The Divine Word
and its Expression in Sanskrit:
Continuity and Change
in Vedic and Classical India

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Abstract

The Vedas are said to be not a human creation (*apauruṣeya*), but Revelation imparted to the Vedic sages who have put it down in inspired verses. Vedas' words are therefore divine and eternal, and thus extensively praised. *Vāc*, the Vedic word, is eulogised in several hymns, among which *Vāk Sūkta* (X.125) is by far the most illustrative of all. In some teachings of the Upanishads, *Vāc* is equated to *Brahman* alongside other interpretations.

When analysing the nature of the word, centuries later, philosophers and grammarians refer to it as *śabda*, and no longer as *Vāc*, the latter remaining confined to a rather poetical and mystical reality. Yet, the idea of the eternal and divine character of the scriptures is superimposed on the Sanskrit language also, despite certain historical change remarks on the grammarians' side. In the 5th century CE, Bhartṛhari displays a genuine linguistic and philosophical thought of the folding and unfolding of Reality and its understanding as Word-Principle (*brahman śabda-tattva*). From an auxiliary science of preserving the correct forms of the Vedas, Sanskrit grammar acquires a hermeneutical role and empowers itself as a way to salvation, an idea supported by previous evidence of grammar's role in producing celestial happiness (*abhyudaya*), merit and righteousness (*dharma*).

I seek in this paper to analyse and point out the strongholds that underpin Sanskrit as a divine language and how continuity and change coexist to support over millennia this undaunted approach.

Keywords: Veda, Sanskrit, Vāc, śabda, *brahman śabda-tattva*, Bhartṛhari, history of Sanskrit

It is a matter of common understanding that God chooses to "speak" to people in their own language. The Biblical tradition records the descent

of the Holy Ghost upon Jesus' disciples fifty days after the resurrection, making them able to be speaking and impart the words of God in all languages of the crowd.

> And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and begun to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, in Egypt and the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."[1]

It is therefore perfectly reasonable that God's messages are expressed in accordance with everyone's innate linguistical competence, to create easy understanding, urging, and abiding by them. Yet, there is also a recurrent pro domo understanding that some languages express God's word in a more profound way. Is it their antiquity, and yet their pervasiveness, their rich cultural load carried on and on for centuries with the help of either oral or written tradition, their refinement or simply their capacity to transform themselves by safeguarding certain historical forms and at the same time giving way to new forms to rise and flourish? Even so, what is the difference between a cultured, refined language and a primitive, tribal dialect when it comes to expressing oneself, his world and what is above and beyond his grasp but witness in awe? What makes one language more refined than another? What does "refined" means, according to which universal linguistic criteria? Is there anything like universal linguistic criteria applied to all phyla and language families? Is the capacity of the Kivunjo, a Bantu language spoken in Kilimanjaro villages, in which the verb has seven prefixes and suffixes, two modes, fourteen tenses and which agrees with both its subject,

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[1] *King James Bible. New Testament. Acts 2.1-11.* https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Acts-Chapter-2/.

its object, and its benefactive nouns, each of these having sixteen genders,[2] less refined than the ninety-nines verbal forms[3] of what is likely to assume almost any verbal root in Sanskrit?

For many, beginning with the Vedic seers and the brahman priests, and ending with any supplicant of the yore or today who has been imparted a mantra in Sanskrit of which meaning (not to mention grammatical forms) remains rather obscure, Sanskrit is considered a divine language. The name of the script too, Nāgarī (the urban script) was also amended in this light, duly named thereafter "Devanāgarī" (the script of the god's city)[4]. From the Indo-Europeans lens perspective, classical Sanskrit falls in line with old Greek and Latin. The last two old languages where the medium of an extremely rich and impressive literary as well as scientific tradition that lay the foundation of the western European cultural mapping, which also has imprinted in later centuries most recognisable cultural patterns across the whole world. Likewise, and fortunately, Vedic and then classical Sanskrit too have produced not only an impressive literary tradition, and an extensive grammatical literature, but a significant religious and philosophical corpus that has cast into cultural patterns for almost two millennia a significant part of Asian civilisations. The linguistical introspection and speculations into the nature of language and word of the old Indian grammarians and philosophers is by and large one of the most impressive of all similar efforts of other cultures. The enquiries about the nature of word and language were persistent and systematic, yet, nonetheless pervaded by an acute sense of reverence as toward a divine gift to the Indian race.

This paper, however modest, aims to point out and analyse from an historical and analytical perspective some of the strongholds that helped and

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[2] See more S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, Penguin Books, 2015, 25–26.

[3] These comes as a result of having in Sanskrit ten conjugations, three persons, three numbers (singular, dual and plural), eleven verbal tenses (*lakāras*).

[4] Based on the Brāhmī script, Nāgarī (the city script) superseded other scripts and was in use by 7 century CE. The earliest available epigraphic example is a royal inscription of a text written entirely in Nāgarī of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Dantidurga 754 CE. As pointed by many early scholars, writing in India was attributed divine origin (Brāhmī too is an eloquent example), and thus extending the Nāgarī into Devanāgarī (the script of the city of gods) falls into the pattern" to invest the script with a divine provenance" N. Brassey Halhead, *A Code of Gentoo Law*, London, 1776, xxiv, *apud* Walter H. Maurer, "On the Name Devanāgarī," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96, no. 1 (1976): 101–4. According to Maurer the two terms are not exactly interchangeable, as Nāgarī seems to cover a wider texts typology, whereas Devanāgarī does not always apply to some Nāgarī script varieties, but the latest seems to have better satisfied the need of pursuing the Indian religious commitment. More technical insights on the topic S.Rath, "The Evolution of Inscriptional Nāgarī from Early 7th till 12th CE", *Epigraphica Vostoka (Epigraphy of the Orient)* Moscow: Russian Academy of Science, 29 (2011): 187–201.

maintained the perception of Sanskrit as a divine language and how continuity and change coexist to support over millennia this undiminished approach. Many exquisite and comprehensive accounts of the history of Sanskrit are filling large spaces of libraries. Similarly, there are many papers dealing with the topic, some from very sound scientific / linguistical grounds, others culturally or politically biased which mean to emphasize upon the prominence and status of Sanskrit over other languages or cultural expressions. From a down to earth perspective, on synchronic and diachronic levels, to uplifting spirited eulogies, there have been many efforts to disclose and reveal the strong foundations and well-inbuilt structures that made possible the extant of Sanskrit for such a great span of time.

