Cymatics, the Structure and Dynamics of Waves and Vibrations* (English-German text), Bâle, 1967. The author writes: « Everything, both in inert matter and in the living world, exists in a state of vibration, oscillation, pulsation ». This theory is consistent with the whole tendency of the sciences of sound and with astro-physics, which define the universe as formed, not of « raw materials » but of « fluid events », as Whitehead would say.