

The Origin and Nature of Speech in Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo

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Abstract

The paper delves into the nature and origin of ideas, words, meanings, speech, and language from the perspective of Indian mystics and philosophers Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo. To provide historical context, we begin with the Eastern viewpoint, starting with the Vedic interpretation, which posits that the source of all speech is the transcendent sound, known as the ‘Word’. Later, Abhinavagupta delineates the genesis of words as a four-level process within consciousness, where mystic sounds gradually acquire concreteness in the form of human language. In the 20th century, Sri Aurobindo extended Abhinavagupta’s framework, envisioning all words as stemming from mind-impressions elicited by seed-sounds bearing psychological qualities. Moreover, according to Sri Aurobindo, the universe and its natural phenomena represent the expression of a creative transcendental Real-Idea, which serves as the foundation for all meanings, signs, words, and human language and Nature itself. Language, therefore, becomes an instrument for the expression of divine consciousness in manifestation. Finally, it is shown how the integration of Western and Eastern philosophies into a synthetic framework that unifies the diverse positions opens interesting venues that could reconcile many apparent inconsistencies within modern philosophy and science, especially in the philosophy of language, evolutionary linguistics, cognitive sciences, neuroscience, and AI.

Keywords: history of language, philosophy of language, evolutionary linguistics, Abhinavagupta, Sri Aurobindo, biosemiotics, science, metaphysics

I. Introduction

Despite more than one and a half centuries of speculation and research, the nature and origin of human language remain highly debated issues. The quest to unravel the inception of language is an enduring intellectual journey that has fascinated linguists, anthropologists, cognitive scientists, and philosophers alike. In the Western tradition several competing theories have emerged over the last century and a half, but the debate over whether the nature and origin of speech and language, the development of signifying ideas, the use of words, and the emergence of meaning are products primarily of biological evolution, cultural development, or something else, remain a matter of controversy. Nonetheless, what they all have in common to a greater or lesser extent is that they are based on a tradition of analytic philosophy and a predominantly materialistic conception of cognition and life. Language is seen as a product of social interactions, cultural development, an anthropological and societal perspective, or a

neurological and genetic outgrowth in the frame of Darwinian evolution. With few exceptions,¹ from the foundations of semiotics of Saussure, through the positivistic approach of Wittgenstein, to the biological outlook of Chomsky, who argued that “*there is a special component of the human brain (call it ‘the language faculty’) that is specifically dedicated to language*” and which is genetically determined (Chomsky, 1996), despite all their differences, their commonality is that they are rooted in a strictly naturalistic paradigm. However, from a historical perspective, it is often overlooked that, particularly in the Eastern tradition, the philosophy of language adopted a different approach. Here, we will extend our view from an exclusive third-person rationalistic perspective to a first-person position inspired by the spiritual insights of two personalities who developed a profound vision of language, namely, the Indian mystics Abhinavagupta Acharya (AD 950-1016) and Sri Aurobindo Ghose (AD 1872-1950). To the best of my knowledge, only few authors tackled with Abhinavagupta’s ‘grammatical cosmology’ (Biernacki, 2013a) and ‘theogrammatical topography of the One and the many’ (Biernacki, 2013b). Biernacki also relates Abhinavagupta’s philosophy to the contemporary philosophy of mind and how it could lay the foundations for a new materialism (Biernacki, 2023).

In this paper, I will take a different approach. If we admit that the origin of language may be tightly connected with the origin of consciousness and that consciousness is not explicable in a naturalistic theoretical framework (something that is resurfacing more than ever in the contemporary philosophy of mind; for a review, see Mørch (2023)), then we are allowed to take a different approach and outlook toward the question of the origin and nature of language and see if it may have a deeper explanatory power than a strictly naturalistic worldview.

Though they are usually considered ‘philosophers,’ both Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo must be understood within their cultural context, they were not philosophers in the ordinary sense. Their teachings came from the perspective of the mystic, not the thinker. They sought to argue from the perspective of higher states of consciousness beyond the analytic mind rather than from intellectual constructs and speculations. Their worldview was rooted in the ontology of the Vedic rishis, the ancient Indian mystics. However, this doesn’t imply that the Eastern and Western currents must remain distinct and separate forever. There is a commonly shared bridge. The point of contact is the common search for a theory of how we represent the essence of reality with ideas, signs, words, forms, symbols, speech and language, and meanings.

The first section of the next part will discuss the common basis of both seers: At the origin of all existence is consciousness expressing itself by means of sound. The Rig Veda speaks of a primeval vibration beyond the physical realm that generates all existence and becomes the basis of speech as well. Here, consciousness and language are inherently interlinked. The second section describes how Abhinavagupta starts from the Vedic tradition by describing how the ‘Sound-Word,’ descending through four levels of consciousness and manifestation, becomes human speech and language, which are attempts to express these transcendent sounds in physical form, and that we only subconsciously know, as they originate from a realm beyond our ordinary states of consciousness. The third section describes Sri Aurobindo’s theory of the origin of speech, which follows in the footsteps of Abhinavagupta. The evolution of speech emerged from sensations, emotions, and nervous utterances first, became a living language based on seed-sounds having psychological qualities, and then transitioned from general notions to precise expressions under the influence of the intellect and reason. Moreover, in the fourth section, his outlook of the world as a Real-Idea will put both his and Abhinavagupta’s

¹ The model of the origin of language presented here has similarities with the theory of the origin of language presented, for example, by Süßmilch (Süßmilch, 1766) who claimed that language is necessary for the development of reason and, thereby, must be of divine origin. However, in Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo there is no claim that language develops mental functions in humans. It is the faculty of reason that contacts language, not the other way around.

theory of language in a broader perspective. All the universe, matter, and life are a sign, a symbol, or just a ‘word.’

The final chapter will attempt to synthesize these theoretical frameworks into an integral view, highlighting how they fit into our contemporary scientific, philosophical, and philological knowledge. Several aspects that remain obscure in contemporary philosophy of language, rooted in a biological paradigm, might receive interesting insights from this spiritual philosophical framework. However, a broader perspective in which we can connect the dots is needed.

II. The Nature of the Word and the Origin of Speech in Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo

1. The Transcendent Sound-Word

The Rig Veda speaks of the universe created by an original and originative ‘sound,’ or cosmic vibration, the seed of the transcendent sound and a sonic representation of the Brahman, the Absolute of the Vedic texts, as ‘Aum’ or ‘Om’ (‘Prajāva’), and represented by the sacred Sanskrit syllable ॐ. Everything inside the so-created universe also originates from vibrations of consciousness or ‘etheric sounds.’ These immaterial vibrations on higher planes of existence determine the creation, change, and dissolution of all forms on the material plane of existence.

According to the Veda, the original vibration is not physical. Its origin and primary nature are always transcendent, supra-material, beyond matter, space, and time. The rhythms of cosmic vibration become physical only at the most material level. Consequently, the primary vibration or ‘sound’ (‘śabda’) is transcendent and issued forth from a supreme consciousness, descending through four universal levels of manifestation, with the physical manifestation being the last plane in a series of descending planes. The idea of the four levels of consciousness is a common theme in the Rig Veda, and its correlation with speech was already present in the teachings of Rishi Dirghatamas.

“The Word has been measured in four quarters. Those quarters are known to the knowers of the Word, brāhmaṇaḥ, who possess also the power of the Mind, manīṣiṇaḥ. In the hidden place the three are established, which do not move. And the forth one men speak.” (Rig Veda 1.164.45)

Similarly, in the mental realm, mental forms and their changes are realized by mental vibrations. Just as all material objects are the result of a combination of physical vibrations, all thoughts are a combination of mental vibrations. These are inaudible to the physical ear but are perceivable to the mind. The same rationale applies to even higher planes of consciousness beyond the mind. The goddess Word—‘Vāc’—is the vibration of a supreme consciousness, loaded with an inherent supreme knowledge, vision, and creative power, that holds and sustains the manifestation by penetrating Earth and Heaven and holding together all existence (Rig Veda, 10.125). In Sanskrit, vāc means ‘to speak,’ and in Latin, it corresponds to ‘vox,’ meaning ‘voice.’ However, in this context, vāc refers to sound. It is the divine Will that manifests its creation by means of the creative sound. For the Vedic seer, the entire manifestation is an expression of the unmanifest, formless, transcendental ‘Word.’ For the Upanishads, Vāc is superior to name and should be worshiped (Chandogya Upanishad 7.2.1). It is something reminiscent of the meaning of the ‘Word’ in the Bible: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* [John 1:1].

