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The Interpretation of the Tower of Babel: A Buddhist Perspective

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The task of offering a Buddhist interpretation of the biblical episode of the Tower of Babel is daunting. This is a narrative with no real equivalent, not only within the Buddhist tradition, but more broadly within the entire traditional Indian worldview. An Indian philosopher—Buddhist or otherwise—faced with this episode would likely focus primarily on the linguistic aspects, relegating the actions of humans and God to the background. Indeed, speculation on language is one of the primary concerns of Indian thought. What is language, essentially? How does it signify? What is its grasp on reality? What is the relationship among different languages?

Before delving into a Buddhist interpretation, we will attempt a Brahmanical—or more broadly, Hindu—interpretation. Indian Buddhism developed in dialogue (at times quite contentious) with Brahmanism. Buddhist philosophical and theological positions are better understood as implicit or explicit responses to Brahmanical ones—and vice versa.

In the Brahmanical context, language is not described as a mere vehicle of communication but rather as the manifestation of a primary and undifferentiated vocality, the foundation of all individual languages, including non-human ones. Nevertheless, this principle is seen in its highest form as a divine gift, distinguishing humans, instilled in them by the gods. Speech (*ṽāc*) is thus divine, according to the famous hymn 10.125 of the *Rgvedasamhitā*. It exists before and independently of the speaker. Speech, in this sense, as a foundational principle, precedes the dichotomy of signifier and signified. In the Vedic world, it is inseparable from the sacrificial rite, which in turn upholds the cosmos. Speech dynamically structures the world, prefiguring the concept of *dharma*. Unlike the gods, who depend on sacrifice, Speech is dependent on nothing and has no beginning, not even with the Vedic revelation. The Veda itself is regarded as the most immediate expression of Speech, or even as its original and primary form. The Vedic language is a real and active force rather than referential. Before it signifies, it acts. According to the Mīmāṃsā school (the philosophical current most directly representing orthodox Brahmanism, dating to around the 2nd century BCE), its essence lies in issuing injunctions, thus regulating both the natural and social worlds. The Brahmanical philosophical concept of the absolute continues the idea of the power of Vedic Speech; both are expressed by the same word, *brahman*, also referred to as *śabdatattva*—“word-essence” or “sound-essence.”

Over time, the qualities attributed to the Vedic language were progressively absorbed by Sanskrit in general. By the end of this process, Sanskrit was seen as eternal and transcendent, like the Vedas themselves—a first incarnation of Speech as transcendent principle.

The great grammarian and philosopher Bhartṛhari (5th century CE) maintained in his masterpiece *Vākyapadīya* that knowledge is always woven with words. No concept exists without linguistic mediation. No experience is immune from language. Language is the only access we have to the world. Entities do not exist independently of language. There are no "things-in-themselves" for us. The subject accesses reality only through language, which Bhartṛhari regards as a transcendental function. Language, however, is unthinkable without sound. Thus, drawing from Vedic views, Bhartṛhari saw sound not merely as a vehicle of thought, but as the very condition for language, ideas, and knowledge. The educated priest or *brāhmaṇa*, master of the Sanskrit language, embodied the highest model of conduct. A learned *brāhmaṇa* was both adviser and exemplar in matters of righteous behaviour and, ultimately, a living source of law.

What then was the Brahmanical view on linguistic variety? First, it had to contend with the Middle Indo-Aryan languages or Prakrits (first epigraphically attested in the 3rd century BCE), vernaculars akin to Sanskrit spoken in northern India. From a Brahmanical perspective, these were not seen as autonomous languages but rather as degenerated forms of Sanskrit, corrupted by inept speakers. Grammarians thus described these languages in terms of deviations from the perfect, immutable, place-independent Sanskrit. Even lower were the barbaric (*mleccha*) languages, at times likened to animal verses.

Turning now to Buddhism, according to early canonical scriptures in Pāli (committed to writing in the 1st century BCE but transmitted orally from the 5th century BCE), the Buddhist position on language stems from contemplative experience. Contemplation reveals that the subject and objects of perception arise from the unconscious reification of perceptual flow—a process fundamentally linguistic in nature. Thus, while words and sentences have practical utility, they are ultimately mere conventions. This distrust of verbal constructs led the Buddha, in the Pāli Canon, to discourage metaphysical speculation. If words fail to capture reality in the ordinary world, they are even less effective in grasping what transcends it.