The divine origin of speech,
the speech divine and the uncreated Veda

In the Ṛgveda, the word is termed *Vāc*[5]. It is not uncommon to have the word looked upon and venerated as a deity under several names in the Vedic literature. Interestingly, the word and by it the speech, are highly praised and described in some of the riddle-like hymns (*brahmodya*) I.164.45, 4.5.83 or openly in word praised manifesto hymns (X.71, X.125). The linguistic speculation on language is anchored as expected in a divine origin of language. The myth says that when gods created speech, it was distributed equally among men and animals. In the yore days, humans and animals could communicate with one another, but somehow, animals have misused their speech and the goods took it away from them and leaving it to humans alone[6].

The word that we use, either in Vedic mantra (*vaidika*)[7] or in our daily transactions (*laukika*), is, to all appearances, only the fourth part of the mystic Vāc, which represents the speech given to mortals alone: "Speech is measured in four feet [quarters]. Brahmins of inspired thinking might know these. They do not set in motion the three that are imprinted in secret; the sons of Manu speak the fourth (foot / quarter) of speech." (*catvāri vāk paramitā padāni / tāni vidurbrāhmaṇā ye manīṣiṇaḥ / guhā trīṇi nihitā neṅgayanti / turīyaṁ*

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[5] The *Nigaṇṭu*, a collection of difficult Vedic words on which is based the oldest available etymological treatise *Nirukta* of Yāska, gives a list of fifty-seven names for word. Vāc is a feminine noun. Sarasvatī is also listed among the fifty-seven names.

[6] RV 8.100.11 *devīṁ vācaṁ janayanta devāḥ / tāṁ viśvarūpaṁ paśavo vadanti //* Gods generated divine speech. Animals of all kinds speak her.

[7] It is also impossible (except for some *silentio* (*tūṣṇīm*) situations) to carry on a full ritual in the absence of words / mantras. It can be Sarasvatī[7], primarily in the Ṛg Veda period the river goddess, and identified with Vāc in the Brāhmaṇa period (Sat.Br. 3.9.1.7, Ait.Br.3.1. (11).7), the poetical meters such is Gāyatrī.

vāco manuṣyā vadanti// Ṛgveda 1.164.45[8]. Next to it, the often-quoted lines of another hymn-riddle which literally runs: "Four are his horns, three his feet, two heads, seven hands are his. Triply bound, the bull keeps on roaring. The great god has entered mortals" (*catvāri śṛṅgā trayo asya pādā/ dve śirṣe sapta hastāso asya/ tridhā baddho vṛṣabho roravīti/ maho devo martyām ā viveśa// Ṛgveda* IV.58.3) is commonly read in purely grammatical terms with certain variations as the four types of words nouns and their substitute (*nāma*), verbs forms (*ākhyāta*), connectors (*upasarga*), and particles (*nipāta*) for the four heads, the three persons, the first (*prathyama*), the second (lit. the middle) (*madhyama*) and the third (lit. the utmost one) (*uttama*) stand for the three feet, the two heads are to be the verbal aspects active (*parasmaipāda*) and passive reflexive (*ātmanepada*), the inflectional system of seven case endings (*vibhaktī*) could be interpreted as the hands, and the triple bonds the numbers: singular, dual and plural. Later grammarians like Bhartṛhari, Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa, philosophers such as Gaudapāḍa, or Sāyaṇa in his commentary on the Vedas are inclined to give the fourfold partition a more specialised approach by interpreting it as the four stages of the word: *vaikharī*, *madhyamā*, *pasyantī* and *parā*[9]. Yet, before jumping to these terms belonging to a later stage theory of language interpretation, it is worthwhile to read one of the many Vedic interpretations[10] of these riddle verses, given by the Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā, and quoted in the Nirukta:

> The speech, thus created, became fourfold. The three parts went to the three worlds and the fourth one into beings. The speech that was in the earth is seen in the fire as well as in the *Rathantara*

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[8] The *RigVeda. The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, trans. by Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton (Oxford University Press, The University of Texas, South Asia Institute, 2014), 359. When not indicated otherwise, I use the English translation of S. Jamison and J. Brereton for the Vedic verses.

[9] *Vaikharī* is the word that is audible to others. At this stage, the sound sequence is differentiated, and it is the place where the utterance, as well as the perception, takes place. It represents the speech itself with all its particularities according to every speaker. *Madhyamā* is the stage where meaning and the word are differentiated, but together still form a unity. The meaning of the word, the signifié, is constructed with the help of a mental representation. *Paśyantī*, which is called otherwise *pratibhā* or *prakṛti,* is the stage where there is no sound sequence, nor conceptualised word. It is considered the source of all manifested words and their meanings. One of the most explicit and earlier descriptions of these stages is made in the *Vākyapadīya* of Bhartṛhari. The commentary, *Vṛtti*, mentions the fourth and supreme stage, *Parā,* where all sequences and modifications are completely absorbed. It is a highly explored linguistical construction of speech analysis phonetic, semantic, and cognitive aspects. The Kaśmir Śaivism tantric tradition is building a massive textual interpretation of this fourfold word/speech grades on metaphysical and ontological layers.

