

The Root of Indian Communication Theory in the Ṛig Veda: Practical Vedānta

Anne Melfi

Abstract

What is the source of the power of speech and eloquence and fulfillment in life? Though communication and rhetoric departments in most Indian universities have been focusing their teaching and research agendas on Western models, a growing body of scholarship is developing communication theory that approaches the big questions from an Indian perspective, drawing on traditional sources (Adhikary, 2014), which claim Veda as their ultimate source. This paper explores the Vedic worldview on speech and communication proclaimed in the *Ṛicho Akṣare* verse of the Ṛig Veda, and others, drawing on sage Bharṭṛhari (c. 450-500 CE), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1975; 1971), and Sanskrit scholars of the philosophy of language, who reference these hymns. They describe a Vedic cosmology of speech that bears striking resemblance to the universe according to string theory of quantum physics. The science serves to corroborate the premise of Vedic levels-of-speech theory that the universe is structured and governed by laws of nature/language of nature from within an unmanifest unified field of all the laws of nature, which Ṛig Veda 1.164 calls *Parā* and identifies as consciousness. This inquiry helps to illuminate how speech is Brahman, the source and goal of understanding, eloquence, and fulfillment. The Vedic texts enjoin the *sanātana dharma* of yoga, opening awareness to the transcendental source of

speech. I conclude that Vedic communication theory embedded in the hymns is integral to practical Vedānta. As Muktitkā Upaniṣad 1.9 proclaims: “As oil is present in a sesame seed, so *Vedānta* is present in the Veda.”

Keywords: Vedānta, Indian communication theory, levels of speech, R̥g Veda 1.164.39, Vedic rhetoric

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The basis of Vedic-based communication theory is integral to Vedānta, as the Vedic hymns and commentaries suggest. Funnily enough, some commentaries consider the Vedas and Vedānta to have opposing views of reality since the Vedas feature a multiplicity of gods while Vedānta gives a unitary perspective, Brahman. The binary is a false one, an error in logic analogous to a claim the fact that there is a multitude of words contradicts the notion of speech, that dynamic unity of all words. Speech is Brahman in the Vedic view. Within the hymns can be found a vision of what could be called in hindsight “practical Vedānta,” the practical benefits of living the state of knowledge and experience called Brahman. This paper finds the theme within certain hymns on the field of speech, which verify what the Muktitkā Upaniṣad (1.9) proclaims: “As oil is present in the sesame seed, so Vedānta is present in the Veda.” To be fair, the unitary vision can be elusive amidst the richly analogical/metaphorical expression, the sophistication of thought, and the profusion of gods the hymns display, but R̥g Veda 1.164.46 explains: “Truth is one; the wise call it by many names.”

One name is Brahman. Another is Vāk (Speech), also known as Saraswatī, who has a thousand names, each foregrounding a special attribute (Prasoon 2009, pp. 163-164); and Speech is Brahman, as certain hymns suggest: The *Ṛicho Akśare* verse (1.164.39), the Hymn of Knowledge—the *Jñāna Sūkta* (10.71)—the Bāghāmbhṛṇi hymn to Vāk (10.125), and other hymns about the nature and power of speech hold the seeds of Vedānta philosophy within them, which is integral to the Vedic view of speech and communication. Indeed, the *Ṛicho Akśare* verse appears verbatim in the Shvetāshvatara Upaniṣad as verse 4.8, thus asserting the vedāntic stance of this Vedic verse. *Ṛiṣi* Bāghāmbhṛṇi, in her hymn to Vāk, where she identifies fully with the goddess Vāk, describes the depth, breadth, and power of speech as the all-inclusive substance and governor of the universe. She proclaims:

... I spread through all beings and touch this heaven with my body (7)

I breathe forth like the wind, giving form to all created worlds; beyond the heaven, beyond this earth (am I), so vast am I in greatness. (8)

This may be as close to a portrait of Brahman as word can convey. The hymn demonstrates both the direct experience and the conscious awareness that “I am That,” thus validating Bāghāmbhṛṇi’s mature state of Brahman consciousness, the fulfillment of Vedānta.

She proclaims that her source, the source of speech, is in the transcendental field of consciousness: “My birthplace is in the midst of the waters” (10.125.7), a frequently-used metaphor for the ocean of consciousness, the imperishable wholeness.

This metaphor also appears in 1.164.42, where the word *akśara*, imperishable—which also means letter, word, and sound—is used to mean “water,” playing with the obvious association of speech and its imperishable source (Monier-Williams, 2014). Vāk proclaims that “He who sees, who breathes, who hears what is spoken, does so through me; those who are ignorant of me perish” (4). Thus, transcendental consciousness is the basis and means of understanding, the ability to be conscious *of* anything, to experience and, indeed, to live and thus cannot be neglected to good effect.

