

Themes of Yoga Philosophy

10. Insights into language in YS

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Occasion for discussion

In the course of the detailing of miraculous powers, Patanjali refers to the achievement of an ability to understand the sounds of all creatures when the Yogin focuses on the distinction between the constituents of language (III.17). Vyaasa expounds the implications of this suutra in detail. The suutra states that the elements (of the language, viz.) word, object and cognition, being identified with one another, get mixed up; cognition of their distinction leads to the understanding of the sounds of all creatures. Apart from this major context, language figures in the YS at two more places, – first, while detailing the states of the mind (I.9), and then, while detailing the types of object-supported meditation, *samaapatti* (I.42).

What is language?

Sounds, the hearing faculty and words are the basics which allow a language to function. Only articulated sounds convey meaning. The hearing faculty cognises only sounds and not words. It is words that convey meanings. Articulated sounds have an inherent ability to express all meanings in combination with other sounds, when they are part of a word, and not by themselves. Though differing from one another, sounds in a specific sequence give rise to a word confined to a specific conventional meaning. The audible word and its sense soon get inseparably united, and are rarely identified as separate entities. They work together to produce the cognition of the targeted meaning. The word, being uttered with a single effort, is in fact a mental entity devoid of parts, sequence and sounds, and subject to a unit of cognition at the utterance of the last element of a sequence. Words originate in the desire to convey one person's intention to another and, by virtue of uninterrupted use since time immemorial leaving a trail of latent impressions, get deep-rooted in the minds of a people as an established fact. Thus a language in use is a superimposed identification of sound, sense and cognition. The object in the real world is yet another entity distinct from but supporting the word and its meaning, undergoing changes of condition independent of its representation in language. The constituents of a language – words, meanings, cognition – are as much distinct from one another as is the object in the world from them.

Potentiality of words as sentences

Just as parts of words have the potentiality of all meanings as explained above, words have the potentiality of functioning as a sentence, for there is no object which is unrelated to existence, and no action which is unrelated to an

object. Thus a single word meaning 'a tree' implies a predicate such as '(there) is'. A word meaning 'cooks' can imply all syntactical operants or factors, while specification by words of operants such as agent, means and object is only the reiteration of a syntactical implication. A word can have a meaning in a sentence, i.e. in relation to other words in a sentence; this is the reason why words with several referents (multiple meanings) or different grammatical status are parsed with reference to their occurrence in a sentence. Thus 'cuts' is a noun in the context of 'The boy sustained several cuts', and an action-word in the context of 'The boy cuts his finger'.

Status of verbal knowledge

In justification of its recognition as a separate state of mind, Patanjali distinguishes verbal knowledge (*vikalpa*, I.9) from both valid (*pramaana*, I.7) and invalid knowledge (*viparyaya*, I.8). It is distinct from the first because it is constituted of elements that do not correspond to facts; it is distinct from the latter because, when supported by the knowledge of usage, it can lead to valid knowledge. In the statement, 'Space is invisible', the existence is presumed of a quality attributed to space which is imaginary (*vikalpita*), as the purport is to convey the absence of visibility for space, and no relation is possible between the existent and the non-existent.

Meditation accompanied by verbal knowledge

Our thinking process is so soaked in language that one cannot keep aloof of it even in meditation. This makes Patanjali recognise a separate variety (*savitarka*, I.42) of object-supported meditation (*samprajnaata*) as a stage prior to the one free from any verbal element (*nir-vikalpa*). Perception at the latter stage is considered to be superior, and the source of authoritative knowledge and inference (*Vyaasa*, I.42).

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