[10] N. Kulkarni gives a well-documented account of these interpretations in "The Vedic Interpretation of the Verse *catvāri vāk parimitā padāni (Ṛgveda 1.164.45)*", in *Indian Theories of Language*, ed. B.K. Dalai (Pune: Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit, 2008), 1-9.

sāman. The speech that was in the sky is seen in the wind and in the *Vāmadevya sāman*. The speech that is seen in the heaven is seen in Āditya, in the meter Bṛhatī and in the clouds, The speech that was extra in the beings was placed in the Brahmins. Therefore, Brahmins speak both the languages, that of the gods and that of the human beings.[11]

This account not only tries to shed light upon the shares of the fourfold word by equally linking all the four elements but also serves the purpose of explaining and reinforcing the divine aspect of the speech in its utmost form. It is said to be the gods' language communicated as the language of the Vedic hymns, but it also shares a resemblance to the language of men. Could this dichotomy be understood in terms of refined and sacred Sanskrit as opposite the unrefined, uncouth Prakrit, which, as plastic and available to change as it was, gave rise to the Indian vernaculars? As for the god who has entered the mortals, the 5th century CE grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari, who translates the word-speech poetic description into linguistical and philosophical developments, touches upon this union in the following terms: "It has been said that Self, which is within the speaker, is the word, the great Bull with whom one desires union"[12].

The prominence of the Vāc as sacred speech that must be mastered by the priests when performing Soma sacrifices is clearly shown in the hymn X.81. The sacred word sets upon the most competent among the seers who gave a name (*nāmadheya*) to the surrounding. The divine word/goddess speech was picking the one who was to be revealed according to his merit, righteousness, and capacity to capture her into the Vedic mantra. But we also find out from the hymn that the worthy ones have brought the divine word into the world and dispersed it into many places, conjointly in their efforts to sing her out. Thus, we have not only a passive attitude but an active one of willpower over the hidden word: "1. O Bṛhaspāti, (this was) the first beginning of Speech: when they [=the seers] came forth giving names/What was their best, what was flawless – that (name), set down in secret, was revealed to them because of your affection (for them)…3b. Having brought her here, they dispersed her in many places. The seven husky-voiced singers together cry her out". The share in goddess Speech

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[11] *Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā* 1.11.5: *sā vai vāk sṛṣṭā caturdhā vyabhavat/eṣveva lokeṣu trīṇi, paśuṣu turīyam/yā pṛthivyāṁ sāgnau sā rathaṅtare/yā'ntarikṣe sā vāyau, sā vāmadevyai//yā divi sādityai sā bṛhati sā stanayitnau/ atha paśuṣu tato yā vāgatiricyata tāṁ brāhmaṇeṣvadadhuḥ/ tasmād brāhmaṇā ubharyāṁ vācaṁ vadanti yā ca devanāṁ yā ca manuṣyāṇāṁ iti// Apud* N. Kulkarni *vide* supra note.

[12] *VP I 144: api prayoktur ātmānaṁ antaravasthitam/prāhur mahāntam ṛṣabhaṁ yena sāyujate iṣyate//* (where not otherwise stated, the Bhartṛhari verses/ commentary's translation is by K.A. Subramanya Iyer, 1966, 1995, *vide* references).

is only by merit; who hears, yet can't hear her, who sees, if not yet cannot sees her "Though all have eyes and ears, the companions are unequal in quickness of mind" not everyone is qualified to serve her.

The hymn X.125, also called *Vāk Sūkta*, is decidedly the most comprehensive poetical eulogy of Vāc-Logos. It is one of the few hymns where the seer (*ṛṣi*), this time a female seer (*ṛṣikā*) is the same as the governing deity of the hymn Vāk Āmbhṛṇa. It is a self-praise[13] (*ātmastuti*) hymn that has generated a rich commentarial literature and acts as a stepping stone to enhancing the perspective of speech's importance to shaping and understanding reality[14].

> 3.I am the ruler, assembler of goods, observer foremost among those deserving the sacrifice. Me have the gods distributed in many places – so that I have many stations and cause many things to enter (me). 4.Through me he eats food – whoever sees, whoever breathes, whoever hears what is spoken. Without thinking upon it, they live on me. Listen, o, you who are listened to: it's a trustworthy thing I tell you. 5. Just myself I say this, savored by gods and men: "Whom I love, just him I make formidable, him a formulator, him a seer, him of good wisdom.[15]" 6. I stretch the bow for Rudra, for his arrow to smash the hater of the sacred formulation. I make combat for people. I have entered Heaven and Earth. 7.I give birth to Father (Heaven?) on his (own?) head [=Agni?]; my womb is in the waters, in the sea. Thence I spread forth across all worlds, and yonder heaven with height I touch. 8.I, just like the winds, I blow forth, grasping at all words, beyond heaven, beyond this earth here – of such great size is my greatness have I come into being.[16]

The hymn's poetical and cosmical images of envisaging the power of the Word will be highly explored by the orthodox Brahmanical elites, priests

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[13] Poetical imagery and extensive metaphor of the self-reference function of the word. For it is through words that we analyse word, speech and language. Any other art in its very etymological sense (τέχνη - craft) uses other materials and resources to produce works.

[14] In his commentary, Sāyaṇa identifies consistently Vāc with brahman in terms rather typical for the Advaita Vedānta school. The interpretation given to the last line is clearly indicating his choice of seeing Vāc "I, in the form of absolute bráhman consciousness, removed from attachment, come to be with such greatness".

[15] It is hard to suppress an unsought yet so obvious similarity of this line with the definition of the accomplished orator in Rome prepared to embrace and follow the *cursus honorum*, which, in Cato the Elder's words, quoted by many, including Quintilian and Cicero, is: *uir bonus dicendi peritus*.

[16] The Rigveda, *The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, trans. Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton (Oxford University Press, The University of Texas, South Asia Institute, 2014), 1603-1604.

and theologs in the next level met in the philosophical and theological discussions on the Veda – text transmission, that is, the esoteric teachings of the Upaniṣads, or in other words, Vedānta (the end of the Veda).

