

Translating Mantras

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Even at their best, translations of classical texts barely succeed in capturing the verbal meaning of the original. But being reader - rather than listener-directed, they silence their sound. Translations into modern languages attempt to convey the classical text's 'phonocentricism' to the reader's 'scriptocentric' sensibility. Though worlds do not fall into Walter J Ong's neat 'oral aural'/literate model, translation from classical languages essentially involves carrying their phonocentric message across to a scriptocentric receiver. This happens even in electronically recorded versions. Translation of orally patterned thought into the structure of textuality converts sound to the letter. This violates phonocentric cultures' investment in sound and the relationship of the acoustic sign with meaning. The emphasis on the interdependence of the word and the referent in phonocentric cultures challenges the basic assumptions of modern linguistic theory. In contrast to Structural Linguistics that highlights the arbitrariness of the sign, the phonocentric word reveals the inseparability of sign and meaning. This paper will relate problems of classical translation to the difference in the perception of the sign in phonocentric and scriptocentric cultures.

The perceptual difference begins with the status of the word in traditional cultures. Word does not need to be sacralized as *mantra* or sacred word. It is inherently sacred both as *shabda* or sound and *akshara* or letter. It cannot be an empty sign, a mere communicational tool transmitting an idea by nature but the embodiment of the idea. The following paean to Speech, underlining its pre-eminence in Vedic phonocentricism, is an initiation into fundamental cultural differences in the perception of the word.

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I am the queen, the confluence of riches, the skilful one who is first among those worthy of sacrifice. The gods divided me up into various parts, for I dwell in many places and enter into many forms. (*Rig Veda* 10.125.3.)

The word *Vac* is the essence of Being. It fills a certain lack in Being who has no name and cannot exist except as being-in-itself. “*Vac* is really the total living Word, that is to say, the Word in her entirety, including her material aspects, her cosmic reverberation, her visible form, her sound, her meaning, her message.”

The Word, imperishable, is the Firstborn
Of Truth, mother of the Veda and hub of
immortality. May she come to us in
happiness in the sacrifice! May she,
our protecting Goddess, be easy of
entreaty!

Word as sign and word as Being reflect entirely different modes of consciousness. The word as logos is the manifestation of Being, or its *naam rupa* (name, *naam* and form, *rupa*). The word, pre-existing Being, creates Being in a pre-Whorfian sense.

I gave birth to the father on the head of this world. My womb is in the waters, within the ocean. Even there I spread out over all creatures and touch the very sky with the crown of my head. (*Rig Veda* 10.125.7)

As Panniker argues, “the meaning of *Vac* is an interplay of the multiple dimensions of the word, as breath, as sound, as meaning and so on”. *Vac* mediates in a very different manner than the structuralist sign. Its mediation is not confined to the object and its meaning. *Vac* is required to mediate between the mind, *manas*, and *prana*, life force, or body, *kaya* partaking the features of both. The word’s mediation at this level regulates purity and control of speech. Word is not an arbitrary label or tag but a name rich with meaning. The act of naming here is to know the named object intimately and invest it with a certain quality. The translator, habituated to word as a sign, a mere tool, is awed into silence by the word as Being. The intrepid translator confronts not “the thorny wall of an ancient and

cryptic language” but an *alaukik* or ‘unearthly’ language the world revealed itself in.

Its unearthly language provides a lead to the word’s authorship. If the word pre-existed creation, as it is sometimes believed, the question of authorship becomes doubly contested. The word without an author, *apurusheya*, turns the concept of mediation inside out. The authorless word is revealed to multiple receivers and is ultimately transcribed. If the word, as the first-born, is primordial, it must seek a human medium through which it must express itself and man made complete. Whether authorless or with a divine authorship, the sacred word cannot be tracked back or measured against an original authorial intention. Who is the final word on the accuracy of translated mantras?