Later Buddhism, particularly the Mahāyāna (emerging in the 1st century BCE), systematized this position, affirming that all *dharmas*—phenomena and entities, both concrete and abstract—are empty of intrinsic being. These are only collectively accepted constructs. For the great Nāgārjuna (2nd century CE), language can never transcend its conventional nature. On this basis, the epistemological school of Buddhism (Pramāṇavāda, 6th–11th centuries CE) challenged systems that attributed essence to words, arguing that a word signifies only by difference, referring to something only through the exclusion (*apoha*) of other meanings. This was, as one can see, a radically anti-Brahmanical stance.

What of the Buddhist view on linguistic diversity? The Pāli Canon tells how some *brāhmaṇa*-born monks suggested using Sanskrit to preserve the teaching, fearing that vernaculars lacked the phonological and grammatical robustness of Sanskrit. However, the Buddha forbade this (*Cullavagga* 5.33). This refusal might reflect class conflict between nobles (speakers of vernaculars) and *brāhmaṇas* (Sanskrit users), and perhaps also the limited dissemination of Sanskrit at the time. Brahmins saw themselves as exclusive guardians of esoteric knowledge in Sanskrit and had no interest in disseminating it. Sanskrit would not experience a revival until the early Common Era. The Pāli Canon betrays no inferiority complex toward Sanskrit.

There were also areas of overlap between Buddhism and Brahmanism. For example, the early Buddhist Lokottaravāda school held that the Buddha's teaching existed as a single supramundane (*lokottara*) sound (*śabda*), viewing the Buddha as a transcendent, omniscient being. Hence, the school's other name: the "School of one expression" (*ekavyavahāra*). Here, the Buddha's Word was attributed the same transcendent, foundational qualities that Brahmanism ascribed to the Veda or Sanskrit. Eventually, Buddhism too adopted Sanskrit over vernaculars—the vast Mahāyāna sutras, among others, being written in Sanskrit.

Can we now draw a link between the Tower of Babel and the Indian cultural sphere? The biblical narrative presents a humanity unified by one language and a shared goal: building a city and tower reaching heaven, seeking fame and avoiding dispersal. God intervenes, confounding language and scattering humanity, underscoring the link between language and knowledge. Similarly, the Brahmanical world focusses on linguistic reflection, and in both traditions, the spoken word holds absolute, even transcendent, value. The single language in Genesis enables humans to approach omnipotence; in the Brahmanical world, voice (*ṛc*, *śabda*) is a cosmic and ontological principle. The loss of linguistic unity in the Bible yields division and incomprehensibility; similarly, vernaculars in the Brahmanical world were associated with moral decay and social disharmony, contrasted with divine, unifying Sanskrit. While linguistic diversity in the Bible is a divine punishment, in Brahmanism, it is a problem to be managed by upholding Vedic orality and Sanskrit to prevent the fragmentation of knowledge. Both traditions focus on human arrogance: in the Bible, punished through linguistic dispersal after the Tower's construction; in Brahmanism, reflected in the presumption of fixing oral Vedic knowledge in writing, thereby obscuring its divine nature. The Tower of Babel in the Bible is perhaps analogous to writing in Brahmanism.

Let us now return to the issue of linguistic and cultural diversity concerning contemporary Buddhism. Originating in India in the 5th century BCE, Buddhism evolved and spread across Asia (and more recently to the West), forming a wide range of schools. These are generally grouped into two major traditions: Theravāda and Mahāyāna. Theravāda predominates in Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos), while Mahāyāna includes diverse streams (including Tantrayāna) that influenced East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam) and the Himalayan region.

Theravāda, in some respects, presents a formally similar perspective to Brahmanism, assigning a central and sacred role to the Pāli language, as Brahmanism does to Sanskrit. The Pāli Canon (Tipiṭaka) is considered the most complete and authoritative collection of the Buddha's teachings. The Theravāda tradition holds that Pāli was the Buddha's spoken language, though modern linguistics shows that this is unlikely, as Pāli does not reflect the features expected of a spoken language in northeastern India, where Buddhism first flourished. Today, Pāli remains the liturgical and scholarly language of the Theravāda tradition.