Vāc and *Brahman*
between affirmation and negation

The Upaniṣads elaborate complex metaphysical speculations in a more straightforward language[17] with regards with the Vedic Vāc or the divine word, in all its forms (inaudible, unarticulated, or articulated), through various associations between speech and the other human faculties, including high philosophical concepts such is self (*Ātman*) or *Brahman*. Thus, Vāc is connected and interrelated to several forms of Divinity such as Gāyatrī, Agni, (Ch.Up[18]. III.13.3, III.18.3, Br̥.Up. III.9.24, Jai.Up.IV.9.1-2,4), connected or supported by the vital breath (*prāṇa*) (Ch.Up. III.18.2; Taitt.Up. I.7; Jai.Up.I.1.1, I.21.-2) which mutually merged one into another, mind (*manas*) (Ch.Up. IV.3.2-3; Br̥.Up. I.2.4; Jai.Up.27.17), intelligence (*prajña*) (Br̥.Up. IV.1.2; I.5.9; Jai.Up.I.40.4, Ch.Up.VII.3.1) space (*ākāśa*) (Jai.Up.I.2). The most compelling assimilation of all is between *Vāc* and *Brahman*. The concept of *Brahman* we deal with in the Upaniṣads has travelled a long way from its meaning in the Vedas. In the R̥gveda, *bráhman*[19], accented on its first syllable, it refers to a sacred poetic composition, or the hymns, a sacred formulation of truth, a mantra, thus *śabda brahman*, and not as much to the absolute *brahmán*, accented on its last syllable, as it is stated in later Sanskrit, particularly in the Upaniṣads which are building their metaphysical theology around the paradoxical nature of brahman, liable to both a cataphatic and apophatic approach. The *brahmán*, accented on the last "a" is widely accepted in the Vedas as the one who composes the hymn or who knows and masters the Vedic hymns and lore, the formulator of the sacred formulation. As far as the meanings of the term is concerned, Oldenberg (1972:65, vol.II) goes for the aura of magic power that fills the hymn, L.Renou 1943:43, the energy that uses speech to convey the ineffable, and Gonda 1950 the life force or power of the hymn. Regarding the etymology, the general scholarly consensus accepts the root "*bhr̥*" "to increase, to grow" which is in accord with the *Nighaṇṭu* classification of brahman under the terms for food (2.7) (*brahman*

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[17] In the sense that is divested of all the metaphors or other figure of speech, literary devices, or other prosody resources to creating poetical image.

[18] The abbreviations for the quoted Upaniṣads are Br̥.Up. – *Br̥hadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, Ch.Up. – *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, Jai.Up. – *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad*, Taitt.Up – *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*)

[19] There is not a full consensus on the etymology of the term. For detailed studies on etymologies and meanings L. Renou & L. Silburn, "Sur la notion de brahman", *Journal Asiatique,* 1949: 7fff Gonda 1950, P. Thieme, *Brahman*, ZDMG 102, 1952: 99-151.

annam) and wealth (2.10) which assumes identification of Brahmanaspāti with Bṛhaspāti as "lord of speech".[20]

The transition of *bráhman* from a form of speech to the absolute is, no doubt, a gradual process based on assimilating layers of semantic development triggered by forces of extraction and abstraction the most distinctive feature which would satisfy the mind's quest for essence and all-encompassing / transcending principle of the phenomenal world. Hence the description, yet the refusal to fit the concept into words. In support of this idea, it can be noted that

> The transference of meaning is no accident; rather it is fundamental to the conception of the identity of speech with the fundamental element of being. That fundamental element has the nature of consciousness, of knowledge, which is expressed in speech. In the fifth century CE, the philosopher of language, Bhartṛhari, makes this identification complete in his concept of śabdabrahman 'speech absolute'.[21]

Reference to two *brahman* (the sacred formulation) can be dated as early as *Maitri Upaniṣad* 6.22: "There are two brahmans to be known, the sound brahman and what is higher than that. Those who know the sound brahman attain the higher Brahman. (*Dve brahmaṇī veditavye śabdabrahma paraṁ ca yat/śabdabrahmaṇi niṣṇātaḥ paraṁ brahmādhigacchati//*).

In Bṛ.Up., the most competitive of all debaters, as well as their acknowledged champion, Yājñavalkya, taking over from Jitvan Śailini, most likely a contemporary renowned theologian or philosopher, explains to king Janaka how *Vāc* is Brahman, nevertheless, at the very end of the section, after further attempts to solving further equations between brahman and life breath (*prāṇa*), sight (*cakṣus*), hearing (*śtrotras*), mind (*manas*), the heart (*hṛdaya*), he concludes that Brahman is rather Ātman and the answer is fulfilled.

> "What constitutes knowledge, Yajñavalkya?" "Speech itself, Your Majesty," he replied. "For surely, Your Majesty, it is through speech that we come to know a counterpart. Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, the Atharva-Aṅgirāsa, histories, ancient tales, sciences, hidden teachings (*upaniṣad*), verses, aphorism, explanations, and glosses; offerings and oblations; food and drink;

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[20] Valuable insights on the meaning, reception, and interpretation of the "brahman/Brahman" in its transition to the *śabda-brahman* is offered by Peter M. Scharf in "Determining the Ancient Vedic Conception of Speech by Samanvaya of hymns of the Ṛgveda" *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 97 (2016):150–185.

[21] P. Scharf (2016: 162). More on the *śabda-tattva brahman* of Bhartṛhari will be dealt with further down.

this world and the next world; and all beings – it is through speech, your Majesty, that we come to know all these. So clearly, Your Majesty, the highest brahman is speech. What a man knows and venerates it as such, speech never abandons him, and all beings flock to him; he becomes a god and joins the company of gods."[22]

What would also be of interest is to observe that for the first time in the history of thought, in Upaniṣads the limits of language are openly acknowledged. From the theological point of view, the apophatic cry *"Neti! Neti!"* of the Upaniṣadic thinkers is the expression of increasing awareness of the language's limits to comprehensibly comprise and describe the ineffable. Language can, at the most, just point at it. Vāc's powers (*śaktīs*) are unmistakably still there but lay hidden, as it should be to preserve intact the mystic force of the unspoken word.