Thus, according to the Veda, all mental vibrations, which we call ‘thoughts’ or ‘ideas,’ and all physical sounds, which we call ‘spoken words,’ owe their origin to ‘voiceless,’ ‘unvoiced,’ ‘unheard’ subtle vibrations of consciousness beyond the gross physical and ultimately originate in the universal consciousness that casts them into ‘thought/idea-forms’ and ‘matter-forms’ by

descending to the mental and physical planes. Or, to put it in the words of Western philosophy, words exist ‘archetypically’ in a separate realm², something echoing the realm of Plato’s Forms ruled by a ‘universal phonological semiotic’.

However, according to the Vedic seer, in our state of ignorance absorbed in the physicality and inertia of matter, so conditioned by our half-animal bodily and subconscious nature, we are only subliminally aware of this truth of things. We can discover it only by a process of spiritual ascesis. Nevertheless, on our ordinary cognitive state, language is an attempt of the human mind with its bodily apparatus to express these etheric sounds with physical sound vibrations in the form of sound-units, segments, phonemes, words, and sentences.

Therefore, from the Vedic perspective, in their origin, words are subtle trans-rational vibrations that have not yet dressed themselves in intellectual concepts and language. Language is adopted only later, at the level of the surface mind. In their original form, words exist as a ‘consciousness-form’ that precedes apprehension, comprehension, conception, perception, and any intellectual analysis. The word articulated with its sound in the form of physical air pressure vibrations using the organs of speech is only the very last stage of differentiation, manifesting a mental idea, a concept, or the names and forms of objects.³ The true origin of every spoken word and phoneme is beyond any physical or mental plane, where an original ‘sound-idea’ is expressed, and the human mind can only vaguely intuit it, and not fully comprehend it, unless one ascends to higher cognitive states through spiritual practice.

From this phenomenological first-person cognitive perspective of the Vedic system, words and sounds are not just a means of expressing an intellectual idea. They are the reflection of an original immaterial vibration pregnant with meaning. Words and sounds can still carry the memory of its ‘root-meaning,’ that is, its ‘root-sound,’ which can be apprehended if one has developed an awareness of the ‘sound-idea’ and can hear the ‘internal sound’ standing behind the word. A Speech beyond our speech and mind exists, made of expressions of truths that already pre-exist in the Infinite and of which the human language is only a shadow and artificial counterfeit. The symbols or representations that the human language expresses are external representations of the things in themselves residing in another reality. In the Vedic tradition, the ‘forms’ and ‘objects’ are beyond any mental conception and must be found in the formless and timeless domains of the ‘upper Ocean’: *“It is from her, the all creative Word, that the waters of the upper Ocean flow down in all directions”* (Rig Veda 1.164.42).

The Word on the level of that Reality is much more creative than human speech can be. Consciousness uses vibrations as a form of pre-reflective self-expression because every form, quality, quantity, and property itself is an expression of a vibrational power on one or another plane of existence. The unspoken, formless, and unmanifest Word isn’t a passive and inactive sound without power and force. The Word of the Indian Vedic rishi is a living entity with creative and formative powers. In fact, the idea standing behind the mantra—the sacred word, phrase, or sound used in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions—assumes that, if the spoken word

² Here, the term “archetype” refers to a semiotic universal idea. Jung defined archetypes differently, describing them as patterns of behavior that emerge from the collective unconscious consisting of innate psychic structures and predispositions—essentially instinctive blueprints for the human psyche. The Jungian archetypes are considered structural templates that manifest in response to biological instincts and become evident in common myths, dreams, religious symbols, and artistic expressions. Nonetheless, Jung viewed archetypes as pre-linguistic forms that enhance the depth of meaning, with language serving as a symbolic expression of these archetypes. Language is the means through which archetypes become visible. The richness of meaning derives from its archetypal roots in the collective unconscious. Without the underlying archetype, a symbol would simply be a sign. Therefore, with a slight abuse of language, we will adopt Jung’s terminology.

³ As we shall see in more detail later, by ‘names’ (nāma), the rishis didn’t mean just the words describing objects but rather, in its deeper sense, the powers, qualities, and characters (features and traits that distinguish one thing from another) caught up by our awareness. In this sense, all ‘names’ are already latent and inherent in the nameless and timeless Absolute but are expressed in the temporal manifestation as qualities, powers, and characters of its forms. Similarly, ‘forms’ (rūpa) have to be intended in its more general connotation. Not only are signs, words, and symbols forms, but sound waves, ideas, mental concepts, and even feelings or emotions are ‘forms’ of and in consciousness.

is charged by a spiritual vibration, it can still carry a creative power that the ordinary word doesn't have. It is supposed to produce vibrations in our mental and emotional atmosphere, with potentially beneficial physical effects. It is what the repetition of a mantra ('Japa') during a spiritual practice is said to achieve: The psychologically energized words and sounds aid the practitioner in transcending the mind. Human speech is 'creative' in the sense that it can create mental images, forms of emotions, impulses of action and movement, sense-properties, etc. Thoughts and words are carriers of a force. Thereby, in sound waves, words can encode features and powers of the awareness of who is speaking.

The origin of the Word resides in what Sri Aurobindo called the 'Supermind'—the supreme creative Logos—the highest level of the creative consciousness and gnosis of the Absolute acting in the manifestation.⁴

"Let us suppose a conscious use of the vibrations of sound which will produce corresponding forms or changes of form. But Matter is only, in the ancient view, the lowest of the planes of existence. Let us realize then that a vibration of sound on the material plane presupposes a corresponding vibration on the vital [emotional plane] without which it could not have come into play; that again presupposes a corresponding originative vibration on the mental; the mental presupposes a corresponding originative vibration on the supramental at the very root of things." (Sri Aurobindo, 1952, Ch. V, p. 31)

"All vibration of sound on that higher plane is, then, instinct with and expressive of this supreme discernment of a truth in things and is at the same time creative, instinct with a supreme power which casts into forms the truth discerned and eventually, descending from plane to plane, reproduces it in the physical form or object created in Matter by etheric sound. Thus we see that the theory of creation by the Word which is the absolute expression of the Truth, and the theory of the material creation by sound-vibration in the ether correspond and are two logical poles of the same idea. They both belong to the same ancient Vedic system." (Sri Aurobindo, 1952, Ch. V, p. 32)

On our cognitive level made of words, the Word is expressed by 'seed-sounds,' which carry in them the principles of things and forms in the phenomenal world.

"Human speech is only a secondary expression and at its highest a shadow of the divine Word, of the seed-sounds, the satisfying rhythms, the revealing forms of sound that are the omniscient and omnipotent speech of the eternal Thinker, Harmonist, Creator. The highest inspired speech to which the human mind can attain, the word most unanalysably expressive of supreme truth, the most puissant syllable or mantra can only be its far-off representation." (Sri Aurobindo, 1952, Ch. V, p. 33)

At first, the idea that human speech has its basis in a 'transcendent speech' (Sri Aurobindo, 1950, p. 375) being a shadow of the divine Word might sound too mystical. However, in the light of modern physics, this isn't a far-fetched vision. Waves in their mechanical form (pressure waves in a solid, liquid, or gaseous body) or electric, magnetic, or electromagnetic waves (light waves, radio waves, X and gamma rays, etc.) are the foundation of classical physics. What is often not realized is that all waves are ultimately 'immaterial.' Mechanical waves in matter are vibrations propagating between molecules through an exchange of momentum mediated by electromagnetic waves or photons, which are not material (in the sense that photons have no mass). In quantum physics, things become even more subtle because the waves considered in this context are 'probability waves' that are neither material nor immaterial

⁴ Sri Aurobindo reported the existence of states of consciousness transcending ordinary human cognition, which he classified in ascending order as the 'higher mind' (a "luminous thought-mind" and "spirit-born conceptual knowledge"), 'illumined mind' (a "clarity of the spiritual intelligence" and an "illumination of the spirit"), 'intuitive mind' ("when the consciousness of the subject meets with the consciousness in the object, penetrates it, and sees, feels, or vibrates with the truth of what it contacts"), 'overmind' (a universal or cosmic consciousness of "wide cosmic perception and feeling of a boundless universal self"), and 'Supermind' (the "divine gnosis" or "Truth Consciousness") (Sri Aurobindo, 1919a, p. 985).

but, rather, abstract mathematical functions representing the probability that a certain quantum event will take place. These form so-called ‘probability clouds’ around atomic nuclei (and that one can calculate with the famous Schrödinger wave equation), known as ‘orbitals,’ and ultimately serve as the model by which physics represents atoms, molecules, and all matter. Furthermore, in quantum field theories, all the fundamental constituents of matter and all forces are represented by oscillating quantum fields. At the core of it all is always some form of vibration.⁵

However, the Vedic rishis would point out that physical waves are only a shadow or a mask representing the original vibration coming from other planes of existence. For them, the physical sound was only a distorted image of the mystical sound. One cannot comprehend, let alone recreate, the latter starting from the former but, rather, must first meet the sacred sound with an inward turn of the mind, sustained by a spiritual and meditative practice, such as yoga. Ultimately, all the thoughts and ideas and their very essence possess a ‘semantic charge’ we call ‘meaning,’ and have their origin and nature in something beyond that which a strictly naturalist philosophy or science can account for.

