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What do Ancient Indian Cosmogonies Tell us about Language?

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to reconstruct the Vedic concept of language as presented in the Brāhmaṇas and to show that, according to the Vedic thinkers, language not only expresses thoughts but also it is a social phenomenon which cannot develop without a speaking community. It is argued that cosmos, gods and society divided into four social states (*varṇa*) can be seen as God's language and that the creation of the cosmos and society conveys the concept of God, who not only wants to express itself in its creation but also to talk *via* various speakers. This would reveal the Vedic concept of language seen as the means of self-expression in discourse.

Keywords: India, ancient cosmogonies, Veda, language

1. Introduction

Contemporary studies on culture see thinking and language as social phenomena. In his book *The interpretations of culture* Clifford Geertz wrote:

Human thought is basically both social and public – (...) its natural habitat is the house yard, the market place, and the town square. Thinking consists not of «happenings in the head» (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in (...) significant symbols – words for the most part but also gestures, drawings, musical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels, anything, in fact, that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience.¹

¹ Geertz 1973: 45.

Enrique Bernárdez summarises the basic assumptions of the study of language as a social activity in the following way:

(...) Human languages exist only in the form of social activity. (...) Linguistic activity is essentially collective, cross-individual, i.e. is not simply carried out inside a (social) group, but the reasons for its realisation, the form of its realisation and the results of the activity itself are collective, social in nature: in other words, the process of linguistic activity cannot be understood solely in terms of the individual.²

Norman Fairclough goes even further when he sees language as

a part of society; linguistic phenomena *are* social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena.³

In this paper, I would like to reconstruct the Vedic concept of language as presented in the Brāhmaṇas and to show that, according to the Vedic thinkers, language not only expresses thoughts but also it is a social phenomenon which cannot develop without a speaking community. This concept of language is close to our modern understanding.

In order to show that, I will use the basic assumptions of cognitive linguistics. This branch of linguistics assumes close relationship between human experience, language and thought, and it also sees language as inextricably connected with society.⁴ Human thought and language are motivated by physical, cognitive and social experience. As Evans and Green put it: “we can only talk about what we can perceive and conceive, and the things we can perceive and conceive derive from embodied experience” (Evans, Green 2006: 46). Universal to all human beings and closely connected with their physical functioning and perception, this experience is the ground for universal concepts. However, as it is largely mixed with culture-specific experience, many concepts vary according to a culture or a set of cultures (see e.g. Kövecses 2005).

We organise our knowledge in mental structures that are activated in discourse *via* ‘significant symbols’ (in Geertz’s terminology): they can be linguistic, but also visual, auditory, etc. In his cognitive analysis of language, Taylor (2002: 589) calls these structures ‘domains’⁵ and defines them as ‘any knowledge configuration which provides a context for conceptualisation’. For example, in order to understand what ‘thumb’ means we have to activate the concepts of the palm and the hand, which in turn lead us towards the concept of the human body.

² Bernárdez 2005: 211.

³ Fairclough 2001: 19.

⁴ Cf. egg. Geeraerts 2005, Sinha 2009.

⁵ These conceptual wholes are also called ‘frames’, ‘idealised cognitive models’, ‘mental spaces’. Each of these terms highlights a different aspect of the conceptual whole within its specific theoretical framework (Radden 1992: 527, Cienki 2007: 183–184).

As cognitive research shows, there are two basic conceptual strategies that human beings use to think and to speak about various elements of their experience. These are called metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor is a mapping that projects one concept onto another and thus makes it possible to think about the latter in terms of the former. The concept that lends its categories is called the source domain, the concept conceived by means of these categories is the target domain. For example, in the Indo-European culture cognition is conceived in terms of seeing;⁶ “seeing” is the source domain, “cognition” is the target domain. Conceptual metaphor reflects itself in language, which is why we can meaningfully say: *I see what you mean*. It is obvious that in this sentence we do not speak about seeing, but we have to evoke this concept in order to understand aspects of the concept of cognition expressed by it. As we can see, the target domain is more abstract, but, conceived in terms of a more concrete source domain, closely connected with everyday life experience, it becomes easier to understand and speak about.

