

LANGUAGE – IMAGINATION

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Language and Reality

The process of human evolution holds back many secrets from our understanding and we may only build apparently scientific hypotheses about them: such hypothesis that even the exactly contrary position may sound equally convincing. Language as a social institution, the nature of its exact origin and the clear sequence in its formation, are some of the mysteries in the epic text of human evolution. Was there an attendant sound when the universe came into existence? Did sound exist at all prior to the development of the animal ability to perceive it? Do the eternal sound — the *anahat dhvani* — and the sound coined by vocal chords belong to the same material type? Once regulation of air by the vocal chords came to be the central mode of meaning transaction, and subsequently numerals and letters became the surrogates for sound, why was it that the script language did not entirely displace the sound language? ‘Meaning’ consists of the meaning expressed through gesticulations, sound -regulation and script marks, as well as through the silence and stillness outside the pale of these three. What exactly constitutes ‘meaning’ has not been conclusively determined. The theories of meaning have so far remained at the level of philosophical speculation. Besides, it has so far not been possible to state with any great precision as to whether meaning is language, or if meaning exists prior to language and is capable of transcending human language even when language is an experience within the range of perception of an individual. This has led us to conclude that language is a social institution. But is language ‘meaning’, is it some material, is it a transcendental energy or a purely social institution, or is it a mere biological function given to the human body in the process of evolution? Or is it all of these at once or in various aspects of the language phenomenon? All these questions need yet to be tackled fully despite linguistics being the most developed among the human sciences.

There is a well-established view that culture has no other expression but language, that the two are one and the same. It is maintained that cognition too would be impossible

without language. A similar view on meaning too exists. In other words for practically every transaction of the intellect, 'language' has been used as a synonym that determines the outer boundaries of each transaction of the intellect. Even when the structure of dreams is not based on language content, it is conceptualized as being the same as language structure. The origin of dreams is in the ability to remember, in memory. In other words we are made to believe that memory cannot exist entirely in the absence of language. Similarly, we have come to believe that other psychic possibilities such as inspiration, imagination and reason cannot exist in the absence of language. While these hypotheses seem unexceptionable, it is true that there are experiences that the human animal shares with other animals that show a marked absence of language based on sound regulation. Vertigo, or the fear of falling, and love or sensuous attraction are the main instances of such experiences. Phenomenology, which is one of the sciences of the human understanding, maintains that language develops in tune with the perpetually increasing scope of the phenomena perceived by the human mind. As against this, it has been argued that the human grasp of the phenomenal reality increases in proportion to the ever increasing ability of language to grasp complexities. It is indeed difficult to establish if a domain of experience exists independently and outside the domain of language. At the same time it is even more difficult to overrule the existence of such a domain of experience. Similarly complicated is the question whether those semi-verbal or verbal substances that scripts, grammars and cultures do not admit as language, are language or not? At best they find a place in marginal categories such as dialects and regional varieties.

In the vast spectrum of meaning beginning with the mysterious origin of sound, to its pervasive spread through human space and time, human languages may at best be seen as dialects of the uninterrupted *dhvani*. Similarly, in the total range of meaning capable of being conducted through material and symbolic means, the sound-symbol based language will have to be counted as a dialect of the total range of meaning. Moreover, the process of the perpetual increase in the human experience interlocked with language will have to be thought of as a dialect of the universe of experience. And the totality of the human languages stabilized through words and scripts will have to be seen as a dialect of the

totality of all experience, all meaning and all sound. Therefore to be a dialect is not being left behind, but to be the *avant-garde*, to be on the forefront. If we imagine a certain component of language (as a substance within the system that it is) whose destiny it is to be at the turbulent interface of the ever expanding reality, and if we imagine that this component is required to persist in its work without losing its identity as language—be in currency at least with the value of the counterfeit—we will have adequately imagined a dialect. To use a metaphor, dialect is like the amorphous substance surrounding a newly born planet which is yet to find its ultimate rate of revolution. That planet environment of the language is defined by its dialects. It is through them that language keeps its ceaseless contact with the universe outside it, and therefore manages to belong to it.