The principle of a transcendental level of speech is embedded in the Vedic worldview and ubiquitous in the literature, implicitly or explicitly, but levels-of-speech theory has its first extant mention in the hymn that contains the *Ṛicho Akśare* verse: Ṛig Veda 1.164.45 proclaims that there are four levels of speech; men see (/hear) just one level; the other three are hidden (Padoux, 1990, p. 167). Speech is both manifest and un-manifest, like the universe. Indeed, according to this hymn and later theory, speech virtually *is* the universe; speech is Brahman. By the fifth century C.E., sage Bhartṛhari helpfully elaborated levels-of-speech theory in his *Vākyapadīya*, building on long-standing tacit theory. He named the levels and described them, for the hymn names only the transcendental level, *Parā*.

The figure below depicts the mind as an ocean of consciousness. The arrow labeled W2 shows the full range of the mind—and of speech—from its active surface expressions to its silent depth. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1967) explains that thoughts bubble up from *Parā* in the depths of the mind, come to conscious awareness, and burst forth as speech. The

most-expressed level is *Vaikharī*, speech one can hear or read, the range indicated by the short arrow labelled W1, indicating the small range of speech theorized in Western theory. W2 represents the full range of mind/speech theorized in the Vedic literature (Maharishi, 1967 p. 470). Deeper than the *Vaikharī* level is *Madhyamā*, silent speech-in-thought. Less familiar is the deeper level, *Paṣyantī*. “*Paṣya*” means “see.” On this fine feeling level, the impulse of thought is sensed as a gestalt, all in a glance, more felt than articulated. Unlike the linear flow of language word after word on the *Madhyamā* level of the mind, *Paṣyantī* is nearly free of space-time (Coward & Goa, 2004 p.38). Beyond *Paṣyantī* lies *Parā*, infinite silence.

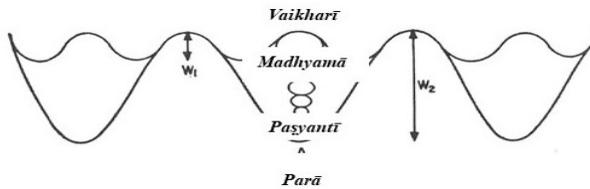


Figure: The Levels of Speech (adapted from Maharishi, 1967 p.470)

Yet, as the *Ṛicho Akṣare* verse reveals, *Parā* is also dynamic, a reservoir of creative intelligence. The verse proclaims:

The verses of the Veda exist in the transcendental field,

Which the *devas*, responsible for the whole universe, inhabit.

He who is not open to this field, what can the verses accomplish for him?

Those who know this are established in evenness.

The silence is lively with virtual sound, the *devas*, *mantra*, which, vibrating in different frequencies, structure and govern the universe. This aggregate of all the laws of nature is *Rta-Brahman*, and the verses are composed of this field; one must open conscious awareness to this field to benefit from their content. Implicit in the verse is a call to action, the duty, the *sanātana dharma* to attain knowledge/experience of the Reality so that wholeness may be known and lived.

Sage Bhartṛhari describes the Reality similarly, starting his *Vākyapadīya* by affirming: “Brahman ... whose very essence is the Word, who is the cause of the manifested phonemes, ... from whom the creation of the world proceeds” (1.1). Similarly, for Indian music theory, the universe is nothing but *spanda*, pulsations of the sonic absolute, Brahman: *He* is the *rasa* that the artist strives to convey to give the viewer a taste of Brahman (Ubhyakar in Desai, 2009 disk one, 00:09:30 & 01:56). For some, such a perspective may sound fanciful; however, recent advances in physics tend to validate the Vedic view of the universe.

Though not part of Western language theory, this unitary vision does bear striking resemblance to the way that string theory of quantum physics describes the universe. In a TED talk, *Brian Greene: Making Sense of String Theory*, the physicist explains that the universe according to string theory consists of “a huge number of ... filaments of vibrating energy, vibrating in different frequencies. Different frequencies produce different particles. The different particles are responsible for all the richness in the world around us. And there you see unification” (Feb. 2005, 8:57-14:54). This