Metonymy operates within one conceptual domain: its one element (the vehicle) provides access to the concept or to its element (the target).⁷ For example, there is a metonymy that operates between the concepts of part and whole. This metonymy is of two kinds. In the first case, the target concept is part, the vehicle is whole (Whole For Part). Thanks to this metonymy, we can meaningfully say during Christmas: *Let's light the Christmas tree* instead of *Let's light the candles on the Christmas tree*.⁸ In the second case, the target concept is whole, the vehicle is part (Part For Whole) and thanks to this metonymy we can be sure that we will be understood showing a photo and saying *This is my daughter* instead of *This is the face of my daughter*.

One of the most important concepts that serves as the source domain in the Vedic philosophy is human being: in these terms the Vedic thinkers thought about God, cosmos and society.⁹ As it is shown by cognitive linguistics, not all the aspects of the source domain are mapped onto the target domain.¹⁰ The most important features of the human being that were used in metaphoric conceptualisation in the Vedic philosophy include: firstly, cognitive and emotional abilities and, secondly, language in which thinking is expressed. In the frames of this conceptualisation, creation of the world was seen as a cognitive process during which God wants to, and consequently, does express himself in language. This view of creation reveals the general assumption, underlying the whole Vedic philosophy, according to which cognition precedes, creates, and conditions being. In this paper, I will argue that cosmos, gods and society divided into four social states (*varna*) can be seen as God's language and its speakers. And I hope to show that – understood in these terms – the creation of the cosmos and society conveys the concept

⁶ Sweetser 1990.

⁷ Radden, Kövecses 1999: 21.

⁸ Radden, Kövecses 1999: 31.

⁹ In the Upaniṣads, conceptualisation of the soul in terms of the human being begins (the soul is called ‘man in size of a thumb’, *aṅguṣṭhamātraḥ puruṣaḥ*: *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 4.12-13, 6.17, *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 3.13, 5.8). Cf. DesCamp, Sweetser 2005 for a cognitive analysis of metaphorical thinking about God in the Bible.

¹⁰ Lakoff, Johnson 1980.

of God, who not only wants to express itself in its creation but also to talk *via* various speakers. This would reveal the Vedic concept of language seen as the means of self-expression in discourse.

2. Creation of cosmos is creation of language

The concept of the cosmos created by God as he creates language is ubiquitous in the Brāhmaṇas and was analysed by many scholars.¹¹ I will analyse the cosmogony presented in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6 in order to show not only the cognitive dimension of creation but also how it is expressed *via* conceptual metonymies and metaphors:

[1] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6 (Eggeling's translation with my minor changes):¹²

Verily, in the beginning this [universe] was water, nothing but a sea of water. The waters desired, „How can we be reproduced?” They toiled and became heated¹³, when they were becoming heated, a golden egg was produced. This year, indeed, was not then in existence: this golden egg floated about for as long as the space of a year. (1)

In a year's time a man, this Prajāpati was produced there from; and hence a woman, a cow, or a mare brings forth within the space of a year; for Prajāpati was born in a year. He broke open this golden egg. There was then, indeed, no resting-place: only this golden egg, bearing him, floated about for as long as the space of a year. (2)

At the end of a year he tried to speak. He said 'bhūh': this [word] became this earth; 'bhuvah': this became this air; 'svah': this became yonder sky. Therefore a child tries to speak at the end of a year, for at the end of a year Prajāpati tried to speak. (3)

When he was first speaking Prajāpati spoke [words] of one syllable and two syllables; whence a child, when first speaking, speaks [words] of one syllable and of two syllables. (4)

These [three words consist of] five syllables: he made them to be the five seasons, and thus there are these five seasons. At the end of the (first) year Prajāpati rose to stand on these worlds thus produced; whence a child tries to stand up at the end of a year, for at the end of a year Prajāpati stood up. (5)

¹¹ E.g. Lévi 1898, Gonda 1983, Holdrege 1994, Holdrege 1996: 47 ff.

¹² Since English is not my first language, I quote Sanskrit texts in already published translations. Sometimes I introduce changes when the translation goes, in my opinion, too far from the original.