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Writing and Aphasia

The term ‘manuscript’ signifies something written in hand. But this writing itself can be done differently in different situations. There is no logical connection between a given language and a given script. It is widely held in post-Saussurean linguistics that the process of matching verbal icons to signify semantic units by a given speech community itself is entirely arbitrary. The influence of Saussure’s propositions on modern linguistic thought is so overwhelming that this view will continue to enjoy validity till a technical tool is developed to hold all human sound data together through digital and multimedia imagery and to fathom the taxonomy of all possible relations obtaining between sound and sense. That however will be a point in the cultural evolution of the Homo sapiens when human speech will be left with no justification for its existence. At the present juncture, however, the question is why various speech communities develop methods and manners of representing speech in the form of scripts? Are these mere accidents in history, or just some expression of a speech community’s aesthetic instinct?

I would like to think that development of script, which develops when leisure as an economic product enters the life of a society, is not a mere reflection of the leisure available to that society, but rather a means of *procuring and perpetuating* such leisure. Scripts primarily are related to the counting system rather than speech. When the first surplus out of pastoral or agriculture economy came, and it had to be transacted for

labour, the community that undertook the negotiations needed to mark the quantity of surplus invested. Thus the initial characters in the evolution of a script are the numerals in their rudimentary forms. Numbers were inscribed on rock or wood surface or sand, as was the practice in India. The child was taught writing on dust in the first year of school. But some of these numbers did not subsequently qualify for getting into the range of characters counted as a script. For example, we still have the tick mark and cross, and the tick mark has not become a character in any script though it is understood quite widely as a mark that says ‘yes’ as against ‘no’, indicating a presence as against an absence.

Many such marks get into the script system, but initially they are quantifying signs, a way of numbering. Every community has a different world view, and therefore a different way of measuring the world. There are communities that do not differentiate between *agneya* and *nairutya*, *ishanya* and *vayavya*. Again there are communities that think in terms of four directions—east, west, north and south, and others in terms of eight, or in some places ten directions. The reasons could be traced to the given community’s attitude to surfaces, space, recognition of images which change from place to place depending on visibility, light available in the area, or the surface textures of things that a community encounters over long spells of material-cultural history. The methods of counting will change from place to place, and so also the kind of characters a community develops to record speech. Thus Modi, which as a script was a purely counting system but not a writing system—something that can be compared to a contemporary software such as Tally which can ‘write’, but writes only accounts—was used by the ruling classes and the merchants. Writing as we know it today is a combination of numerals and various geometrical forms. Three or four geometrical forms are enough to make a script. These mainly acquire the place of ‘vowels’ when they attain the status of a script.

For most part of our literary history, most of the linguistic creativity has been in the oral tradition. Though people knew how to write, writing was not used as a means of educating the next generation in remembering these compositions. I am not denying the fact that we had something written even in Harappan times, and a tremendous era of literary productivity in ancient Tamil and post-Vedic Sanskrit; but by and large, knowledge, literature and memory were handed down not through writing but through speech and oral media. What developed in India as oral tradition was not just ‘writing’ on

walls and boards, but also composition of texts, documents, or what one describes as ‘manuscripts’. They follow the logic of speech and not the logic of orthography.

In India numerous compositions have come to us from ancient and medieval times without the mediation of writing, but with a grammar of memorizing them. In the pre-colonial schooling systems, the teachers set before students one part of a word or a sentence and the remaining part was coined by the students as a complement or *samsya-purti*. It was a standard practice, not involving writing but with a clear evidence of document, text, style and unity. This kind of schooling changed after paper became available for use in India during the thirteenth century. However, the place of the oral was not entirely, or substantially, taken by the written. The two co-existed in an inter-dependent manner in Indian production of knowledge.