This is the theory of the cosmic original and originative transcendent sound as the source of all signs, words, meanings, speech, and languages, in the Vedic tradition. However, the Vedic texts remained vague and didn't elaborate much on this aspect. They are quite cryptic, with their interpretation being highly subjective. It was Abhinavagupta and his followers who developed a detailed theory, building upon the classifications made by the fifth-century linguist and philosopher Bhartṛhari. Bhartṛhari had labeled the four levels⁶ of consciousness and speech as ‘parā vāc,’ ‘paśyantī vāc,’ ‘madhyamā vāc,’ and ‘vaikharī vāc.’

2. The Four Levels of Speech of Abhinavagupta

Abhinavagupta Acharya (950-1020 CE) was an Indian mystic and prolific philosopher, artist, and musician who lived in the 10th -11th centuries. He is regarded as one of the most significant figures in the history of Kashmir Shaivism. His teachings about the path to self-realization have made him a revered figure in the history of Indian thought and spirituality. He made significant contributions to the understanding and practice of Tantra. His works, such as *Tantrāloka* and *Tantrasāra*, are considered foundational texts in the Tantric tradition.

One of Abhinavagupta’s most significant philosophical works concerns the ‘four levels of speech.’ His metaphysics of language can be found throughout his texts but are especially emphasized in the *Parātriśikā-Vivaraṇa* (Abhinavagupta, 2011).

In line with the Vedic and Tantric tradition, Abhinavagupta posited the foundation of all creation not in matter but in spirit. As described above, the origin of the word is found in the transcendent śabda-Brahman (‘śabda’: sound, vibration, word), which is the Sound and Word residing in the Absolute (Williams, B. 2022). The foundation of Abhinavagupta’s theory is based on the four levels of consciousness, each of which corresponds to a level of speech, reflecting the intrinsic and indissoluble relation between consciousness and speech. Vāc, the word-sound, is a form of expression of consciousness. This transcendent Sound descends from the Absolute, then progressively moves through the four levels described by the Vedas until it reaches the physical realm, where it finally finds its verbal and vocal expression in the form of a language.

⁵ It might be worth recalling how waves have the power to create and dissolve regular patterns in resonant structures through standing waves—a well-known fact in physics dating back to the 19th century. A nice didactical example showing how one can be creative with sound waves that form structures, change them, and eventually dissolve them is illustrated with sand grain patterns forming on vibrating Chladni plates, or with so-called ‘Faraday wave patterns’ in water. Vibrating forces give rise to forms with order, structure, and symmetry.

⁶ To be precise, in his main text, the *Vakyapadiya*, Bhartṛhari speaks of only three ‘levels’—that is, paśyantī, madhyamā, and vaikharī—but mentions śabda-Brahman, which is parā vāc, as the Absolute containing it all.

He explained the emergence of speech, which is the transformation from the original undifferentiated vibration, idea, meaning, and word into differentiated spoken language, using the four levels of language as follows.

Parā Vāc—The level of pure Consciousness

In Abhinavagupta's scriptural sources the supreme level of parā vāc (the beyond-sound) represents the transcendent and unmanifest consciousness of the Absolute, known as śabda-Brahman, where the essential nature of the sound principle (śabda-tattva) reside. This realm exists as an intangible and unmanifest plane without space and time of the word principle (avyakta). It encompasses both the pure light of changeless Consciousness (prakāśa) and the pure vibratory power of Consciousness (vimarśa). In essence, consciousness, light, and the word are unified (pratyavamarśa). At this level, there is no principle of separation. The still unexpressed word, embodies the pure consciousness of Cit-Tapas or Cit-Shakti—the Consciousness-Energy carrying the luminous vibration (sphurattā) of complete knowledge.

Parā vāc represents the supreme level of the Word without subject-object distinction. Here, the Word is transcendental and beyond creation, archetypal and undifferentiated, containing the entirety of significance, power, and essence in its potential state. It is discernible only through introspective awareness that has not yet been formulated into mental representation.

There exists no distinction between the sound-word (śabda) and its true meaning (artha). Sound and meaning are coalesced; sound embodies meaning, and meaning is sound. Meaning is the inner essence of an expression existing within the consciousness of a spoken word (antar abhilāpa.) There exists a vibration of knowledge and power in an undifferentiated state before the descent from one plane to another. Subject, object, name, form, image, sound, and meaning are inseparable. Perfect unity exists between the object of sense and sense itself.

At this level, words remain unexpressed verbally and mentally, existing only in a state of potency, devoid of physical sound, phonemes, letters, or written words. In line with Wittgenstein's intuition, here also meaning is perceived as independent from language.

Paśyantī Vāc—The level of the will to know and thought visualization

In Abhinavagupta's framework, while at the parā vāc level, consciousness, will, knowledge, and action exist as one and the same, at the paśyantī level, the distinctive feature is the active power of will (icchā śakti), encompassing the potential for cognition and actualization. The luminous and vibratory aspects of consciousness, prakāśa and vimarśa, begin to diverge, giving rise to audible sound (nāda). An intention to speak takes shape as a flash of intuition from above. The initial moment of desiring to understand and a will to remember emerges. Each word still holds numerous possible meanings but inclines toward self-manifestation in name and form (nāma and rūpa).

Paśyantī also means 'she who sees,' denoting the visual image of the word. The visualization of ideas and thoughts commences with a beginning of discernment. Form-images and form-sounds emerge, devoid of mental conceptualization (nir-vikalpa).

However, thought remains latent and unspoken, and there is still no distinction between subject and object—that is, between the subjective 'I-ness' (ahantā) and the objective 'thisness' (idantā)—and the signifier (vācaka) and the signified (vācya).⁷ Separation has not yet occurred, and the sequence of sounds-words is a singular unit arising in the speaker's mind (sphoṭa) like a flash of intuitive insight (pratibhā) encompassing the intended meaning. Śabda and artha, the word and the word's meaning, continue to constitute a single vibrational semantic entity. There

⁷ The distinction reminiscent of Saussure's signified and the signifier might not be a coincidence. Saussure was a professor of Sanskrit.

is still no analysis, rationalization, or logical inference. This represents the stage of pre-vocal thought or the ‘voice of silence.’⁸

Madhyamā Vāc—The mediating level

Madhyamā means ‘mediating’ or ‘middle.’ This level serves as a mediator between the undifferentiated and differentiated realms of cognition, namely, between paśyantī vāc with vaikharī vāc. Icchā śakti becomes active through the power of cognition (jñāna śakti) at the level of madhyamā vāc. At this stage, the separative principle fully manifests. The first perceptible vibration emerges (referred to as ‘spandana,’ the creative ‘pulsation of consciousness,’ though still physically inaudible). Madhyamā represents the level of the subtle body (sūkṣma-śarīra), composed of the mind (manomaya-kośa), intellect (buddhi), and vital sheet (prāṇamaya-kośa). Here, the first distinctions between the infinite and finite, the transcendental and immanent, subject and object, and word and meaning arise.