¹³ Eggeling 1994, V: 12: 'performed fervid devotions' but he adds in a note: 'Or, they toiled and became heated (with fervid devotion)'.

The source domain of the creative process is a complex scenario of a sexual intercourse, insemination, pregnancy, birth-giving and growing up of a child. The description begins with the conventional formula ‘*X idam agra āsīt/āsa*’ but it replaces Prajāpati, the usual subject of the formula, with the concept of water (*āpas*). However, in my opinion, the cosmogony does not present a different vision of the beginnings of creation. It rather begins its description with the next phase of creation, which is conceived in terms of water.

It is possible to reconstruct the experience that lies behind this description. In order to do it, we have to refer to the cosmogony presented in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.3. It begins with the most conventional form of the cosmogonic formula (*prajāpatir vā idam agra āsīt*, ‘Verily, Prajāpati alone was here in the beginning’¹⁴), then it presents Prajāpati who heats himself, water coming out of him. As the cosmogony says, this is the reason why people, when they are heated, sweat. The cosmogony sees everyday experience as the result of what happened during creation but the real motivation runs in the opposite direction: it is everyday experience that influences thinking about creation. Since in everyday life people sweat from heat, Prajāpati, metaphorically conceived in terms of a human being, sweats too. In the Vedic thought, sweating is treated as transformation under the influence of heat¹⁵ and in cosmogonic descriptions the concept of sweat becomes the source domain for the first manifested form of Prajāpati.¹⁶ According to *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.3, this form heats again to become the next form of Prajāpati, that of foam, then, successively, Prajāpati heats his manifested forms to become clay, sand, pebble, stone, metal ore and, finally, gold. The logic of the source domain of a sweating human being allows the recipient to understand that only a part of Prajāpati, conceived in terms of sweat, undergoes creative transformations. This is his external part which becomes shining and thus visible while the internal part remains unmanifested and cannot be seen.

The composer of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6 (example [1]) metonymically refers to the same concept of a sweating human being. In this way, he begins cosmogony from the stage when Prajāpati has already manifested himself. At the same time, thanks to this metonymy, the description of the beginnings of creation is more abstract because water is a more abstract concept than a sweating human being. What is more, the use of the general notion of water, without explicit reference to the concept of sweating, allows the recipient to activate various metaphoric and metonymic mappings that give him a profound insight into creation.

The concept of water metonymically prompts the recipient to evoke the concept of a pregnant woman (Water For Womb, Womb For Woman).¹⁷ If the recipient understands the first manifested form of Prajāpati in terms of a woman, he will understand that during

¹⁴ Eggeling’s translation (Eggeling 1994, III: 157).

¹⁵ Cf. Jurewicz 2006; 2010: 268.

¹⁶ One of the clearest example is *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.1.

¹⁷ Metonymy ‘Water For Womb’ is an example of metonymy ‘Contents For Container’. Metonymy ‘Womb For A Woman’ is an example of metonymy ‘Part For Whole’.

the creative act Prajāpati, who in his unmanifested form is conceived as a man, becomes his own opposition, which is conceived in terms of a woman.¹⁸

Secondly, the concept of water activates the metaphor ‘Language Is Water’.¹⁹ The coherence of this activation is confirmed by another metaphor of language, well grounded in the Veda, i.e.: ‘Language Is A Woman’.²⁰ In this case, the recipient conceives the beginnings of creation as the appearance of language in general.²¹

Later, water is shown to be heating itself, and then the golden egg appears. This agrees with conventional way of presenting cosmogonic transformation in terms of toiling and heating (expressed by the formula: *so ’śrāmyat sa tapo ’tapyata*, ‘he toiled, he became heated’), which confirms that *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6 follows the general cosmogonic pattern of the Brāhmaṇas.²²

“The golden egg” (*hiraṇmayam āṇḍam*) is a complex conceptual whole. Firstly, it evokes the concept of an egg in terms of which the beginning of life is conceived. In this way, the composer activates the concept of a sexual act and successful insemination. In these terms, the creative unity of the opposing aspects of the Creator is conceived.