When paper became available, scholars used paper for writing. Previously when tree bark was available they had used tree bark. Manuscripts were copied meticulously by generations of students and every few hundred years they were renewed. But there were others who memorized this and continued handing down knowledge through speech. Therefore, manuscript was both writing and speech at the same time, and this continued in Indian history for centuries. When the print technology arrived in this country, it was not available to every language that had extensive literature in it, nor did it reach every language that had numerous speakers. It only reached some languages spoken by communities from which people could be drawn as bureaucrats, as those who would work in the East India Company’s government or teach in government colleges. Languages were chosen for printing in India not on the basis of their literary capabilities, or their antiquity, but on the basis of the administrative convenience.

After independence linguistic states were created again for administrative convenience. However, these were not linguistic states, rather they were ‘script states’ created on the basis of those languages which had ‘writing’ practices considered exclusively from the perspective of the print technology. Bringing this out in a sharp relief, the Census Reports continued to point out that there had been quite a large number of other speech communities in India with a sizable population. Out of the Indian languages, only twenty-

two have been placed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. These were languages with written literature in them; but nearly ninety other languages that have a population of over a ten thousand have not been placed there because of the absence of 'writing' committed to the print medium in those languages.

By not recognizing the personality of these languages, by not recognizing their citizenship we have imposed on them a condition of what may be described as aphasia, rendering these languages speechless. In psychology, aphasia is explained as falling into several different categories. A certain type of aphasia is caused by the damage to the motor system, in which the linguistic message is not conveyed from the brain to the speech organs or vice versa. Next, aphasia may be caused due to damage to the organs of speech. And, finally, there is a psychic disorder in which one loses the ability to link word with sense. These known forms of aphasia can be cured by medical treatment. However, there could be a form of aphasia when nothing has gone wrong with the brain, the tongue or the psyche, but when one is just not allowed to speak! This is an 'imposed aphasia', which silences the vast population of India's dialects and the 'unscheduled' tribal languages. In fact most of the practices of oral history are facing this kind of terror from the mainstream languages that have received state patronage. It is necessary therefore to underscore that the Indian manuscript traditions are not solely traditions of writing.

The Sanskrit term *akshar* literally means, 'that which will not dissolve'. *Akshar* also means that which is perennial, eternal, without the limits of birth or death. In Indian mythology, the world in its entirety, the cosmos, is perceived as creation out of sound and *akshar* is the indestructible substance of that sound. The energy that created the world is *akshar*; so it cannot be destroyed. Now *akshar*, or characters, are always essentially nomadic and migratory in character, and lexical units are like the sedentary state giving them a fixed location and a definition. That is the reason why a limited number of *akshars* can create many words, or the orthographic instrument for an entire language. In India, we have learned to look down upon nomadic people because the colonial British did not approve of nomads. The colonial state viewed these communities as 'criminal tribes'. Those who did not pay taxes to the state became suspect and therefore undesirable. In our time, to sedentarize the subject communities for turning them into

'citizens' has come to be seen as the mission of the State. The idea behind this 'civilizing' mission of the state is to give the citizens fixed addresses so that they can not only be bound within a 'contract' but also be controlled.

Silence, Insanity and Language

Silence is a communication zone which has the potency of language but no desire for verbal articulation. This is not a case of aphasia resulting from the neurological or physiological inability to speak. For instance, an intense mystical experience may contain a structured sensation or perception, capable of communicating an element of significance, but it is very difficult to articulate that experience through words. Silence therefore is not any absence of language but, like a dialect, it is a language frontier negotiating with unexplored fields of significance. One can compare, perhaps, the apparent aphasia contained in silence with the apparent euphoria explicit in a mental state of unruly excitement. It is known to psycholinguists that any kind of psychic imbalance has a direct impact on one's language behaviour. It activates language; it makes language so rapid that the listener cannot make good sense of what is being said. A small segment of the entire area described as insanity by western psychoanalysis is hysteria. When one is hysteric the kind of language which is produced is far beyond the understanding of a grammarian. Thus insanity as well as silence has a bearing on language as a system of meaning. It is not just that an episode of insanity or a moment of silence will hamper the normal flow of language. This they certainly do, but more importantly, implicit in the being of a language are the possibilities of a movement in the zones of silence, or the turbulent outbursts of hysteria. When the possibilities of a given speech community, or the speech systems employed by that community, start getting curtailed, or are pushed to the verge of exhaustion, in a manner of speaking, the language starts losing its nerve and starts entertaining suicidal tendencies.