Conceptualizations in the form of different thoughts (vikalpa) emerge, and words arise from within. This is the level at which the signifier and the signified become distinct, and words take on a temporal sequence. Language begins taking shape in the form of phonemes, words, and sentences, gaining the ‘thisness’ of the objective apprehensive cognition.⁹

While at the parā vāc and paśyantī vāc levels, the creative element with its meaning and expressive power, along with the knowledge it contains (śabda and artha), remain unspoken, involved, and transcendent, at the madhyamā vāc level, they acquire names and forms as explicitly audible mental vibrations, popularly referred to as ‘internal speech.’ The mind ‘hears’ these vibrations as articulate, tangible, and manifest sounds (vyakta), though they are still beyond the reach of the physical organs of sound: the ears. Linguistic signs with their syntactic structures, their distinct intellectual language categories, and the division between form-images and form-sounds come fully into existence.

Although there is still a unity in meaning, there are differences in the form of objects and the structures of language. Each word acquires its unique significance.

Vaikharī Vāc—The level of bodily organs

Finally, the vibration materializes the verbal expression of the thought in the form of physical sounds on the material plane—namely, in the physical gross body (sthūla-śarīra or annamaya-kośa) with its speech organs (larynx, tongue, lungs, etc.). This represents the level of consciousness's power of action (kriyā śakti). The original Word is manifested not only in terms of speech production but also in terms of the objectification of reality. At this stage, speech, spoken language, and written words refer to objects. It is the level of conventional signs that hint and gesture toward something (saṅketa). Vaikharī is the manifestation of speech in time and space, encompassing all the distinct features of language: spoken phonemes, words, and sentences.

These were the four levels of language according to Abhinavagupta.

Thus, in this framework, spoken words and sentences capture only a very pale essence of their original true meaning and power of expression. In Abhinavagupta’s linguistics, vocal speech obstructs the original supra-rational intuitive knowledge and power, which formal spoken or written signs can no longer fully convey. In this view, the inner perception of meaning

⁸ While Abhinavagupta’s paśyantī vāc level is described as something beyond what ordinary human analytical reasoning can grasp, it is suggestive of the proverbial ‘aha moments.’ The sudden realization of a deeper truth emerges as a flash of intuitive light and insight in silent, wordless conscious awareness—an insight that has not yet been articulated in spoken words. One might struggle to express it because it represents an inner knowledge that resists confinement within rigid conceptual forms.

⁹ Something that could be compared with the haecceity (‘thisness’) concept from medieval scholastic philosophy, first coined by Duns Scotus, which denotes an irreducible property of an object that makes a thing unique. Another idea experiencing a revival is ‘philosophical essentialism’—the hypothesis that humans perceive certain categories as having an underlying essence, having deep, unobservable, intrinsic properties that unify the members of a category (Neufeld, 2022).

does not emerge from mere symbols, letters, words, or text but, rather, from the perception of a transcendent sound. External symbols, signals, and words point to an internal domain. Only within this inner domain is their true original meaning revealed, and it is where they acquire a greater creative and expressive power than is usually recognized. Though parā vāc is always latent on all levels and projects itself in the form of different planes of subtleness, it is active only as potentiality and not as actuality. Parā vāc *“is indeed present on all the levels of paśyantī and others, for without her, darkness and unconsciousness, would prevail”* (Abhinavagupta, 2011, p. 5). If it were to withdraw its luminous Word, the entire cosmos would plunge into darkness.

3. The Origin of Speech According to Sri Aurobindo

The Indian mystic and poet Sri Aurobindo followed in Abhinavagupta's footsteps.

Sri Aurobindo's vision, teaching, and spiritual cosmology, based on his ‘integral yoga,’ are vast and complex. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to elucidate it in detail.¹⁰ Here, I will focus on the relevant aspects related to the origin of speech. Sri Aurobindo focused primarily on language in the context of the Indian subcontinent, but his theory can be considered a general theory of all human languages.

Here also, sound comes first as an archetypal expression of a deeper meaning that outward symbols can't express. We can understand the nature of language by silencing the mind and transcending it: *“It is in stillness that we can feel the unspoken word”* (Sri Aurobindo, 1950, p. 14). Sri Aurobindo explores this in his work on the “Kena and other Upanishads.” The title of the fifth chapter, “The Supreme Word,” speaks for itself.

“... human speech at its highest merely attempts to recover by revelation and inspiration an absolute expression of Truth which already exists in the Infinite above our mental comprehension. Equally, then, must that Word be above our power of mental construction. All creation is expression by the Word; but the form which is expressed is only a symbol or representation of the thing which is.” (Sri Aurobindo, 1952, Ch. V, p. 29)

For Sri Aurobindo, the cultural development of language is a secondary factor. The primary force determining the birth of language and its path through history is the psychological factor. He provides hints about his theory in “The Secret of the Veda” in the chapter on “The Philological Method of the Veda” (Sri Aurobindo, 1914-20). According to this theory, human language initially developed from emotions, sensations, feelings, and infra-rational thoughts related to life occurrences. Something, the modern evolutionary linguist would compare to forms of communication in animal cognition or the language acquisition in infants, where their pre-linguistic vocalizations and gestures primarily reflect emotional and physical states and where iconic signals prevail over symbols. Words were originally expressions of physical and emotional needs, serving primarily life-preserving functions, without having developed into a more coherent structure made of fixed symbols with precise intellectual significances that express ideas about objects. In this early stage of language, the word was a more dynamic force, driven by sensations and emotions with its ‘sense-value’ and ‘sound-sense,’ rather than being primarily an intellectual idea.

“In their beginnings language-sounds were not used to express what we should call ideas; they were rather the vocal equivalents of certain general sensations and emotion-values. It was the nerves and not the intellect which created speech.” (Sri Aurobindo, 1914-20, p. 51)

¹⁰ For a more comprehensive review, see (Masi, 2023a), and references therein.

Only in later evolutionary stages does the idea become central, with the sound reduced to a symbol standing for the idea. Initially, each word could have several meanings,¹¹ and language expressed general notions such as light, motion, touch, substance, extension, force, speed, etc. For example, for the ancient Vedic population, 'vr̥ka' had a general meaning of 'tearing' or 'tearer,' and, therefore, among many other possible uses, it indicated a wolf. It was not restricted to nouns; it could be used as an adjective, verb, or adverb, all conveying the idea of tearing something apart within different contexts.

This kind of use was clearly visible in the Vedic hymns. Words did not indicate objects but were laden with psychological significance (or, should we call it 'energy' and 'sound'?) that could be applied in entirely different contexts without creating conceptual ambiguities. Another example: 'Agni' had a general meaning of strong, bright, force, or brilliance. These qualities could indicate a normal fire, a flow of heat or light, or just something giving wealth, while for the worshiper, it could signify the god of fire, a vital principle, or an illumined energy that built up the world, etc. Each word was a living thing with a creative and formative power where the sound determined sense. It had a holistic character, with many different meanings, and each object could be expressed by a large number of words. In this sense, words were not yet conventional symbols for an idea but, rather, flexible and living entities.

From his analysis of the underlying system of the structure of the Sanskrit language, Sri Aurobindo submits that only later did words and language shift from the general to the particular, from the vague to the precise, and from the physical to the mental. This shift occurred when the mind, the intellect, and analytical reason (or Abhinavagupta's *madhyamā vāc* level), with their precision and conceptual sharpness, intervened. The single words with multiple meanings—something that can still be found in the Sanskrit language—progressively acquired less flexibility and finally contracted to their present outer and concrete significance. The formal distinction between the action, the agent, and the object arose, differentiating between subjects, objects, nouns, and verbs.

This might seem like a great achievement of the mind. The conceptual clarity and precision of science, mathematics, and analytic philosophy, with their precise nomenclature and exact definitions and axioms, as well as the reduction to the particular vs. the general, is the extreme embodiment of this psychological and cultural process. However, for Sri Aurobindo, this hardening into the rigid forms of the intellect has its downside: The modern word lost its power and its creative and formative vibration, as well as its holistic character that the living words of the Vedic Rishis possessed.

Sri Aurobindo's main theory of the origin and nature of 'Aryan speech,' now referred to as Indo-European languages, is summarized in a booklet he wrote between 1910 and 1915, titled "The Origins of Aryan Speech" (Sri Aurobindo, 1912-14). His primary focus was on the study of Sanskrit because it preserves the original type and structure of an ancient language, with its system of primitive words and roots (i.e., etymons). It has a transparent derivative system of grammar that no other language can provide. Sri Aurobindo's profound mastery of English, along with his knowledge of Latin and Greek, allowed him to create a consistent theoretical framework applying to all Indo-European languages.