If the recipient evokes conceptualisation of language in terms of water/woman, he will understand the cognitive dimension of this phase of creation during which Prajāpati wants to express himself in words; as we will see below, expression of thoughts in language is conceived in the Veda in terms of a sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. This cognitive dimension is also expressed *via* the concept of boiling water which produces the golden egg. The recipient can metonymically activate the concept of gold seen as the product of heating. In terms of such processes thinking is conceived in the Veda: in the frames of this conceptualisation “gold” is the source domain for thought.²³

Finally, the concept of the golden egg evokes the concept of the sun²⁴ as the first form of the cosmos which will be later divided and organised. Thus the recipient will see the ontic dimension of the cognitive act.

We can see then that the careful use of concepts that function as the source domains for the conceptualisation of creation allows the composer to evoke the scenario of sexual

¹⁸ Prajāpati becomes a woman in creation: in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.2 (see, below, example [2]) he gets pregnant, in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.5.1.3 he feeds his offspring with milk from his breast.

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. *Tāṇḍya Mahābrāhmaṇa* 20.14.2, *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.244. For other references cf. Holdrege 1996: 445 (note 111).

²⁰ Interestingly enough, the conceptualisation of language in terms of a woman reveals aspects of the Vedic (maybe not only Vedic?) stereotype of a woman: her main features are frivolousness and fickleness. In this way, the difficulty with gaining and preserving the language was expressed (cf. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.18ff, 4.2.4.2, 3.5.1.21ff.).

²¹ Cf. Holdrege 1994: 45, 1996: 49–50.

²² In *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.3 gold is also the product of heating.

²³ Cf. Jurewicz 2010: 181. The concept of gold-transformation was very much elaborated by the Buddha, cf. Covill 2009: 184–214.

²⁴ The concept of golden egg evokes the concept of the semmetonymically (*via* metonymy ‘Colour For The Substance’) and on the basis of similarity of shape.

human activity and transformation under the influence of heat. In terms of these activities, cognitive and creative processes are conceived.

The following sections of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6 develop the scenario of human sexual activity with its prototypical results: pregnancy, giving birth and development of a child. The golden egg remains in water for one year and then a boy is born. In these terms the next manifested form of Prajāpati is conceived, immanent to the world. Since the Vedic thinkers assumed that father was reborn in his own son, the recipient knows that Prajāpati immanent to the world is the same as Prajāpati in his unmanifested form.

Prajāpati conceived in terms of a new-born child cannot walk for one year (he has 'no resting-place') and he is very close to his mother (inside the golden egg which is only half-open). After a year he begins to stand up and speak. And, we could say, he expresses his experience: he successively pronounces words that correspond to the stages of his movement up: first, the word for the earth, next, words for the space between the earth and the sky, and the sky itself. The words have creative power: to say the word 'earth' is to create the earth, to say the word 'space' is to create the space, to say the word 'sky' is to create the sky. The creation of spatial division is simultaneous with the creation of time division realised while Prajāpati stands up and begins to move. We can see then that Prajāpati, who creates the cosmos, is conceived in terms of a child who, learning the language, as if creates the world for himself. Contrary to everyday experience, the cosmos is ontologically identical to Prajāpati: he becomes what he says.

If we interpret water as language in its primeval, undifferentiated form, we can see that now it is divided into words, so that Prajāpati can precisely express himself and his creative activity. Thus Prajāpati can express the way he manifests himself in the cosmos: he divides himself into three parts and moves. Words *bhūh*, *bhuvah*, *svah* become parts of the cosmos.²⁵

2. Creation of gods is creation of language

In many places in the Brāhmaṇas, the cognitive core of creation is reduced to interaction between mind and language. In some cosmogonies, Prajāpati is conceived in terms of the mind and he gives birth to language. Language is conceived in terms of a woman and it copulates with Prajāpati, who is a man in this case.²⁶ Metaphoric conceptualisation of Prajāpati in terms of the mind is motivated by metonymy 'Mind For Human Being'. We can see again how metonymical thinking leads to abstraction: the concept of the mind is more abstract than the concept of the human being and the metaphorical concept of God-as-mind is more abstract than the metaphorical concept of God-as-human being.