A way to bridge the unspoken with the spoken is somehow secured by empowering the sacred syllable Oṁ. Midway through inaudible and audible, articulated and unarticulated, in its sonorous expansion and regression, Oṁkāra becomes the symbol of what in Bhartṛhari's words is already an symbol/image (*śabdabrahman - anukāra BK I.5*) of the whole Veda. As a syllable, it becomes the very embodiment of the imperishable syllable (*akṣara*) or principle, which at times acts as a name or epithet for *brahman* itself.

Aiming to salvation while ploughing down the rules: grammar's approach

Grammarians claim to be enquiring into the nature of word and language from the standpoint of the science of language with a purposely custodianship of the sacred language. Acknowledged as one of Veda's ancillary science (*vedāṅga*), vyākaraṇa's purpose is to provide means for insight and truth into the Vedic hymns forms, meaning and hermeneutics[23]. High moral ground as to grammar use and importance comes from the first grammatical commentary available, *Vārttika* of Kātyāyana. Also, in the introduction to the commentary of Ṛgveda, Sāyaṇa tells us how god Bṛhaspati tried to teach Indra the correct words, a very tedious endeavour which took many

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[22] Bṛ.Up. 4.1.1 in *The Early Upaniṣads*. Annotated text and translation Patrick Olivelle. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998),103.

[23] *Paspaśāhnika 2.1 rakṣohāgamalaghvasaṁdehāḥ proyojanam*. The purposes of the grammar are *rakṣā* – the preservation of the Veda, *uha* – the suitable adaptation of Vedic mantras according to the requirements of a particular ritual, *āgama* – following the Vedic tradition, *laghu* – simplicity and economy of the correct grammatical forms, and *asaṁdeha* – the removal of doubts with regards to understanding some Vedic.

thousands of heavenly years, and yet he could not exhaust the whole lot, and therefore he decided to teach Indra grammar instead. Thus, it seems that grammar is the necessary shortcut to master a language. The mystic Vāc meant through riddles or praised in cosmological dimensions in hymns is now restricted to the Vedic usage alone. Of all other names for word, *śabda*[24] which is both sound and signifier is gaining ground and represents the study material of the grammarians.

In the 4th century BC, Pāṇini[25] structures a comprehensive collection of grammatical rules of the correct usage (*sadhu*) of what he recorded as standardised Sanskrit spoken in his time, known as *bhāṣā*, the language of the elites and cultured brahmans (*śiṣṭas*), and also the rules applying to *chandas*, the language of the Vedic hymns. His approach is based on an economic principle of outlining the general rules (*ustarga*) and then offering the exceptions (*apavāda*). In both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, Pāṇini also makes room for marginal, optional, preferred, and dialectal usages of the Sanskrit language he is pinning down in his *lectiones*. The concise sūtra form, the highly specialised metalanguage and techniques used in *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, which must be a result of a significant tradition which produced Pāṇini, resemble more a code machine than a mystical reverie or a metaphysical introspection into the subtleties of the relationship thought – language – reality. Yet, all Pāṇinian commentators, starting with Kātyāyana, the first commentator of Pāṇini, felt it necessary to says lay the stress first and foremost upon the eternality of Sanskrit: "Correct usage of Sanskrit leads to prosperity. This is similar to the correct use of the Vedic expression[26]."

In the same frame of mind, Patañjali states the eternality of the relationship between the object and its verbal form and seeming to purposedly overlook acknowledging the historical development of the language, dialectal differences or particularities clearly shown by Pāṇini and by Yāska. The historical framework appears to be abhorrent to the Indian mind, which feels

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[24] There are also other names to express word – language in the Vedas i.e. *gir, vāṇī*, alongside the over fifty names listed in the *Nigaṇṭu*. Most of the total of fifty-four nouns are names of the metres, or variants to express sounds. Out of all these, *śabda* (which means both sound and significant (*vācaka*) prevails over and builds a successful conceptual career in the theory and the philosophy of language. To start with, the verbal testimony (*śabda pramāṇa*) of the Mīmāṁsa philosophers and the word-principle (*śabda tattva*) of the 5th century AD grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari are the earliest and the most productive ones in terms of commentaries and polemics.

[25] Pāṇini makes a great use of the fourteen aphorisms called *pratyāhāra-sutrāṇi* or *akṣara-samāmnāya*, which are technically devised to arrange the sounds of Sanskrit in such a way that allows many possible combinations and permutations. The tradition claims that the sūtras were revealed to Pāṇini by Śiva himself, beating his drum fourteen times.

[26] *Vārttika 9 śāstra-pūrvake prayoge'bhyudayas tat tulyaṁ veda-śabdena.*

so much right in a self-equal continuum, always ready to validate and justify any change or act in perfect keeping with established, mainstream Vedic paradigms. This attitude certainly applies to the grammarians who have never dwelled consistently on its historical changes although aware of language evolution. M. Deshpande summarises the opinion that a moderate, mixed attitude can as well be considered a possibility.

> …that the grammarians were actually aware of the facts of the linguistic changes, historical or otherwise, and yet, for reasons other than grammatical, they maintained the doctrine of eternal Sanskrit, and then tried as best as they could to accommodate the facts of linguistic change within the parameters of this dominant paradigm. A more judicious statement may be concerning this situation that the language did change somewhat, and that the grammarian were aware of some changes, but also made some modifications to their linguistic theory. But they did not change their basic paradigm. They only added new epicycles to the old paradigm to accommodate the newly emerging situation"[27]

Ignoring the historical changes or the dialectal differences could not have been the right attitude for a learned grammarian whose expertise will help the grammatical tradition to grant him the status of a sage[28] (*trimuni*). Yet, acknowledging those as possible historical, or usage forms and even more placing all of it under the generous parasol of unaccountable and unexplored changing possibilities of the eternal language is perfectly honourable.

A step forward to ensure the validity of the paradigm of Sanskrit as a divine / eternal language was to account for the fact that all usage or historical were changes valid as long as, from the purely grammatical point of view they were correct, not corrupted, and thus capable of generating merit by knowing and employing them (Deshpande 1985). Merit is, therefore the main concern, and it seems to apply both to the Vedic as well as common (*laukika*) words provided are used on their correct, grammatical form[29].