Though word as sound ‘indicates the presence of a speaker’, which will be elaborated during the discussion on the stress on purity of delivery, the focus appears to shift from the speaker to the receiver and to the mode of reception. The word is not only ‘received’ but is defined by its reception. This includes the sensory organs involved in reception, the physical and the psychological conditions of reception, and the fitness and suitability of the receiver. Though the words’ receivers are named *mantradrashṭa*, those to whom it has been revealed, the ear rather than the eye is its channel. The word is received through the ear as vibrations produced on the tympanum through the production of certain sounds. Only certain ears, those of the seers, whose spiritual and moral purity makes them suitable receptacles, receive the word. When transmitted to other ears, the unbroken flow from the *guru*’s mouth to the *shishya*’s ear ensures minimal distortion. It also enjoins upon the *guru* the status of its custodian as well as the responsibility to test the receivers’ suitability. The knowledge of the word is *shruti*, or ‘that is heard’. The word exists as sound in *shruti* wisdom. Its insistence on the ear as the sole mode of reception comes from the perceived link between hearing and understanding. The word exists in and is transmitted through the body. Written translation begins by disregarding the basic injunction about the preservation and transmission of the word. Word as sound eludes translation for the sounds of two languages rarely commensurate. With its meaning inseparable from sound, its verbal meaning cannot

exist independent of sound. In non-literate cultures, therefore, it is virtually impossible to think of the word as a tag coming after the sound. As Ong points out, the separation of sign and meaning, the notion of word as label, is possible only when it exists outside the body as an orthographic symbol. Translators wishing to bring “the treasure of a tiny, exclusive group” to non-Vedists must realize that certain aspects of the text will remain hidden. The translator’s concern with readability engages with the complexity of decoding an archaic idiom ignoring this aspect altogether.

Arthashreya, the word as the shelter of meaning, posits an identity of word and meaning that invalidates semiotic theory of the sign. Meaning is the product not of the relational difference but inheres in the sound. Unlike the sign where the signifier and the signified are united through an arbitrary link, the sound of the *shabda* ‘points to the idea of the object’ because of its inseparability from the artha, or meaning. This logically leads to the conclusion that the word’s meaning can be expressed through specific sound combinations. Translation must reproduce verbal meaning in another language using the same combination of sounds. This is the key to a skilful translation whether in an Indian vernacular or an alien language.

O *Prajapati*, lord of progeny, no one but you embraces all these creatures. Grant us the devices for which we offer you oblation. Let us be lord of riches. (*Rig Veda* 10.121.1)

Neither its Hindi transliteration nor the English transcreation succeeds in reproducing the magic of sound. The English version, if anything, is closer to the spirit.

An introduction to the science of sounds, *Shabdavigyan*, can aid understanding of the way sounds are believed to work. Traditional science of sound postulates that meaning produced as an effect of sound is experienced as vibrations in the body. The vibration theory of sounds corresponds to modern scientific theory, which differentiates sounds in terms of frequencies. The strictures governing mode of transmission, correctness of pronunciation, breath control voice modulation, right intonation come together in the theory of sound effects underlying the *shruti* system. Phonocentrism approaches its limits in suggesting routes to

'liberation by sound', *anavriti shabdat*. The privileging of the reproduction of sound effect over understanding verbal meaning is reflected in chants being recommended even to those who have no knowledge of their meaning. Translation, on the other hand, subordinates aural message to the verbal message thus splitting the *mantra's* wholeness. Since verbal meaning is designed to produce certain effects on the body and consciousness through sounds and sound combinations, even the most accurate translation of verbal meaning accomplishes a fraction of the job.

The link of the *mantra's* sound and meaning to its effect on the individual and cosmic consciousness must be kept in mind. The *mantric* composition incorporates four phases of sound, which must in turn be experienced at different points in the consciousness. *Shruti's* mode of transmission logic is complicated through the multiple points at which the word is received to engender different effects. The vibrations caused on the *typhanum* through oral transmission are diffused through different points resulting in different phases of reception. Experienced separately as word and meaning in the first two, *vaikhari* and *madhyama*, it transmutes into a visual experience in *pashyanti*, and culminates in the union of the signifier and of the signified in the para consciousness. Initiated as a sensory experience, it transcends to a super sensory perception. Written translations, that divorce the verbal from the aural meaning, reflect the word and object split of the first two phases. Liberation of sound is the prerogative of the non-literate listener open to its mystic message, whereas the reader must rest content with an intellectual understanding. The translated text, therefore, decontextualizes the *mantra* by considering its meaning independent of its function.