He warned against the fundamental mistake of jumping to conclusions by analyzing the identity or similarity of words between languages and, thereby, assuming this must indicate a common origin. A community of languages with common terms and vocabulary does not necessarily imply a common civilization. It could equally signify contact and cohabitation with each other in the past, despite their separate linguistic origins. Instead, Sri Aurobindo proposes starting from 'root-identities' and 'root-meanings,' deriving them from their 'sound-identities' and 'sound-meanings.' As previously pointed out, in Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary linguistics,

¹¹ This multiplicity of meanings should not be confused with the separative semantics of modern words, such as 'fleet,' meaning a number of ships, or swiftness indicating speed but not suggesting the swiftness of ships.

language did not develop from a fixed set of rules and object-oriented words, as the modern intellect would prefer, but was born out of a system of utterances centered on sensations, qualities, and seed sounds that developed in phonological rules. Most importantly, these utterances created ‘mind-impressions’ associated with meaning. His basic thesis is that, while transcendental sounds exist as living, creative forces that determine our ideas, human words composed of vowels and consonants, are a human attempt to reflect their original ‘root-sounds’ or ‘seed-sounds.’ These seed-sounds are the basic unit of language (not to be confused with phonemes, which are derived components) and carry the ‘root-meaning,’ an inner meaning as an articulation of a state of consciousness. The divisive and fragmenting mind can capture them only vaguely: *“He [the hearer] strives to read it with the labouring mind, but finds bright hints, not the embodied truth”* (Sri Aurobindo 1950, p. 375).

For example, the first four simple vowels—a, i, u, r—of Sanskrit indicate a state of being and existence (‘a’: just being and existing; ‘i’: a narrowing intensity; ‘u’: a widening and extended state of existence; ‘r’: a vibrant state of existence).¹²

Words are, therefore, living growths of sound, with certain seed-sounds as their basis. Out of these seed-sounds developed a small number of primitive root words, which, over generations, developed into more complex words while still maintaining a common lineage of seed-sounds. To illustrate this, take again the word ‘vr̥ka,’ which means wolf. It is already a formed word. To trace its origin, we must find the seed-sound and its associated mind-impression: ‘vr̥j’ is the seed-sound conveying the mind-impression of tearing apart, ripping, or splitting.

Another example could be the original meaning of the word ‘yoga’ that is derived from the root ‘yuj,’ meaning ‘to yoke,’ ‘to unite,’ ‘to use,’ among many other possible significances. However, in order to understand its universal significance one needs to find the parent-root from which it was derived, namely ‘yu,’ of which ‘yu-j’ is an extension. The root ‘yu’ has two major meanings: ‘to unite’ and ‘to divide,’ depending on the verbal class. One could go even deeper and note that the simplest component of the root ‘yu’ consists of two simple vowels, ‘i’ and ‘u’—the simplest components in the Sanskrit language. The first root has the significance of ‘one pointedness’ in its motion or concentration, the latter has the opposite significance of ‘widening’. Thus, the most elemental sound-roots with ‘i’ and ‘u’ have the significance of both singularity and duality, union and separation, and that will be maintained in all other roots with extra consonants and their extensions, words, and derivations containing these elemental sound-roots, modify the meaning of the root and add some additional, contextual significance to the root (Yatsenko, 2023).

Sri Aurobindo also provides an example from Latin, where words like ‘doleo’ (I grieve), ‘dolenter’ (painfully), and ‘dolor’ (grief or pain) are interconnected. Similarly, ‘dolus’ (fraud), ‘dolusus’ (deceitful), and ‘dolose’ (deceitfully) are interconnected, as are ‘dolo’ (I hew, cut, or break) and ‘dolabra’ (an axe). However, there is no proof that these three families of words are interconnected. What connects them is not the words themselves but, rather, their common seed-sound: ‘dol.’ ‘Dol’ is associated with grieving, deceit, and splitting—it forms the basis of a family of words. According to Sri Aurobindo, the single root sound ‘dol’ created an original, common mind-impression, conveying a specific psychological state or quality and significance.

In line with the Vedic tradition, Sri Aurobindo categorized the sound’s characters or qualities into the three guṇas of tamas (inertia, darkness), rajas (restlessness, passion), and sattva (equanimity, harmony). The guṇa of sound creates a particular impression on the mind, and we associate that sound with it. This forms the basis of what we call the ‘meaning of a word.’ The

¹² Something reminiscent of how Hermes Trismegistus reached spiritual enlightenment by singing hymns uttering the seven Greek vowels considered having supernatural powers. With every vowel the consciousness rises up until attaining gnosis. (Trismegistus, Book XIII.) Yet, he warned from translating his corpus in Greek. *“For the very quality of the sound and the pronunciation of the Egyptian language carries in itself the power of what is being spoken...”* It uses *“sounds full of power.”* (Trismegistus, Book XVI)

mind perceives the original mental impression, created by the vibrations of the seed-sound, as a semantic unit. Looking at the common seed-sound and its guṇa (like ‘dol’ imbued with the guṇa of rajas) leads us to a unified vision of the origin of speech.

Sri Aurobindo provided many more examples of this nature, especially in the Sanskrit language, and concluded that not only must one root-sound originally have had one root-meaning but also that all kindred root-sounds (such as the kinship of ‘dol’ to ‘dal,’ derived from the simple root-sound ‘da’) must be of one word family. In modern Sanskrit, these words may convey very different meanings, but they still have a common or kindred meaning carried by the primitive or secondary and tertiary root-sound tracing back to their root-meanings because of their common guṇa, which retains their seed significance.

Thus, according to Sri Aurobindo, the origin of language is found not only in a common origin of physical sound forms (letters, phonemes, words) but also in the way these vibrations evoke psychological qualities through their mind-impressions, producing particular ideas related to sensations, motion, action, feelings, contact, sound, form, and more.

Based on this vision, Sri Aurobindo hinted at the existence of an ‘original language’ spoken in an ‘age of truth,’ rooted in the true and perfect relationship between vāc and artha. This proto language, preserved fundamental sounds that held a force inherent in the nature of things, and it had certain primary meanings independent of human choice. These meanings initially arose from a set of primary roots, from which secondary roots were developed. All words were formed from these roots through the addition of vowel and consonant terminations, eventually leading to the creation of more complex words. However, this original language gradually became ‘corrupted’ in both sense and sound, transforming into the later Sanskrit, which he considered the known language closest to this lost original language. Every other language, no matter how remote, represents a detachment from these universal and eternal principles, resulting in a loss of its original purity (Sri Aurobindo, 2013, p. 475). Nevertheless, *‘every speech carries a light of inner truth’* (Sri Aurobindo, 1950, p. 430).

Poetry, or at least a certain kind of poetry that attempts to convey intuitional concepts or feelings beyond the reach of words and rational analysis, serves as a (more unconscious than conscious) human desire to evoke this original mode of communication. These words possess a sound expression that carries within them a suggestive force, life, power, and ‘soul-suggestion,’ which evoke mind-impressions and extend our vision toward higher and broader ideas. At the highest level of cognition, ‘hearing’ becomes a comprehensive and undifferentiated understanding of all relations in one meaningful unity. It is a flash of immediate intuitive recognition requiring no further explanation.¹³

As a concluding remark to this brief overview of Sri Aurobindo’s perspective on the nature and origin of speech, it is necessary to place it within the evolutionary spiritual emergentism underpinning his entire vision.

Similar to the metaphysical views of the Vedic Rishis and Abhinavagupta, Sri Aurobindo’s cosmology goes beyond simple individual body-mind dualism or matter-soul distinction. He delineates various levels of manifestation, which he labels the ‘planes of consciousness and parts of being.’ Without delving into the details, let us (admittedly, somewhat incompletely) summarize it in four levels of existence, in line with Abhinavagupta’s four levels: the physical plane, the life plane or ‘vital’ plane, the mental plane, and the supra-conscious plane of the Supermind.¹⁴ Each plane of universal manifestation has its personal aspect as well.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo claimed that his epic poem ‘Savitri’ was inspired from a higher cognitive level, he called the ‘overmind.’

¹⁴ Once more, the categorization into these ‘levels’ or ‘planes’ is conventional in the sense that it establishes arbitrary demarcation lines along a continuum, much like the distinction between day and night or as in Bhartṛhari’s and Abhinavagupta’s three versus four-level arrangements. These categorizations serve to aid in our conceptualization and provide a framework for organizing our understanding. The crucial point is that they all indicate varying degrees of ‘subtleness’ in both substance and consciousness.