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[27] M. Deshpande, "Historical Change and the Theology of Eternal Sanskrit," *Zeitschrift Für Vergleichende Sprachforschung* 98, no. 1 (1985): 126.

[28] The grammatical tradition refers to Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patañjali as the three sages (*trimuni*).

[29] *Paspaśāhnika* 4.84 *lokato'rthaprayukte śabda-prayoge śāstreṇa dharma-niyamaḥ* "When (it is assumed that the use of words is occasioned by the thing-meant, on account of the usage of) the people, grammar provides a restriction (on the use of words) for the sake of dharma"; 7.86 *evam ihāpi samānāyām arthagatau śabdena capaśabdena ca dharmaniyamaḥ kriyate. śabdenaivārtha'bhidheyo nāpaśabdenety evaṁ kriyamāṇam abhyadayakāri bhavatīti.* "In the same way, here also when meaning can be understood equally from correct words and incorrect words, a restriction is made for dharma, namely, that meaning is to be conveyed by correct words only, not by incorrect words (because) if it is being done in this way (the use of words) leads to *abhyudaya* (happiness in the form of the svarga)".

Language's natural or conventional character is one of the most important issues of Indian linguistics, which is entertained mostly by Mīmāṁsā and Nyāyā schools followed closely by the atomist-physicist school Vaiśeṣika, and obviously by grammar[30]. The ritualistic Mīmāṁsā[31] school of thought is the strong defender of the natural, innate character of language (*auttpatika*)[32]. As the Veda is revealed and inspired to sages (*apauruṣeya*), the origin of language also cannot be ascribed to any mythical founder, for if there had been any, the Tradition would have recorded him.

On the other hand, the Nyāyā-Vaiśeṣika schools are not too keen to accept a natural character of language, preferring the convention to it. However, the logicians, as well as Vaiśeṣika philosophers, do not consider language in its divine outcome but rather as a semiotic system. For them, language (*śabda*) is the last to come in a list of the means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*).

> The word is a type of inference; it is not another means of valid knowledge. Why it is so? [It is so] because the thing is inferred from the word. How it is inferable? It's said that is inferable since it is not known through direct perception (*pratyakṣa*), as it is not known [directly] from its sign, but only by association with its sign it is known correctly thereafter through the correct knowledge of the word. In this way the word is inferable.[33]

For the grammarians, starting with Patañjali, the relation between word and meaning is eternally established[34] rather on account of a divine origin of

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[30] Grammar was always seen playing a subordinated position, as an ancillary limb of the *Veda* (*vedāṅga*). But at times, given the contribution of some great grammarians such as the 5th century Bhartṛhari, grammar is "raised" to the status of a *darśana*, view endorsed by some philosophers such is Mādhavācarya. In his *Sarva darśana saṁgraha*, the 12th century Dvaita philosopher, discusses in the 13th chapter *Pāṇini Darśana* mainly the Bhartṛhari's system of thought.

[31] The *mīmāṁsākas* claimed supremacy over any other philosophical schools to preserve and correctly extract the meaning of the *Veda*s. Their knowledge, known otherwise as the science dealing with Vedic phrases interpretations (*vākyārtha śāstra*), grew mostly around producing the meanings and procedures of rituals laid down by the Vedic injunctions but it did not go any further than that. For the *mīmāṁsākas*, the Veda is authorless (*apauruṣeya*), revealed and heard by the poet-visionaries (*ṛṣis*).

[32] *Autpattika* is derived from *utpatti*, a feminine noun which means "birth, creation, origin" with the help of a secondary suffix (*taddhita*). Thus, the relation between word and its meaning was produced *illo tempore*.

[33] *Nyāya Bhāṣa* II.1 50-52 *śabdo'numānaṁ na pramāṇāntaram/ śabdārthasyānumeyatvāt/katham anumeyatvam/pratyakṣo'nupalabdheḥ/yathānupalabbhyamāno liṅgī mitena liṅgena paścanmīyata ityānumānam evam mitena śabdena paścānmīyate'rtho'nupalabhyamāna ityanumānam/ ityāścānumānam śabdaḥ/.*

[34] *Paspaśāhnika 3: siddhe śabdārtha sambandhe* (given the eternal relation between the word and its meaning), which is one of the major topic that is found even in Kātyāyana's *Vārttika* and then discussed thereafter in the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali.

language than a convention device. They do not question it in the fashion the other mentioned philosophers do but focus mostly on the grammatical techniques and terminology, which is, otherwise, the grammar's main concern. Before Patañjali, Kātyāyana has also firmly ascertained the innate relationship between the word / the certain sounds sequence form (*vācaka*)/signifier and the object denoted (*artha*)/signified, but also acknowledged it from the perspective of gaining merit as the most important role of the grammar.

> While the relationship between words and meanings is established by the usage in the world (of a certain expression) to denote a certain meaning, the science of grammar makes a regulation concerning the religious merit (produced by the use of words), as is commonly done in worldly conventions and Vedic rituals.[35]

These are the premises[36] that are put forward and made manifest as the unique acceptable mind set of further enquiries and analysis into the various grammatical domains. There is also another strong hint at it. Patañjali himself explains that he uses the word *siddhe* (perfectly established) with a very good reason at the back of his mind, i.e., for the sake of receiving blessing (*maṅgalam*) before embarking upon the considerable effort of commenting upon Pāṇini's sūtras. Therefore, admitting this eternal character of Sanskrit as well as taking painstaking efforts to ensure the correctness (*sādhutva*), purification of the word (*śabdasaṃskāra*) and constant clearing out of all the corrupted grammatical forms of the language (*apaśabda*) is said to be merit generating. The correct grammatical forms are known only to gods (*suras*), whereas demons (*asuras*) do not, and therefore they can be defeated, as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* story tell that instead pronouncing *he'arayaḥ, he'rayaḥ* they have wrongly uttered *he'lavaḥ, he'lavaḥ* which incurred their defeat[37].