seems a close paraphrase of the *Ṛicho Akśare* verse; however, in a later interview Greene (Jan. 30, 2014) excludes consciousness, arguing that the purview of physics is the physical universe alone, which he has nevertheless described as non-physical virtual vibrations. But the world’s most-cited string theorist, John Hagelin (Dec. 8, 2007), argues for a conscious universe, which he describes as a symphony of creative intelligence, and, he says, “That’s what we’re made of.” Hagelin’s assertion echoes the Upaniṣadic Mahāvākyas: “I am the totality” *ahaṃ brahmāsmi*, “Thou art that” *tat tvam asi*, and “All this is that” *sarvaṃ khalv idaṃ brahma*, and “that totality, wholeness, is consciousness” *prajñānaṃ brahma*. Indeed, the Katha Upaniṣad proclaims, “Manifest diversity is unmanifest—there is nothing else” (2.1.11). It bespeaks the imperative to open one’s awareness to this field as the verse proclaims in order to benefit from the total potential of Natural Law available deep within. This will be the source and fulfillment of eloquence. Thus, the aim of Vedānta, to realize Brahman, brings practical side-benefits that are essential to living the full value of life and make the most of speech.

The Hymn of Knowledge, the *Jñāna Sūkta* of the Ṛig Veda (10.71) makes the same point, but helpfully describes just how one’s state of consciousness affects eloquence and success in everyday life. First, the hymn identifies “the best part of Speech” as Brihaspati, the *guru* of the gods (Ṛig Veda 8.100.10 in Timalina, 2009, p. 403), who is associated with Brahman, with wisdom, and with speech (Griswold, 1999 pp. 172 & 174). In richly metaphorical terms, it proclaims that, attuned to “the best part of Speech” (1), which is structured in transcendental consciousness, *Parā*, ... “then

friends know friendship; good fortune is placed upon their word (2). ... They do not exclude him from (the society of) the powerful (in knowledge)” (5). But one who has not duly cultivated “the friendship (of Speech) ... wanders with an illusion that is barren, bearing Speech that is without fruit, without flowers” (5). The hymn explicitly elaborates on the consequences of failing to cultivate the “friendship of Speech”:

He who has abandoned the friend who knows the duty of a friend, in his speech there is not a particle (of sense); what he hears, he hears amiss; for he knows not the path of righteousness (6)

...devoid of wisdom, attaining Speech, having sin-producing (Speech) (9)

Intelligence and understanding, then, depend on having awareness open to the full range of speech/consciousness. Bhartṛhari writes that when awareness is open to the deep level of speech Pashyanti, then the full meaning of words stands revealed (in Coward and Goa, 2004, p. 40) but that when conscious awareness is limited to a surface level of perception, then understanding is limited (p. 41). He explains:

When the absolute [transcendental *Parā*] is awakened, and meanings are manifested through words, then the knowledge and power that is intertwined with consciousness can be clearly perceived and known. Because consciousness is of the nature of word-meaning, the consciousness of any sentient being cannot go beyond or lack word-meaning. (qtd. in Coward, 1989, p. 167)

In other words, “knowledge is structured in consciousness,” as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi summarizes the *Richo Akṣare* verse—a sutra, if you will. Meaning/knowledge is everywhere available; lack of understanding is only due to “ignorance or absent mindedness [that] obscure[s] the meaning inherently present” (Bharṭṛhari qtd. in Coward, 1989, p. 167). Thus, what had come to be seen as a monastic pursuit, the attainment of the highest state of knowledge/experience, is proclaimed in the hymns to be a requirement for living the full value of life in society.

But what is “the duty of a friend” which the *Jñana Sūkta* (6) enjoins? Clearly, it argues that attunement to *Parā* is crucial, yet the hymns are not clear on the means of gaining that desirable state. The *Jñana Sūkta* seems to suggest that *yajña* plays a role: “(The wise) reached the path of Speech by sacrifice, they found it centred in the *Rishis*” (3), but this line also seems to direct attention beyond the *yajña* to the state of consciousness, the enlightenment of the *ṛṣis* who produced the verses of the rite. Moreover, the *Richo Akṣare* verse states flatly that the verses are ineffectual without the requisite consciousness to enliven them.

Method of attainment may well be tacitly assumed in the hymn due to the long-standing tradition of Yoga as well as the revered role of the guru in Vedic civilization as mentor for the process of enlightenment. Indeed, Yoga has been considered an essential element of practical training and success in a wide variety of fields, not only communication, but also others ranging from dance to medicine (Maharishi, Aug. 12, 1971, p. 195; Gautama in Bhattacharyya, 2010 p. 87; Kothari and Om 00:55:59; Chatterjea, 1996 p. 73). At the same time,

diverse fields of knowledge claim that their practices are designed to lead to *mokṣa*. Bhartṛihari made that case for the study of grammar in the *Vākyapadīya*, and Patañjaliposited that “the grammarian is a Yogi whose inward vision enables him to look within to see the eternal flow of pure consciousness” (in Chaitanya, 1962 p. 53). Gautama’s *Nyāya* method of debate similarly states its ultimate goal as *mokṣa*, just as Bhārata *Nāṭyaśāstra* declares the arts to be a means to know Brahman. In turn, all of these disciplines take Yoga as integral to attaining their ultimate goal and extoll it as the direct and efficient path. Thus, the duty that the *Jñāna Sūtra* (6) enjoins would be the practice of Yoga. If the affordance of Yoga were not assumed, the Sanskrit proverb, “No leaves, no branches without the root,” would dismay rather than inspire.