Why is it that human beings alone have developed such an advanced kind of language with its immense complexity of structure? It is true that some other animals species like the honeybees have a kind of language. They dance and communicate, and their communication is fairly accurate. It has its own grammar. One minimum condition of

language is when you reproduce a certain verbal pattern; the meaning of the verbal pattern more or less conveys the same significance for every instance of its being articulated. Thus, honeybees dance and communicate, and the next time they want to communicate they perform more or less the similar kind of dance. Dolphins have a language of their own, and possibly ants too have a sense of language since we see them communicating. But despite all these very visible symptoms of language development in other species, it is in the human species that language has developed to a level of complexity which can accommodate euphoria, hysteria, insanity and silence as patterns of significance.

The human consciousness is made very much in the image of the earth. Those of us who apply Sigmund Freud to understand the human mind often overlook the intimate relationship between the human consciousness and the earth. Like the earth, the consciousness is in a perpetual motion. It has a core that its surface cannot see. The surface is continuously surprised by the strange things that spring up quite mysteriously from the core. The consciousness works like the earth because human beings like other life forms have sprung out of this earth. The earth has two motions, it rotates round itself and it revolves round the Sun. Similarly, the human consciousness has two movements: just as it engages itself in viewing the world, it also keeps looking at itself. This is something very peculiar to human beings. This is so because the evolution of the human body has arranged the brain, through the intervention of the spine, to be farthest from the surface of the earth. The verticality given to us by the human spine has removed the human brain far away from the surface-texture of the earth; and therefore our direct experience of the earth is quite reduced in the process of evolution. It is limited predominantly to a conceptual understanding of the material world. Therefore we are forced to look at our existence critically time and again.

The centuries that shaped the western attitudes to insanity, industrial progress, jurisprudence and the law based state-structures, were precisely the centuries of the colonial experience for India, when India was getting exposed to new forms of 'knowledge' and varieties of 'culture' from its contact with the West. Therefore, the ideas

of criminality and the analysis of insanity as were established in England during the colonial times were accepted in India as scientific ideas. Even today our entire criminal law is based on the British jurisprudence and the treatment of mental illness is based on the Austrian psychoanalysis proposed by Sigmund Freud. The idea of insanity as criminality, a challenge to order and as anti-normalcy has been accepted by us without a question. It would be pertinent to ask if there at all existed in the pre-colonial India a notion of insanity. Can we think of any character in the *Mahabharata*, and the *Mahabharata* has quite a plethora of characters, as a character that can be shown as insane? Was there no notion of insanity in the Indian tradition or traditions, any instance of behaviour that western psychology would describe as 'insanity'? Why was it that a great thinker and mystic like Ramakrishna Paramahansa could easily be passing through fits of what Freudian psychoanalysis would describe as 'abnormal' and yet be intelligible to the Indian thinking?

Ramakrishna experienced a state of ecstasy which is called in the parlance of Indian mysticism *turyavastha*, preparation for the ultimate ecstasy where no separation exists between the self and the other, or the manifest nature and the supernatural. In this state of the consciousness, no polarities exist and, it is said, one becomes completely united with the rest. Ramakrishna's name is associated with that state of ecstasy, which seen from our 'normal' perspective is close to 'insanity', a mystical variety of communion. Having an abnormal personality was acceptable in Indian traditions as a perfectly normal human condition, nor was such person sent out of the normal social framework and there were no asylums created. Even today the creation of asylums in India is seen as a preserve of the state based on the colonial law, but not a very common desire within the social practices. Families are prepared to keep with them the mentally abnormal persons as perfectly normal members of the family. Indian society had space for those who wanted to drop out and do things which were very contrary to what they were trained to do. The society traditionally provided social space for those who showed morally questionable behaviour by accepting or at least tolerating them.