The universal physical plane, which we call the ‘physical universe,’ finds its personal expression in our physical bodies formed from cosmic matter. Similarly, the individual life embodiment in a living organism represents the local expression of universal cosmic life. Our individual mind is derived from the universal or cosmic mind. In this view, the entire scientific evolutionary conception is turned upside down: Life doesn't originate from matter; instead, matter is seen as a veiled form of life.¹⁵ The mind didn't emerge from life; rather, life is a veiled form of mind. Furthermore, the mind is not the ultimate creation in Earth's evolution; it, too, is a veiled form of higher levels or planes of consciousness.

This is also why Sri Aurobindo spoke of an ‘involution’ preceding evolution.

“Matter could not have become animate if the principle of life had not been there constituting Matter and emerging as a phenomenon of life-in-matter; life-in-matter could not have begun to feel, perceive, think, reason, if the principle of mind had not been there behind life and substance, constituting it as its field of operation and emergent in the phenomenon of a thinking life and body: so too spirituality emerging in mind is the sign of a power which itself has founded and constituted life, mind and body and is now emerging as a spiritual being in a living and thinking body.” (Sri Aurobindo, 1919a, p. 885)

A fitting metaphor for the descent of this spiritual power into matter can be that suggested by William James, of white light that a prism refracts into its constituent colors (James, 1898). The prism itself doesn't create the colored light rays; rather, it transmits and separates them into their distinct colors. Similarly, the transcendent sound, containing the originative supramental vibration of a Truth-Consciousness filled with the light of knowledge and supreme vision and discernment, is not generated by our brain. Instead, the brain serves as a conduit, a transceiver instrument that ‘refracts’ this transcendent sound into thought-vibrations within the mind¹⁶ and life-vibrations within our ‘life-body’ (which we commonly refer to as ‘emotions’). On the physical level, our vocal organs produce ‘matter-vibrations’ in the form of sound waves that capture only a faint reflection of the light and knowledge embedded in the original sound. For both Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo, the origin of the word has its seat in a higher plane, which filters the Absolute down to the most physical universal plane, the vaikharī vāc level. This implies that speech does not originate only in the brain.

What this also implies, most importantly for the present context, is that Sri Aurobindo reverses the usual assumption of modern science (and of every reasonably minded person except, perhaps, Süßmilch), which is that life came first, and speech followed. Instead, he posits what might seem absurd from a Darwinian perspective: Speech and language came first, and life followed. This leads to his conception of the universe as a manifestation of a ‘Real Idea,’ which we will describe in the next section.

Sri Aurobindo's theory of the origin of speech is far more detailed than what I've described here. Readers interested in a more in-depth exploration can turn to his original writings. My aim was to provide an intuitive understanding of the concept. Furthermore, Sri Aurobindo's theory of the origin of language is just a small part of his spiritual vision resulting from his spiritual discipline, the ‘integral yoga.’ He expounds on his vision in other works like “The Life Divine” (Sri Aurobindo, 1919a), the “Synthesis of Yoga” (Sri Aurobindo, 1919b), and his epic poem “Savitri” (Sri Aurobindo, 1950). Within this broader context, one can gain a deeper

¹⁵ The concept of a ‘vital plane,’ which implies ‘vital energies,’ remains anathema in modern biology. However, since the 20th century, any vitalist theory has been dismissed and ignored a priori rather than disproven. Scientific facts have not eliminated vitalism or prevented us from considering cognition and consciousness as prior to matter. For a more in-depth analysis of this aspect, refer to (Masi, 2022).

¹⁶ This might extend beyond mere metaphor. Neuroscientific evidence can be aligned with the idea that the brain is not merely an aggregation of matter that ‘produces’ mind and consciousness but, instead, functions as an instrumental organ that ‘transduces’ or ‘refracts like a prism’ mind and consciousness. For a comprehensive analysis, refer to (Masi, 2023b).

appreciation of his vision. Also of interest to linguists is his vision of “The Future of Poetry” (Sri Aurobindo, 1917).

4. The World as Real-Idea According to Sri Aurobindo

The previous sections, besides describing the linguistic theories of Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo, also served as the basis for a larger philosophical context and a more general theory of the sign, meaning, and idea. The last part of the previous section functioned as an introduction to a theoretical framework conceiving of the human words and languages as a particular case of a general ‘signaling’ in Nature, and a cosmic context that is an ‘Idea’ in itself.

In contrast to Spinoza’s Nature or Schopenhauer’s World as Will, which are not self-conscious entities and operate out of necessity, instinct, and blind will, for Sri Aurobindo the Supermind represents the highest form of cognition, wisdom, and knowledge of a universal consciousness. It functions supra-consciously, utilizing its immanent powers, forces, and will, of which śabda, the word, speech-sound, the vibration, is only one possible aspect and form of expression. This universal Gnosis shapes the universe with a ‘Consciousness-Force’ and ‘Consciousness-Will’ through processes, structures, patterns, and, ultimately, living forms according to a divine Intelligence.

In Sri Aurobindo’s words:

“The fundamental nature of this Supermind is that all its knowledge is originally a knowledge by identity and oneness and even when it makes numberless apparent divisions and discriminating modifications in itself, still all the knowledge that operates in its workings, even in these divisions, is founded upon and sustained and lit and guided by this perfect knowledge by identity and oneness. The Spirit is one everywhere and it knows all things as itself and in itself, so sees them always and therefore knows them intimately, completely, in their reality as well as their appearance, in their truth, their law, the entire spirit and sense and figure of their nature and their workings.” (Sri Aurobindo (1919b), p. 786)

This Intelligence operates through a creative power reflecting an original Idea, or what Sri Aurobindo terms the ‘Real-Idea’ or ‘Seed-Idea.’ This transcendent and Real-Idea stands beyond matter, space, and time but translates itself into the manifestation of space and time as an expressive power of conscious force. It is an Idea of oneness that initiates the operation of a dual and divided representation of itself, thereby giving rise to the world of dualities and divisions. It embodies the primal, perfect, divine, and undifferentiated Knowledge. This Knowledge casts itself into mutable names and forms, which the mind conceives of as more or less accurate symbolic representations of this Seed-Idea. At the level of human apprehension and understanding, intuition captures this as archetypes, symbols, and signs along with their meaning and significance in relation to things and phenomena.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Real-Idea is a gnostic power in which Spirit and Knowledge are two aspects of the same Reality. It represents a self-creative Knowledge and ‘Truth-Consciousness’ that organizes, through design, quantity, and number, a foundation for the manifestation of the quality and property inherent in its own Real-Idea. These ideas of forms are what we perceive as a living and material world within the spatio-temporal extension. Life, minds, and bodies are partial expressions of this original transcendent Idea, whose presence our ordinary state of consciousness only dimly perceives. Philosophers often interpret this presence as archetypes, Platonic ideals, or universals. It constitutes what we perceive as a vestige of significance, meaning, design, and purpose in Nature. Everything we indirectly perceive in the world, from non-living matter like rocks, mountains, and rivers to living entities such as plants, animals, and ourselves, is a ‘symbol,’ a ‘sign,’ or a ‘significant form’ of this ultimate Real-Idea, concealed though it may be, within their essence.

In Sri Aurobindo’s evolutionary spiritual emergentism, the Real-Idea shapes things through the power of Knowledge and Will, drawing from infinite potentialities. It ‘unfolds’ what is

internally carried within the form, often referred to as a ‘seed,’ and transcribes it into existence. This development or emergence represents self-development and outgrowth over a gradual, sometimes abrupt, aeonic process of something already inherently contained. The Real-Idea remains in perpetual existence, concealed knowledge, and an indwelling spirit, which is ‘involved’ within the mineral, plant, or animal. These entities respond to the Idea and its will-force by forming groupings and associations of elementary constituents, resulting in the creation of significant forms, types, and species. However, they themselves are external signs and the result of a conscious force playing with its own Idea, generating all types through diverse combinations.