²⁵ It is important to note that the concept of language with its ontological dimension is evoked in the final part of the cosmogonic description of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.3 discussed above: the gold flows (*akṣarat*) and becomes eight-syllable *gāyatrī* which in turn becomes the earth (6.1.3.6).

²⁶ Cf. Lévi 1898: 22–23, Gonda 1983: 29ff., Holdrege 1994: 41ff., 1996: 47ff.

In other cosmogonies Prajāpati gives birth to both mind and language, which copulate with each other,²⁷ as in the following cosmogony that presents the creation of gods who inhabit three spheres of the cosmos:

[2] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.2 (Eggeling's translation with my minor changes):

Having created these worlds, he desired, 'May I create such creatures as shall be mine in these worlds!' (5)

By his Mind (*manasā*) he entered into union with Language (*vāc*)²⁸: he became pregnant with eight drops. They were created as those eight Vasus, he placed them on this earth. (6)

By his Mind (*manasā*) he entered into union with Language (*vācā*): he became pregnant with eleven drops. They were created as those eleven Rudras, he placed them in the air. (7)

By his Mind (*manasā*) he entered into union with Language (*vācā*): he became pregnant with twelve drops. They were created as those twelve Ādityas he placed them in the sky. (8)

By his Mind (*manasā*) he entered into union with Language (*vācā*): he became pregnant. He created the All-gods: he placed them in the quarters. (9)

The gods are created in a cognitive act where the relation between mind and language is conceived in terms of a sexual union between a man and a woman. The Brāhmaṇic philosophers knew that thoughts are expressed in language:

[3] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 12.9.1.13 (Eggeling's translation with my minor changes):

Whatever one thinks in his mind (*manasā*) of that he speaks with his language (*vācā*),²⁹ and what he speaks with his language that one hears with one's ears.³⁰

We can then presume that the concept of sexual act was used to conceive the externalisation of thoughts in language: when spoken thoughts and words become one as a man and a woman become one during sexual act. We can also infer that the happiness gained during this act was the source domain used to conceive satisfaction of the speaker gained thanks to adequate verbalisation of thinking. At the same time, the logic of the scenario of giving birth allows the composer to express the ontological results of speaking.

Gods are divided into groups. The number of group members is conventionalised in the Brāhmaṇas: there are eight Vasus, eleven Rudras and twelve Ādityas. However, it is

²⁷ Cf. Lévi 1898: 22–23, Gonda 1983: 29ff., Holdrege 1994: 41ff., 1996: 47ff.

²⁸ Eggeling 1994, III: 149–150 translates *vāc* as 'Speech'.

²⁹ Eggeling 1994, V: 263 translates *vāc* as 'Speech'.

³⁰ According to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 12.9.1.11 the sacrificer is the language which is the manifested (*pratyakṣād*) mind, in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10.5.1 language is the first manifestation of the mind.

important to note that the number of members of each group agrees with the number of syllables of the meters that correspond to the regions of the world: eight-syllabled *gāyatrī* corresponds to the earth, eleven-syllabled *triṣṭubh* corresponds to the space between the earth and the sky, twelve-syllabled *jagatī* corresponds to the sky.³¹ *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* testifies correspondence between Vasus, Rudras and Ādityas on the one hand and the earth, the space and the sky, respectively.³² So the recipient can see the creation of the gods as the creation of metres. In this case, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.2 (example [2]) would present a more complex diversification of Prajāpati's language than *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6 (example [1]): there are 31 syllables that can be ordered in metres. At the same time, since the expression in language has its ontic results (the words for parts of the cosmos become parts of the cosmos), the gods are not only syllables but also the speaking subjects who will use Prajāpati's language.

We can conclude then that in the creative act Prajāpati thinks about himself and expresses himself in a more and more complicated language. In this cognitive process, he becomes the world and its inhabitants. Such a concept of creation appears already in the Ṛgveda 1.164, where the Creator is conceived in terms of she-buffalo who multiplies her legs in water.³³ The legs can be interpreted as words and the water as the first undifferentiated form of language expressed in words during creation. Thus the whole image presents creation conceived in terms of a cognitive process: the Creator describes her worldly appearance more and more adequately. In the same way, Prajāpati multiplies himself in words that express his cognitive activity more and more precisely.