This emphasis on Pāli might suggest a limited openness to linguistic and cultural diversity. However, we must also consider canonical references (e.g., *Cullavagga* 5.33) suggesting the Buddha actively encouraged using local languages to teach the Dharma, contrasting with the Brahmanical tradition's exclusive use of Sanskrit. This reflects a desire to make the Dharma accessible to all, overcoming linguistic barriers that might limit its transmission and comprehension. Despite Pāli's canonical centrality, the principle of using local languages appears foundational. Historically, the Dharma was transmitted in Pāli but also integrated local languages in

the regions where Theravāda spread. These translation efforts show a pragmatic approach to spreading teachings while preserving Pāli as the reference language. Regarding cultural diversity, the Pāli Canon expresses caution about incorporating practices (e.g., Brahmanical rituals) deemed incompatible with fundamental Buddhist teachings. This might suggest less adaptive potential than Mahāyāna. Yet historical developments show Theravāda did adapt deeply to different contexts in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The safeguarding of core teachings did not prevent syncretism with preexisting beliefs and rituals.

The monastic community (*saṅgha*) played a key role in Theravāda's interaction with various ethnicities, traditionally serving as educators and closely engaging with lay communities. Thus, the *saṅgha* was crucial in both preserving core teachings and adapting Theravāda to new cultural contexts. One could argue that in the modern era, at least until the rediscovery of texts by philologists in the early 20th century, the monastic community's social function outweighed that of doctrinal preservation.

Mahāyāna Buddhism presents an even more diverse perspective on linguistic and cultural differences. As noted, Mahāyāna valued Sanskrit, but was also open to other languages—especially Chinese and Tibetan—which became vehicles for major canons (e.g., the *Dàzàngjīng* in China and the *bKa'-gyur* and *bsTan'-gyur* in Tibet) through vast translation efforts and original compositions. In China, even texts not attributed to the Buddha or his direct disciples were accepted as *sūtras*—sacred writings—such as the famous *Platform Sūtra* of the Sixth Patriarch (*Liùzǔ tánjīng*) by Huìnéng (7th–8th century CE), a patriarch of the Chan school (Zen in Japan). This linguistic openness reflects Mahāyāna's aim to reach as many sentient beings as possible and its ability to adapt to diverse cultural and geographic settings.

The guiding concept in Mahāyāna's approach to linguistic diversity is that of “skillful means” (*upāyakauśalya*). This principle justifies adapting Buddhist teachings to different capacities and inclinations, including linguistic and cultural contexts, to guide beings toward *nirvāṇa*. Mahāyāna's commitment to translation, involving teams of literary specialists, made vast *sūtras* and commentaries available in Asian languages. Chinese translation, beginning with Ān Shìgāo in the 2nd century CE, was pivotal to Buddhism's Asian spread. Mahāyāna's ability to integrate with local cultures and religions, such as Taoism and Confucianism in China, Shinto in Japan, and Bon in Tibet, was key to its success. The bodhisattva ideal, central in Mahāyāna, is seeking enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, fostering inclusivity regardless of language or culture. Compassion (*karuṇā*) serves as the ethical basis for accepting and valuing cultural diversity. This core Buddhist principle offers a framework for adapting to linguistic and cultural differences. Compassion promotes empathy and understanding across languages and cultures.

Another core principle is *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), interpreted in Chinese Buddhism as universal interdependence: all phenomena, beings, and individuals are interconnected. Recognizing this counters notions of ethnic separation and supports an inclusive vision. Furthermore, the Middle Way (*madhyamā pratipad*) principle encourages avoiding extremes and rigidity, promoting engagement with diverse people and cultures. Finally, the concept of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) teaches that all phenomena lack intrinsic existence and are open to change and reinterpretation, transcending rigid categories of linguistic or cultural identity. Thus, if linguistic diversity was a scandal for Brahmanism, for Buddhism it has been—and remains—an opportunity.