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[35] Vārttika 1 *siddhe śabdārtha saṃbandhe lokato'rtha-prayukte śāstreṇa dharmaniyamaḥ*.

[36] It is a very common attitude of the old to put all effort to dissuade any chance of being at fault or guilty of any hubris. Any embodiment of power should be propitiated to secure its benign action.

[37] In another passage of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (I.2.4.6-11), the story goes that the demons who enter a competition with gods about giving pairs of words could not come up with the feminine form of numeral five (*pañca*), as in Sanskrit from five onwards the ordinal numeral has only one form for both masculine and feminine, and thus, the demons, not so competent in grammar, lost the competition and were defeated. The story is used to describe the Prayāja (Fore ritual), where the sacrificer imitates the gods, and his enemies are the demons. Correct employment of the accent is nonetheless important. Any mistake or misuse of the accent place becomes a thunderbolt in the form of speech and kills the performer as it happened to Tvaṣṭṛ demon who wanted a son to kill Indra (*índra-śatru* = slayer of Indra). By accenting the first syllable (*udātta*), instead of accenting the last syllable, to that demon was born a son, Vṛtta, who instead of killing, was killed by Indra (*indra-śatrú* = killed by Indra) (Taittirīya Saṃhitā 11.4.12.1).

Several centuries elapse between the great commentary on *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and further endorsement on the idea of grammar securing merit (*dharma*) and celestial happiness that is made by the unique 5th century CE grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari. There is even more to it, a new dimension which is certainly anchored in the Vedic heritage. To Bhartṛhari, grammar and by implication the Sanskrit grammar is "the door of salvation" (*dvaram apavargasya* VP I.14), "the best of all austerities, the one that is nearest to Brahman" (*āsannam brahmaṇas tasya tapasām uttamaṁ tapaḥ* VP I.11) and the "first step in the ladder leading to liberation; this is the straight royal road for all those who desire salvation"[38]. Bhartṛhari manifesto that supreme brahman is one the same as the word-brahman is clearly stated at the very beginning of his Vākapadīya, in the section called programmatically *Brahmakāṇḍa*.

> That without the beginning or end is Brahman, the Principle of Word-Speech, which is imperishable, and it manifests itself in the state of things, from which the world proceeds to evolve. Although he is thought as one, he appears divisible because of his powers, and [although] his powers are not distinctive, he manifests as if they are distinctive; that whose six types of modification such as birth etc., depend upon the power of time, they being the source of different type of existences, that whose unity, One, the seed of all [is perceived] as multiple: the agent, the object and the action, that for which the Veda is a means of attainment and a symbol. Although it is one, the great sages transmitted distinctively in different traditions[39].

The verses concentrate the gist of Bhartrhari's philosophical position, that is without any trace of doubt a firm adhesion to a structural monistic principle of a world of many names and forms. Echoes of the Vedic formula and mantra are easily recognisable. Echoes or of the Upanisadic assimilation or ultimate identity between self (*ātman*) and *brahman* are also read in its verses. How are we supposed to achieve realization of this supreme world principle that transcends the world being also its source and cause, expansion and point of absorption all in a cyclic wave like a particle (as the movement of an atom according to the quantum physics) little we are told and in

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[38] *VP I 16 idam ādyaṁ padasthānaṁ siddhiṣopānapravaṇām/iyaṁ sā mokṣamāṇānām ajihmā rājapaddhatiḥ/* K.A. Subramanya Iyer translation, 1966.

[39] BK I 1-5 *anādinidhanaṁ brahma śabdatattvaṁ yad akṣaram/vivartate'rthabhāvena prakriyā jagato yataḥ//ekam eva yadāmnātaṁ bhinnaśaktivyapāśrayāt/apṛthaktve'pi śaktibhyaḥ pṛthaktveneva vartate//adhyāhitakalāṁ yasya kālaśaktim upāśritāḥ/janmādayo vikārāḥ ṣaḍ bhāvabhedasya yonayaḥ//ekasya sarvabījasya yasya ceyam anekadhā/bhoktṛbhoktavyarūpeṇa bhogarūpeṇa ca stithiḥ/prāptyupāyo'nukāraś ca tasya vedo maharṣibhiḥ/eko'py anekavartmeva samāmnātaḥ pṛthak pṛthak//.*

words that bear certain resemblance with the Vedic riddles or metaphorical description of what could be otherwise very technical but confided to certain traditions purposedly hidden from plain view[40]? "Therefore, word purification (*śabdasaṁskāra*) is the means of realisation of Supreme Ātman. For the who knows the truth of the employment of [the word] principle of its action attains immortal Brahman".[41] It is still all very philosophical and linguistic in a language that is from the realm of gods, yet there are no theological claims as theology is not Bhartṛhari' concern.

The same, yet another (*mutatis mutandis*) or continuity and change

The very few quotes above of works heavily loaded with praise for the divine and salvific values of Sanskrit[42] are but very few of the many examples down the centuries employed to illustrate its acclaimed divine and idiosyncratic character. Under Ashoka's reign, Buddhism was spread through missionary expeditions across the Indian subcontinent. Fortunately, in Sri Lanka, Buddha's teachings gathered as *Tipiṭaka* canon were committed to writing as early as 1st century BC, but in India, the Buddhist monks express themselves in Sanskrit. Jain monks are the only one that for some centuries resist the pressure to write their religious and philosophical works in Sanskrit. Since the 4th century CE till the 13th century CE, more and more inscriptions in Sanskrit appeared in the Indian subcontinent. They can now be found in far distant places as Vietnam, Cambodia, or Indonesia, and unmistakeably can be taken for an expression of the political power. Besides epigraphic evidence, schools of Sanskrit, numerous scholars, and their impressive and numerous literary works produced in the whole subcontinent led to an *état d'affaire* which rightly and aptly is termed as 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' (S. Pollock, 1996, 2000, 2006). Sanskrit acts clearly as a link-language (Aklujkar 1996, Kelly 1996) or lingua franca between theologians and philosophers across India and Indian subcontinent, retaining once more its elitist marks. Languages of the Indian subcontinent belonging to a family other than Indo-European, drew heavily on Nāgarī/Devanāgarī to create their own writing and Indian metrics are used in Khmer language literary works as early as 10th century CE. Indian

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[40] F. Dobre Brat, Śabda saṁskāra, a mere grammatical technique?" *Proceedings of the International Symposium The Book.Romania.Europe* (2010): 493-501.