But expressing oneself is only one role of language. Another one is interaction with others, communication with them. To realise it fully, God creates manifold users of language. Some of them are gods. Others are human beings.

3. Creation of society is creation of language

As it is well known, Vedic cosmogonies do not describe the creation of the first human being. The mankind is created as a whole and is identified with the Indian society divided into four states (*varṇa*). As I have already said, the society is metaphorically conceived in terms of a human being too: parts of Prajāpati become parts of the society, in the same way as his parts are the parts of the cosmos. Creation of four social states is described in the following cosmogony:

³¹ Smith 1994b: 127 ff.

³² *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.5.2.3-5, 13.2.6.4-6, cf. Smith 1994b: 299. The All-gods are usually treated as gods of the Vaiśyas (cf. Smith 1996b: 96), and as such they should be connected with the sky and *jagatī* metre. However, in this particular cosmogony their connection with directions of space (*dīś*) implies their connection with time: because it is space that enables movement measured by time. It is confirmed by identification of the All-gods with the seasons in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.1.1.43, connection of the All-gods with quarters is also expressed in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.5.2.6).

³³ Cf. Jurewicz 2010: 86–89.

[4] *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 1 (Bodewitz's translation with my minor changes):³⁴

Prajāpati [and nothing else] existed here in the beginning. Now Prajāpati was the mind.³⁵ He desired: „May I become manifold. May I procreate. May I become abundant”. He created from his top, from his head, the Trivṛt laud, the Gāyatrī metre, the Rathantara melody, the deity Agni, the human being Brahmin, the animal goat. Therefore the Brahmin has the Gāyatrī as his metre and Agni as his deity. And therefore also he is the mouth of creatures. For he [Prajāpati] created him from his mouth. He desired: „May I procreate”. He created from both his arms and from his breast the Fifteenfold laud, the Triṣṭubh metre, the Bṛhat melody, the deity Indra, the human being Kṣatriya, the animal horse. Therefore the Kṣatriya has the Triṣṭubh as his metre and Indra as his deity. And therefore he displays his force with his arms. For he [Prajāpati] created him from his two arms, from his breast, from his force.

He desired: „May I procreate”. (68)

He created from his belly, from his middle, the Seventeenfold laud, the Jagatī metre, the Vāmadevyā melody, the deity All-gods, the human being Vaiśya and the animal cow. Therefore the Vaiśya has the Jagatī as his metre and the All-gods as his deity. And therefore he is always intent on producing (procreating). For he [Prajāpati] created him from his belly, from his generative organ.

He desired: „May I procreate”. He created from his two feet, from his support, the Twenty-onfold laud, the Anuṣṭubh verse, the human being Śūdra and the animal sheep. Therefore the Śūdra has the Anuṣṭubh as his metre and the landlord as his deity. And therefore he desires to earn his living by washing feet. For he was born from the support (feet) of Prajāpati. (69)

Prajāpati, conceived of as the mind, creates language, which consists of lauds (*stoma*) composed in particular metres (*chandās*) and has particular melodies (*sāman*). Then, Prajāpati creates gods (Agni, Indra, All-gods) and human beings divided into four states.

As it has been argued above, the creation of groups of gods (Vasus, Rudras, Ādityas) can be seen as the creation of Prajāpati's language. In the same way, the creation of particular gods can be seen. There are cosmogonies that present correspondences between various gods and elements of language, such as *vyāhṛtis* (*bhūh*, *bhuvaḥ*, *svaḥ*), metres (*chandās*), lauds (*stoma*), melodies (*sāman*).³⁶ So the recipient can understand creation of particular gods as the creation of language too.

³⁴ For variants of this cosmogony in other Brāhmaṇas, cf. Smith 1994b: 65–66, 69. Cf. also Smith 1994a: 80ff.

³⁵ Bodewitz 1990: 38: '(vital) power mind'.

³⁶ Smith 1994b: 75, 79, 81, 129, 138–139.