Thus, in Sri Aurobindo’s cosmology, everything comprising the manifestation is a pale reflection of this Idea. It is inherent in all cosmic existence, underpinning the actions of all creative forces and the evolutionary process. The indwelling presence in all forms serves as an expression of the Real-Idea. The undifferentiated yet multi-faceted Real-Idea can fragment into its various facets, each becoming independent Idea-Forces. In living beings, we refer to these as ‘characters’ and ‘personalities.’ Our diverse and multi-dimensional psychology mirrors this concept. We are also a ‘symbol’ of the Idea, capable of expressing itself in an infinite number of ‘ideas,’ each with its own variety of individuated personalities. When we intuitively sense that the world, despite its mechanistic appearance, harbors meaning, purpose, and the development of a project (an Idea), it’s because our limited minds can still grasp and vaguely perceive this transcendent Real-Idea.

“In all material things reside a mute and involved Real-Idea, a substantial and self-effective intuition, an eyeless exact perception, an automatic intelligence working out its unexpressed and unthought conceptions, a blindly seeing sureness of sight, a dumb infallible sureness of suppressed feeling coated in insensibility, which effectuate all that has to be effected.” (Sri Aurobindo, 1919a, p. 570)

Hence, that automatic, blind, and seemingly insentient mechanism in Nature is not the original starting point; rather, it represents the superficial expression and appearance of a divine Knowledge that gives rise to forms and powers of itself. The interplay of all the constituents of the universe should not be regarded merely as a play of unconscious phenomena. It is, in fact, a manifestation of Knowledge, in which what we refer to as the ‘laws of Nature’ are the expression of a Real-Idea guiding every moment toward its destined state. If everything appears as the outcome of intelligent workings, this perception is not a product of our illusions but arises from the presence of a veiled intelligence operating beneath our ignorance. The Real-Idea of the Supermind isn’t an intellectual intelligence but, rather, a Supramental Force and Will operating subconsciously in plants, animals, and the half-conscious human being. It is a transcendent and immanent Will and Force unfolding in time and space.

Sri Aurobindo’s conception of evolution¹⁷, therefore, can be viewed as a two-way process. It is preceded by the involution of the Spirit into form, described as a *“plunge of Light into its own shadow”* (Sri Aurobindo, 1919a, p. 173). A perspective on evolution that entails that forms, qualities, and quantities are shaped by the divine Real-Idea from within. All forms and attributes in the natural world are preconceived within eternal archetypes on other planes of existence. Every manifestation in Nature is the expression of a preexisting Idea, which our ordinary human mentality comprehends in terms of names and forms, and, if it can see far enough, in signs and language. Meaning, significance, and semantics inherent in the human mind and language, ultimately extending beyond the human realm. The universe is a Sign and a Word, its workings a language expressing a Real-Idea.

¹⁷ A spiritual view of evolution that is partly reflected in the cosmology of Teilhard de Chardin and Rudolf Steiner as well.

III. Discussion and Integral Synthesis

In summary, our exploration started from the Rig Veda that described the creation of the universe through an original cosmic vibration. According to the Vedic tradition, words and sounds are not just means of expressing intellectual ideas but reflections of original vibrations beyond the material and mental domains. Human speech, in its articulated form, represents the final stage of differentiation from the original ‘sound-word,’ and its true origin lies in higher cognitive states achieved through spiritual practice. Then, the development of Abhinavagupta’s four levels of language has been traced. At the highest level, *parā vāc*, sound and meaning are unified and exist as an undifferentiated vibrational unity. As language descends through the levels of *paśyantī*, *madhyamā*, and *vaikharī vāc*, the original vibration becomes progressively more distinct and explicit, with an increasing separation between words and meanings.

In line with this perspective, Sri Aurobindo’s theory starts from a phonological perspective and proposes that words share a common seed-sound, creating mind-impressions that convey specific psychological states or qualities. He views the development of language as a psychological process that began with emotional and sensational needs and evolved into a more precise and intellectual structure. Speech is conceived as something naturally inherent in a universal consciousness surfacing within human language in word-sounds that originally reflected a set of deeper and more creative cosmic seed-sounds going beyond the mind. Sri Aurobindo’s theory extends from the origins of human speech to encompass the entire cosmos, where everything is considered a form of the divine Word. In this expanded context with Platonic nuances, he offers an integral perspective. He proposes a more complex cosmology, which includes a transcendent Absolute and a Supermind, functioning as a creative agency linking the unmanifest and manifest. The universe is viewed as an expression of the Supermind’s conscious force, with the Real-Idea or Seed-Idea guiding the development of all forms and life. All things and forms in the phenomenal world serve as a shadow of the Word. Sri Aurobindo’s evolutionary linguistic theory must be viewed within the broader context of his system of integral yoga, which seeks to reconcile evolution with a spiritual emergentism, suggesting a post-materialistic synthesis as a solution to the question of life’s emergence from non-conscious matter.

Thus, considering Abhinavagupta’s and Sri Aurobindo’s vision jointly, and examining the diverse philosophical traditions, both Western and Eastern, a common trait emerges: Reality is ultimately a sign, an Idea, a Word, or a sound. Language represents just one subset of possible creative expressions in the form of sound waves signifying an idea standing beyond it. All cosmic dynamics are an Idea expressed in forms and names. Each object, phenomenon, and play of forces symbolizes an idea on the mental plane, reminiscent of Plato’s archetypal realm of perfect and unchanging Forms and Ideas. Yet, for Sri Aurobindo and Abhinavagupta, there exists a whole supra-sensible reality transcending the mind with its dynamic temporal and spatial notions.

Of course, this vision contrasts naturalist linguistic theories. It is a phenomenological first-person approach based on a methodology that studies language by delving within us, rather than adopting an exclusive third-person perspective. While the modern philosophy of language focuses on a rationalistic and analytic approach, this perspective emphasizes intuitive, spiritual, and first-person accounts—or, to formulate it using Abhinavagupta’s terminology, Western philosophy has focused predominantly on the *madhyamā vāc* and *vaikharī vāc* levels, largely disregarding the *paśyantī vāc* and *parā vāc* levels due to inadmissibility within a naturalistic context. This Eastern perspective considers language not merely as an inter-subjective vehicle of knowledge but as a creative power. The spoken word is an imitation of a higher truth that the speaker aims to mirror as accurately as possible. Thus, other predominantly human activities, such as poetry, music, and dance, are verbal, acoustic, or bodily expressions of the mind that subliminally perceive the rhythm and harmony of a transcendent sound.

At this juncture, the question arises as to whether this integral perspective should be regarded merely as a cross-cultural historical comparative analysis without further implications for contemporary philosophy, linguistics, and science, or whether it contains some valuable suggestions that we might adopt as a working hypothesis, and then see where this leads us. In many respects, it doesn't contradict modern findings; rather it could complement them.

For instance, Saussure's notion of the relationship between the signifier and the signified mirrors what emerges in Abhinavagupta's *madhyamā vāc*, the mediating level. Here, the relation-less meaning characteristic of the *paśyantī vāc* level fractures into relationships of signs and words with other signs and words. The differentiation of the infinite into the finite appears between subject and object. The 'langue'—the structure of language with its abstractions and principles—results from the analytical but separative power of the *buddhi*, the intellect specific to this level. The 'parole' arises at the *vaikhārī vāc* level and reflects the subliminally perceived seed sound that evokes the mind-impression intended to be conveyed.

Saussure sought universality in the structure of language transcending all languages but was puzzled by the arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo, this apparent arbitrariness is not real; it exists only at the *madhyamā vāc* level or the plane of the mind, originating from the realm of *parā vāc* and *paśyantī vāc* or Supermind, where the originative seed-sound was singular—that is, the sound-word (*śabda*) and its meaning (*artha*) being one and the same—yet encompassing all variations that the arbitrary words reflect (for further analysis of this aspect, refer to (Kumar, 2023).)

When structuralists refer to a signifier as a 'psychological imprint of sound,' they intuitively recognize what Sri Aurobindo described as the psychological qualities of the *guṇas* determining the sounds in speech on our material plane. However, what the structuralist intuitively perceives as 'structure' points to the structure of an original language, far beyond the structure of ordinary spoken and written language. According to Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo, indeed, there is universality, but it exists beyond the physical plane of existence (see also (Kumar, 2016), (Kumar, 2023a), and (Kumar, 2023b).) They reverse Chomsky's generative grammar hypothesis: instead of there being universal syntactic rules that generate phonological and semantic structures, there is an inherent universal phonology that generates the grammatical structure of language.