By following the British education, western psychology and psychiatry, certain metrics of values and knowledge constructs, we have today come to a situation where we have been rapidly eliminating the space for insanity. At the school level, we notice that children are

systemically discouraged from even the slightest element of different thinking, ‘of madness’. Rabindranath Tagore understood the importance of allowing children to be what they are. He spent an entire life encouraging the ‘surplus of emotions’ to spring up in the mental transactions of children. That is now not allowed. Similarly, our communication traditions valued silence. Traditionally, aesthetics revolved round the *shant*, the tranquility that follows fulfillment, as the ultimate. Abhinavgupta claimed that the culmination of all these *rasas* is attained by a combination of all—which could be described as *shantarasa*. Abhinavgupta proposed that if Ramayana is unique for its *karunarasa*, the Mahabharata is unique for its *shantarasa*, the ultimate aesthetic achievement. The *Upanishads* always concluded with the benediction invoking silence which passes all understanding. Silence had a core cultural significance in Indian society. Neither are we now capable of experiencing silence or respecting it, nor are we capable of coping with insanity as an essential part of our being. It is because of the reduced cultural space for insanity and silence that the language of our understanding is affected. This is our collective intellectual failure and possibly the failure of the university system. There is another thing that has happened, which pervades our being not just our understanding, and it is that this reduced tolerance of insanity and silence has produced among us a mass hysteria. When we think of the Indian past of the last hundred and fifty years, what are the major visual memories that come to one’s mind? One is of the thousands marching with Gandhi in this freedom march. However, when Gandhi walked from Sabarmati to Dandi, he did not have with him thousands of pilgrims. But in our imagery of the past we have added the mob to the image. We have in the recent imagery of India the mobs attacking a mosque or Muslim minorities. But do we remember the quiet death of Baba Amte as a profound visual experience? Most of visual memory is related to some kind of mob frenzy. If one rebels against the cultural compulsion of belonging to the mob, that person will be labeled a criminal, social dropout or insane, and therefore to be sent to asylum. The interiors of the *bhashas*, shored in the past by silences and style abnormalities, are fast becoming desolate. Those areas are becoming populated with chants associated with communally charged popular religion, and an economy driven semi-scientifism.

The Story of Telling

It is possible to argue that consciousness is a fantasy of the phenomenal world. We do not know if the world exists outside there or not, but we all assume that it is there, and we live with that assumption as some truth. In our encounters with the world external to us, the most remarkable element is language. It is language alone that allows consciousness to come to terms with the world. If we did not have language as a means of mediation it would have been just impossible to name that outside, and then to look at it as if all the names that were given, were things already there as things. Language is what marks out the human animal in the entire range of animal world, a unique feature of human civilization.

Human beings are born within two conditions, one is space, and the other is time. It is just impossible for an individual to be out of space or out of time. A theatrical Hamlet may say ‘ the time is out of joint, o cursed spite, that I was ever born to set it right’, but we can never set fragments of time together, or get time to be disjointed. We just have to live with time just as we have to live with space. The human consciousness, which is essentially fantasy of the world, comes to terms with space and time with the help of the two mental faculties. One is memory, and the other is imagination. It is memory that allows us to come to terms with time. One remembers that one is the same person today as one was yesterday. Though philosophically this is debatable, there certainly is a continuity of identity; it is memory that makes it possible. It allows us to conceptualize time even if it may not exist really, for one does not know if time exists outside our minds or not; it is memory that allows us first to conceptualize time, and then, having conceptualized it, memory allows us to come to terms with it.