What is more, as Smith (1994b) shows, the Brāhmaṇas clearly imply the homology between social states and elements of language.³⁷ *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 3.12.9.2 is one of the most lucid passages in this respect, where it is said that three social states were born of three Vedas.³⁸ So the recipient can also interpret the creation of human beings as the creation of Prajāpati's language, similarly to the creation of gods.

This is attested by the very term denoting the social states, which is *varṇa*. Traditionally, in the context of the society, *varṇa* is understood as 'colour'.³⁹ But the word *varṇa* also means a sound of speech.⁴⁰ In this sense, *varṇa* is used in the following cosmogony which conceives creation as an extraction of the linguistic essence of the three parts of the cosmos:

[5] *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 5.32 (Keith's translation with my minor changes):

Prajāpati desired 'May I be propagated; may I be multiplied'. He became heated, having become heated⁴¹ he created these worlds; the earth, the atmosphere, the sky. He heated (*abhyatapat*)⁴² these worlds; from these worlds when heated (*tebhyo 'bhītaptebhyas*) these luminaries (*jyotiṃṣi*) were born; Agni was born from the earth, Vāyu from the atmosphere, Āditya from the sky. He heated these luminaries. From these heated the three Vedas were born; The *Ṛgveda* was born from Agni, the *Yajurveda* from Vāyu, the *Sāmaveda* from Āditya. He heated these Vedas; from these [Vedas] when heated three pure [sounds, *śukra*] were born: *bhūḥ* from the *Ṛgveda*, *bhuvah* from the *Yajurveda*, *svah* from the *Sāmaveda*. He heated these pure ones; from them when heated the three sounds (*varṇa*) were born; the letter *a*, the letter *u*, the letter *m*.

I would argue then that the use of the word *varṇa* to denote social classes could be motivated not only by the anthropological features of the people but also by thinking about language as a social phenomenon. The social states are the *varṇas*, the sounds of Prajāpati's language which, reversing the order of creation presented in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (example [5]), can be expanded into words (*bhūḥ*, *bhuvah*, *svah*) and texts (*Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*) pronounced by human beings.

³⁷ Cf. Smith 1994b: 288ff. It is the homology between social states, on the one hand, and three *vyāhṛtis*, or metres, melodies (*sāmans*), three Vedas, on the other.

³⁸ Gonda 1979: 129, Smith 1994b: 288ff., the usual order is reversed: Vaiśyas come from the *Ṛgveda* and Brahmins from the *Sāmaveda*.

³⁹ Already in the *Ṛgveda*, cf. Renou 1958: 14–15.

⁴⁰ Thieme 1985: 562; Coward, Kunjunni Raja 2008: 4, *passim*.

⁴¹ Keith 1920: 256: 'practised fervour; having practised fervour'.

⁴² Keith 1920: 256: 'brooded over'.

4. Sacrificial place as the space of discourse

Let us come back to the cosmogony of the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (example [4]). Prajāpati expresses himself and the sounds that he pronounces become the language (which consists of lauds, metres and melodies). In accordance with the basic assumption of the ontic results of cognitive activity, the sounds become speakers, both divine and human. As Smith shows, each social state has a corresponding groups of gods: “Agni and the Vasus are Brahmin deities; Vāyu, Indra, and the Rudras are Kṣatriya divinities; and Āditya, Sūrya, Varuṇa, and the Ādityas are Vaiśya gods” (1994: 292). These are the gods enumerated by the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.2 and the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* quoted above (examples [1] and [4]). I would argue then that in this way Prajāpati creates space in which his language can be realised. This space is sacrifice (*yajña*).⁴³ Animals created together with gods and human beings will be offered as sacrificial victims.

Gods inhabit the heavenly world (*svarga*), human beings – the earth. Both gods and human beings have language. But, as Malamoud (1996) shows, the language of gods is different from the language of men. The language of gods is true in that it is identical with thought and being. In the language of gods, the triad «thinking – saying – becoming» is reduced to one. This is the language of Prajāpati himself who can create the world just because his thoughts expressed in language become elements of creation.