In another dimension, word as sound 'indicates the presence of a speaker'. But strictures on correctness and purity of delivery as laid out in *Shiksha* flow from the theory of sound vibrations. *Shiksha* is evidence of a highly developed knowledge of phonetics in Vedic culture. The onus of ensuring that sounds produce appropriate effects, however, shifts to the speaker. Proper effects of mantras made contingent upon correct intonation, pronunciation, pitch and pace control, breath regulations ensure the purity of the original sound with no erosion. Word as sound cannot be captured

as writing because certain Vedic sounds fall between syllables and defy orthographic transcription. *Shiksha* phonetics is not a description but a prescription of sounds that lays down rules for correct intonation. The production of sound is more intimately related with breathing and particular articulators than, say, English phonetics. Chest breathing is also rejected as shallow compared through navel breathing with the breath travelling upwards in complicated patterns through different points before escaping through the mouth. Breath or *prana*, is related to the emotions produced at different pulse centres. Rules about articulators, force and duration in sound production are equally rigid in *shabda* yoga. Paanineeeya *Shiksha* spells out clear rules of enunciation. The anecdote about *Tvashta* illustrates the importance of correct intonation. All this reveals Sanskrit as the embodiment of *shabdabrahmaatmaka*, the image of sound, which is the soul of the infinite.

The Vedic corpus defies all attempts at containment and explanation by Western theory. Preserving pristine sounds verbatim, they do not reveal the homeostasis they see in non-literate cultures. Classifying them as proto-literate cultures does not solve the problem either. Though controlled by the chosen, even literates memorize them in non-literate fashion. Vedic recitation turns Ong's thesis on its head by proving that verbatim preservation is possible without reference to a written text. It offers a fascinating example of an error free method of preservation without resort to writing through the many safeguards. The 'taboo' about the fullest benefit of Vedas accruing only if no word is changed is a foolproof method of maintaining accuracy. Ong's view of formulaic language and rhythm as mnemonic aids explains oral style exclusively in terms of a knowledge preservation system. He ascribes the stress on the development of memory to an anxiety about erosion of knowledge. He also attributes the conservatism of non-literate knowledge to the same need. Ironically, both systems privilege their own mode of transmission dismissing the other as a mechanical archival tool. The Vedic formulae, compounding and rhythms cannot be reduced to a memory retrieval system. The Platonic distinction between good and bad memory applies to the adherence to the spoken mode in transmitting *shruti* wisdom. Writing, as Plato had found out, as a

mechanical tool of preservation is bad memory or remembrance. The spoken word, as a living presence, embodies good memory for memorization leads to understanding. The insistence that the word be received aurally is aimed at the development of a real memory rather than mechanical repetition. It is one thing to look at rules concerning mantra recitation as mnemonic aids and another to embed them in a quasi-mystical system. At the production end too, sound must be capable of awakening four different phases at different pulse centres. When the word is received aurally, neither sound nor delivery can be separated from verbal meaning. Protoliteracy is an inadequate term to explain Vedic transmission for it continues to be transmitted orally even in conditions of near complete literacy. Authorized transmission of the guru *shishya parampara* personalizes knowledge in the guru's body, who might pass it on to a worthy receiver through a similar social interaction. Phonocentric cultures regard the dialectical method as a more reliable method of understanding for it provides the learner the opportunity to seek clarifications. Positing authority in a person rather than a text that cannot be challenged in person, invites debate on every issue. Authorized transmission is an example of undemocratic script, is also responsible transmission. The spoken text might be possessed by anyone as the written one can be and its audience is always real.

"The Word is not only speech, though constitutively connected with it; it is also intelligibility, the principle of reason, the power of the intellect, the rational structure of reality."