Imagination, a term which I am using here in the technical sense and not in the aesthetic sense, is what Hobbes, for instance, maintained in *The Leviathan* as a “a stream of images”. Images of objects enter the eye all the time and while they are stored in the mind they keep decaying. It is the *arrangement* of these decaying images that is imagination in Hobbesian sense. It is this image making power, thanks to light, that allows objects to be seen by the eye. We are able to see the objects reflecting light.

Thanks to those objects, light and the eye, the images from the outside world enter the mind. It is impossible for a human being to feel the world with the senses, experience everything in the world directly. Images received by the mind are stored there and are later reconstructed in the subjective realm of perception. Memory helps us to interpret. Imagination helps us to negotiate the human defeat at the hands of space. We control our space through imagination, we control time through memory. Language, memory and imagination come together and allow the consciousness to function so that consciousness then can create a fantasy of the world. This is the beginning of fiction.

There is one more component in this transaction and that is, it is not enough for fiction just to emerge, it must be told. Children learn at a fairly early stage in growth (because human growth is very slow and we take much longer than other animals to grow properly) to look at one self/ themselves through the eyes of the world. It is not that the human consciousness just creates the fantasy of the world but through that interlocking allows the world to pose before an individual a notion of the self. That is where the sense of otherness (and shame) enters the psyche. This happens precisely at the time when the ability to speak starts developing. It is not just the story in its silent form that matters, for the human mind the telling of the story becomes necessary because the mind knows that there are others, 'not me', outside, who might be very much like oneself. Many other animals fail to recognize this otherness. Four elements: language, memory, imagination and otherness, they force us to tell a story. The first three create fiction, and the fourth one, alienation, otherness, forces us to tell the story. But then in the human evolution other things happen. For instance, memory is a double-edged weapon and it allows people in the initial stage of evolution to remember that what was cultivated can possibly be saved for future use. Saving begins, capital formation begins, exploitation of labour begins, and transactions begin. When this happens the persons who save their own labour in order to hire others are required to make entries and they start making marks, whether they are hieroglyphs, pictographs or water marks, and a script is created. The basic purpose of human scripts was counting. Greed is institutionalized in scripts. Speech is threatened by scripts. Scripts then allow monopoly over capital formation and the processes that will encourage and bless capital formation.

There is another component in the human psyche that threaten stories and that is the mysterious fascination that the human mind has for blood. It is not just passing on blood from one time to another time, not just continuing the generation, but drawing blood. That attraction has not been explained sufficiently. But just as scripts are aided by memory the attraction for blood is aided by imagination. Imagination controls the space for us and the attraction for blood eventually turns into a controlled mechanism of 'securing' blood. Races are marked, states are created, and territories are imagined. The earth never knew its names as America and England and India, but this fascination for blood, which in other words is fascination for violence, gets institutionalized in the form of state. Scripts and states control stories.

If language, assisted by memory and imagination and the desire for transcending the otherness, creates stories, scripts and states try to silence them. They try to silence them, to pose an authorized version of truth. Therefore a divergent or dissenting version of truth, the fantasy that consciousness builds of this world, become illegitimate, a blasphemy, and a punishable offence. Silence is imposed on it. When the state and scripts force a condition of aphasia on speech and when the territorial rights, identity possibilities, and cultural freedom, are taken away, a new condition emerges in the human society which for the want of a better word I will describe with the term 'anesthesia'. Anesthesia is a mechanism of control of pain, when the fantasy of the world that the consciousness is, is shut off momentarily. When everybody else thinks you are alive, but you know that you are dead within, a condition of that kind is created in the society which makes aesthesis impossible. Aesthesis is, in the Greek sense, the ability to pursue the world through your senses, touch, taste, sound, sight, the joy of being, and the celebration of life. Aesthesis becomes impossible when imagination is negated.

Note: *This text contains jottings from my work in progress, and is not to be treated as a 'finished' paper.*