But when language and the world appear, the elements of the triad become separated. And contrary to the language of gods, the language of human beings (even Sanskrit!) is false⁴⁴ in that words are not identical with thoughts that they express and things that they name. The words *agni*, *indra*, etc. are used in the language of human beings, while *agri*, *indha*, etc. in the language of gods.⁴⁵ These words of human language do not express thoughts properly and cannot create anything, because, as I have shown elsewhere, they do not name the essence of things that is named in the language of gods.⁴⁶

In everyday life, the language of gods, as of Prajāpati himself, is ‘unintelligible’ (*anirukta*) and ‘out of sight’ (*parokṣa*).⁴⁷ However, it can be restored and activated in sacrifice. In the sacrificial place human beings address gods, the gods are expected to answer. The Vedic philosophers emphasise the emotional background of sacrifice, which is the desire for obtaining various goods. If obtained thanks to sacrifice, the goods confirm the truth of the words of human beings who ask for them, and of the gods who give the goods. The priests in the sacrificial place express the sacrificer’s thoughts about future sons, wives, rule, wealth, long and healthy life in imperfect human language. The gods are expected to answer: to put these thoughts into words of their perfect language in which «thinking – speaking – becoming» are the same. When they do, the sacrificer’s thoughts become true in that their designates really appear. We could say that the Vedic

⁴³ In *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.38 sacrifice itself is identified with language (*vāg vai yajño*).

⁴⁴ Cf. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.3.1.34.

⁴⁵ Malamoud 1996: 195–206, Gonda 1955, Jurewicz forthc.

⁴⁶ Jurewicz forthc.

⁴⁷ Malamoud 1996: 196–197.

texts propose the correspondent theory of truth in its most literal dimension. True thought not only corresponds to the actual state of affairs, but also actually becomes reality. But this can happen only in the sacrificial space.

On the surface level, sacrifice is communication between human beings themselves who have to cooperate in the sacrificial place. So, to enter the sacrificial space is to begin to communicate with other human beings. But human beings are not the final respondents of this communication. The gods and Prajāpati himself are. This is the human point of view. However, from the point of view of Prajāpati, sacrifice is the space in which his linguistic competence realises itself through his speaking manifestations. During creation Prajāpati manifests himself in sounds that become parts of the cosmos. He also manifests himself in sounds that become gods and human beings endowed with languages. And then, he begins to talk to himself in the imperfect language of human beings and the perfect language of gods, and thus he confirms the truth of his words and the ontic reality of his manifestations.⁴⁸

It is worth noting that in the sacrificial space, human beings reverse the order of creation. They begin with language in order to find thoughts expressed by it and reach Prajāpati's mind encoded in the language of gods in this way, while during creation Prajāpati first thinks and then speaks. This bi-directional understanding of communication reflects everyday experience: when one is a speaker, one begins with thoughts in order to express them in words, when one is a hearer, one begins with words to understand thoughts conveyed by them. This was the reason of creation: Prajāpati wanted to become the speaker and hearer, not one but many. We should remember that the reason for creation in the cosmogonies is always the desire of Prajāpati to multiply himself. Why? Because he wanted to have others to talk to.

5. Conclusion

The concept of language reconstructed in this paper on the basis of the Brāhmaṇas is similar to the contemporary one. Manifesting himself in language Prajāpati could externalise himself. But if Prajāpati really wanted to talk and make his language really meaningful, he had to create many speakers. Creation of the society is the next phase of creation of language when it becomes the means of social communication. In the sacrificial sphere of communication, Prajāpati talks to himself *via* a multitude of divine and human

⁴⁸ This concept of language seems to be motivated by another human characteristics, which is the ability to play: in some descriptions the concept of the game of hide-and-seek can be evoked (e.g. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.2, example [2], which is later elaborated by *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.1-5). In terms of the game of hide-and-seek, the character of linguistic communication can be specified, which is looking for and finding the hidden meanings of words. This concept of language motivates the understanding of the existence of the world as a process during which God plays hide-and-seek with himself: he hides himself in the multitude of divine and human speakers and he finds himself again when the truth of his words is confirmed by goods obtained in sacrifice. The full analysis of this problem needs a separate analysis.

speakers and confirms the truth of his words by goods obtained in sacrifice. We could then reformulate Clifford Geertz's words quoted in the beginning of my paper: "Human thought is basically both social and public – (...) its natural habitat is the sacrificial place".

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