Steeped in the *guru-śiṣya* tradition, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Aug. 12, 1971) takes the *Ṛicho Akṣare* verse as a call to learn and practice Yoga, meditation that allows the mind to transcend the surface level of the *mantra* (word) and experience its source because, he says, “This hymn itself very clearly brings to light that the Veda is not knowable on the basis of the words, it is knowable on the basis of the foundation of all words, that basic unmanifest sound, pure being, consciousness. In that material, the words of the Veda are structured” (p. 201). Patañjali described the letters (*akṣara*) of the alphabet of which the hymns are composed as “not mere phonetic types, but glowing sparks of Brahman illuminating the entire sphere of existence” (Chaitanya, 1962 p. 53). Maharishi (1967) explains the significance to human life:

The conscious mind becomes powerful when the deeper levels of the ocean of mind are activated in the process of Transcendental Meditation, which leads the attention from the surface of the conscious mind to the transcendental field of Being. The process of diving within is the way to become established in Yoga. (p. 136)

Therefore, Maharishi (2019) takes Yoga to be a necessary complement to the practice of *yajña*, which the *Jñāna Sūkta* indicates plays an important role in living the full value of life (10.71.3, 10 & 11). However, if *yajña* were effective, wars, disease, and misfortune could not endure; health, prosperity, and harmony would prevail. But, Coward and Goa (2004) point out, that if “the pashyanti level is obscured from ‘sight,’ then the uttering of the mantra will indeed seem to be an empty exercise” (p. 40). Maharishi (in Katz, 2011) posits that the speaker must be established so “the whole speech of his is the vibrant consciousness, vibrant Absolute. ... An unenlightened man [sic], repeating the same thing, does not produce those ... ripples of the full value of knowledge” (vol. 2, p. 245), much as the *Jñāna Sūkta* suggests. Yoga and *yajña* are complementary.

The hymn moreover proclaims that cultivating “friendship” with this field results in “mental apprehensions which are conceived by the heart (of the wise),” in other words, the wise have attained a mature state of intelligence that can “wander at will in the meanings of the Veda” (8). It is precisely such a ripe intellect that is capable of activating the power of the *Mahāvākya*, the final stroke of teaching necessary to catalyze the state of knowledge called Brahman consciousness (Katz,

2011, vol.1 p. 54 & pp. 315-318). In other words, the message that “Thou art that,” results in final realization when the experiencer is ripe to hear it fully; the communication can then bear the intended fruit. Thus, Vedānta and Yoga are complementary (see Maharishi, 1967 p.473).

In the final analysis, the seeds of Vedānta are evident in the *Ṛicho Akśare* verse and the *Jñana Sūkta*, which proclaim the practical value of Vedāntaphilosophy and the ultimate fruit of communication. They proclaim the “X factor” for eloquence, the crucial condition for winning all treasures both earthly and divine, a process that entails *mokṣa* and unlocks the *śakti* of all speech, the sacred speech of *yajña* as well as the speech of everyday life in all its manifestations. Maharishi (Jan. 17, 1975) foregrounds the practical value of Vedānta when he explains that, “When one is using speech and one is well connected to the source of speech, which is unbounded, infinite, eternal, all comprehensive, then speech will always be flowering into those values of unboundedness and widest comprehension and greatest focus, which will accomplish the maximum value of communication” (“Enlivening the Full Range of Life” p. 155). His words, in effect, summarize the hymns, which, I have argued, implicitly enjoin the practice of Yoga, of opening the awareness to the full range of the mind—practical Vedānta for living total knowledge and attaining the goals of communication, earthly and divine for immediate practical fulfillment and for realization of the ultimate goal which the Vedic worldview envisions.

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Author Note:

Anne Melfi completed her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition at Georgia State University. Her dissertation research on Understanding Indian Rhetoric on Its Own Terms: Using a Vedic Key to Unlock the Vedic Paradigm, on which this paper is based, was supported by a dissertation grant from the Georgia State University College of Arts and Sciences. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anne Melfi, P.O. Box 401, Laupahoehoe, HI 97674, USA. annemelfi@gmail.com