[41] VP I 144 *tasmad yah śabdasaṁskarah sa siddhiḥ parātamanaḥ/tasya pravṛttitvajans brahman aśnute*/ Translation J.E.M Houben, 1995.

[42] Obviously, the Vedic hymns I refer to in this paper are not in Sanskrit, but I use Sanskrit by extension (and in accord with other scholars' opinion) as a sui-generis term that covers a millennial linguistic tradition extending until the present day.

prosody seem also to have been used in Thailand, as it is shown in a Pāli inscription and a text in Thai with reference to the Pali text Vuttodara. The men in power of the Dravidian languages states made also generous cultural allowances for the usage of Sanskrit as it is shown on many bilingual (Sanskrit – Tamil) inscriptions plenty during the Coḷa dynasty (10 – 13 century CE) in south India. Works on Sanskrit grammar are composed in distant places such as Java where it is preserved. All these examples[43] are but a few glimpses into what Sanskrit meant for centuries on end: a distinguished, refined and elitist sociocultural-linguistic code never imposed, but always pursued.

The foundation of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 marked the beginning of a new era for Sanskrit in many ways, from the systematic comparative Indo-European studies and linguistics turning to an increasing awareness of Sanskrit as a repository of an immensely valuable literary, artistic, and scientific works. Under certain forces stirred up by the colonial period, an acute sense of nationalism surged out during the 19th and early 20th century. As Sanskrit was used as a symbol of Hindu identity (Hindutva), no efforts were spared towards undertaking consistent promotion and popularisation of Sanskrit language and literature, known as Sanskritization, as well as promoting a sanskritized Hindi and other Indian vernaculars.

In today's India, Sanskrit is largely taught and promoted at many levels under many institutions, from the few traditional gurukulas or pathaśālas remaining to universities, research centres, and even on the political agenda. It is one of the twenty-two scheduled languages so recognized by the Indian constitution. Sanskrit language legacy continues and rightly so to be looked upon with utmost respect and reverence. Its legacy named as the language of gods (*gīrvāṇa-bhāratī*) is strongly felt, but under the urge to uphold its greatness and sacredness, its very essence is sadly forgotten[44] or sacrificed to new gods rising in power.

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[43] For which systematic presentation, I am indebted to J.E.M. Houben and his Introduction (to) *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, ed. J.E.M. Houben, (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1996), 10-12, reprint New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012.

[44] Contemporary efforts of Sanskrit revival are seldom heavily political biased and used as an instrument of shaping sharp identities. Sanskrit can become a powerful weapon but at the price of losing its purity and its grammatical correctitude much to the grief of scholars. G.U.Thite (2016: 200) touches on the current state of propagating Sanskrit language in a somewhat disenchanted tone. "Really speaking there is a lot of pollution in Sanskrit today. The writers write in Sanskrit without proper knowledge of the Grammar and prosody in Sanskrit. The proportion of grammatical mistakes is impossible to measure. In this situation it is very difficult to call this Sanskrit. It is ghost-Sanskrit." He emphasizes particularly on nowadays lack of care and refinement which is ultimately the very core, "the soul" of this "refined" = *sanskṛt* language.

Conclusions

In Vedic and classical India, the divine word (*Daivi Vāk*) can be approached and analysed as a topic of study from several points of view: poetical, philosophical and theological. The Vedic hymns about word and speech are copious, resourceful, challenging, mind-blowing and puzzling. The sacerdotal literature of the Saṁhitās extends and deepens the perspective on sacred word by bringing out and organising into complex instructions, patterns and traditions the relations and interpretations between Word/Speech, which is now more and more assimilated to goddess Sarasvatī and other divinities in order to secure the effective performance of ritual which is speech-based. The Upaniṣadic thought aims at more abstract layers of thought where the Word and Speech is seen as possibly describing and identifying with the supreme Brahman, the ultimate Principle, but without exhausting it. The prominent Sanskrit grammarians Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patañjali, in their monumental works left a standard refined language, i.e. Sanskrit, called *bhāṣa*, which succeeded in preserving across centuries its refinement prestige and became the lingua franca of the cultural elites not only of Brahmanical expressions but also of other religious orientations. Bhartṛhari, the 5th century CE grammarian-philosopher, restores the Vedic tradition of the mystic *Vāc*. With him, the fundamentals of divine word re-interpretation are laid out. For centuries after, further introspections and meditations on the nature of the divine word were more or less identical to inquiring into the status and role of Sanskrit itself against the other Indo-Aryan languages of the subcontinent languages which evolved into modern Indian vernaculars.

The divine aspect of Vedic and Sanskrit, the language of the sūtras and of the extensive commentarial and epic literature based on the Vedas is undoubtedly part of the well-constructed hierarchical structure of the Brahmanical society from top to bottom[45]. Thanks to the earnest custody of the Brahmanical priesthood and scholarship and its active role in the oral and written transmission, Sanskrit has become the symbol and enduring image of the divine word in its excellence and power.

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[45] In a more and more technological society, the religious imprints in form of rituals (*pūjas*) are undeniable landmarks of the Hindu society. Any mantra in Sanskrit that to very many remains beyond their grasp of lexical or semantical understanding is highly esteemed and looked upon with profound veneration and respect. It's like wearing an amulet or a token from a pilgrimage which empowers the devotee.

Bhartṛhari. *Vākyapadīya Brahmakāṇḍa* with the Vṛtti, Chapter I, Tr. K. A Subramaniya Iyer, Pune: Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute.

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