Nonetheless, Chomsky's intuition about the mind's central role that tips into 'deep structures' and expressing it on the level of 'surface structures' can also be regarded as a profound insight. The mind hosts a 'language acquisition device,' and there's a universal quality shared by all human languages. Indeed, the sounds, phonemes, and words of a surface structure are connected to something universal at a deeper level. However, this doesn't imply that words and language are only expressions of the mind. We may question whether they emerge within, are modified by, and pass through the mind rather than being originated by it. These sounds are the human mind's attempt to reflect a deeper seed-sound, not just an abstract mental internal representation. Universality doesn't stem from a genetic code or neural pathways in the brain; rather, it originates from an inner domain of universal consciousness. Only when the consciousness and cognitive abilities of early humans were capable of opening a window on the mental level of *madhyamā vāc* could language come into being. Language 'involved' from the top-down, meeting the organism evolving from the bottom-up.

However, Abhinavagupta's and Sri Aurobindo's insights can tell us something beyond linguistics. For instance, it is noteworthy to observe how, stemming from a vastly different context, a much more recent development in biological sciences, namely, biosemiotics, presents a perspective on life and the transformations of organisms that aligns with such an interpretative spiritual stance. Despite not attracting significant attention, biosemiotics has persevered on the fringes of its discipline, offering a holistic perspective on studying life. It serves as an interdisciplinary field, merging biology and semiotics—the study of signs and meaning-making, emphasizing the role of communication and meaning in the living world. Living

organisms generate and interpret signs conveying information, and interactions mediated by signs, such as chemical signals, visual cues, sounds, environmental cues, symbols, codes, interpretation, representation, and communication processes, or even behavioral patterns, and not only attribute meaning to signs and symbols but also create and alter sign relations (for an introduction, see (Emmeche et al., 2011).) The study of semiosis in biology spans from the cellular and molecular level—such as in cell signaling or sign-mediated interactions in bacterial communities with quorum sensing—to the investigation of animal forms of knowledge, including human behavior. One could assert that semiosis and information processing are intrinsic to life. Undoubtedly, human language and abstract symbolic thought are the most prominent examples of semiotic communication. The connection between biosemiotics and language hasn't gone unnoticed. (For a review, see (Velmezova et al., 2015).) The genetic code and its translation serve as the most common example illustrating the biological significance of non-human code and sign processing. DNA conveys functional information by using symbols—specifically, genes represented by a sequence of nucleotide bases in the DNA that code for proteins. Zolyan points out that, instead of comparing nucleotides with letters, one should, indeed, correlate them with sounds (Zolyan, 2023.) Adopting Sri Aurobindo's perspective, one could say that biosemiotics appears to intuit a hidden underlying Real-Idea within life. It aims at a comprehensive vision in which signs, 'words', language, and symbols hold universal significance. Modern biosemiotics naturally discovers this universality and the relationship between signs and meaning in Nature. Consequently, we are entitled to consider a standpoint where language is not merely a bottom-up emergent property of life, but is an expression of meaning-making process by a top-down universal consciousness whose nature and essence are knowledge and gnosis. On the material plane of existence, it 'voices' itself and appears to our derivative cognitive system as signs, signals, and meanings. Life and the entire cosmos constitute a network of 'signs,' 'words,' or 'symbols'—essentially, a 'language'. In Nature, meaning isn't a construct of the human mind superimposing purposefulness and semantics due to an intellectual anthropomorphic tendency; instead, meaning is inherent in all existence. Signs, words, and symbols manifest naturally in the material realm due to a consciousness projecting its Real-Ideas. As the Vedic sages claim, wherever there is consciousness, there must inevitably, in one form or another, be the Word.

Moreover, within a naturalistic framework, attempts to explicate the nature and origin of consciousness have multiplied in recent decades (for an overview, see (Kuhn, 2024) and (Seth, 2022).) Several endeavors to merge biology with cognition have sparked various lines of research, notably the autopoiesis hypothesis (Maturana and Varela (1991)) and, more recently, in the field of non-linear complex systems, or in terms of cellular information processes (Miller, 2023), or as homeostatic processes (e.g., Turner, 2017). Nevertheless, the reason behind the emergence of signs and meaning in Nature remains elusive. This is because biology and any naturalistic science try to explain the emergence of code and cognition via a bottom-up mechanistic and biochemical process as: Chemicals \rightarrow code \rightarrow cognition. However, already inside the same rationalistic and materialistic paradigm, there are good arguments to conjecture that Nature has gone the other way around, namely: Cognition \rightarrow code \rightarrow chemicals (Marshall, 2021). The idea comes first; its material manifestation follows.

Whether we should consider these analogies only metaphorically or take them more seriously is a choice left to the reader. However, Abhinavagupta's and Sri Aurobindo's linguistic paradigms do not contradict biological theories suggesting that language evolved as an adaptation that offers a selective advantage. Within the theories of evolutionary linguistics, the hypothesis that may partially align with the current theoretical framework is Ray Jackendoff's "Unconscious Meaning Hypothesis," which views language as complex adaptation evolving in stages (Jackendoff, 2012). He encourages us to adopt a phenomenological cognitive perspective and recognize how language unconsciously evokes meaningful imagery through a model of 'speech sounds' or 'linguistic qualia'—specifically, pronunciations—that elicit an

internal sense of meaningfulness beyond mere external symbolism, and that is phonological in character. This leads to the understanding that rational thought (the lower domain of *madhyamā vāc*) is not an alternative to intuition (*parā vāc*, and the higher domain of *madhyamā vāc*); rather, the former depends on the latter. Jackendoff proposes a perspective on language known as “Parallel Architecture,” which claims that the three primary systems of human language—phonology, semantics, and syntax—are not independent but are instead interconnected through “interfaces.” In this view, the semantic system was already present in non-human primates as the first generative component of language, with the vocalization of mental concepts forming proto-words and thereby driving the early stages of the evolution of language, and only later developing a proto-syntax with more complex semantic relations. This view still diverges from the perspectives of Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo, who suggested that the phonological aspect serves as the origin of speech. However, it comes a step closer to their ideas by moving away from Chomsky’s ‘syntactocentric’ approach and acknowledging that speech sounds have a deeper function than previously assumed, with words and its phonological structure shaping the structure of sentences, rather than syntax.

Other analogies can be traced to Shigeru Miyagawa’s “Integration Hypothesis” (Miyagawa, 2017). This hypothesis posits that language is an integration of two independently occurring systems in nature that underlie communication. The first system—the ‘lexical system’—comprises isolated sound units, or utterances, from primates that typically have specific referents (semantics), such as “leopard,” “snake,” or “eagle.” These units exist within a lexical system of alarm calls, which, however, lack expressive sound patterns. The second system—the ‘expressive system’—is associated with sound patterns (syntax), similar to those found in bird songs, which do not possess a lexical system. The lexical system features semanticity but lacks phonological syntax, while the expressive system emphasizes phonological syntax but does not include semanticity. The hypothesis suggests that, due to a cognitive leap, humans were able to integrate these two systems, resulting in the emergence of language. Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo focused on the origin and nature of speech and were less concerned about the emergence of the structure, syntax, and grammar of language. However, they would likely have agreed that this integration arose from the contact with the *madhyamā vāc* level, which endowed the first humans with the ability to associate and organize those utterances into seed-sounds within a more complex system of abstract symbolism.

That there exists a gap eluding our understanding between the symbol itself and the emergence of meaning in our conscious awareness also becomes clear in artificial intelligence (AI). Even the most recent AI systems, such as the large language models (LLMs) implemented in ChatGPT, while being impressive at mimicking human intelligence to some extent, struggle to truly comprehend. This issue was highlighted by Searle already in the 1980s with his famous ‘Chinese room argument’ (Searle, 1980). Language, with its semantics, transcends mere symbols, raw data, and symbolic information processing and seems to reside beyond a formal description of a computational model.

A similar and related question is the ‘symbol grounding problem,’ discussed by Stevan Harnad in 1990, which highlights the problematic issue of how symbols (words, numbers, streams of bits, signals, etc.) acquire their meaning. There remains a gap between symbols, signals, number manipulation, and semantic awareness, intuition, understanding, or knowing, which is eludes a formal description of any computational model.

However, Abhinavagupta’s and Sri Aurobindo’s universal standpoint might provide a another perspective. The bridge between sign and meaning isn’t the brain or some complex biological or artificial machinery. The sign and the material container holding it did not precede meaning; instead, meaning in the form of an ‘inaudible sound’ on another plane manifested the word, symbol, and sign later. The deepest semantic significance of meaning is an original seed-sound on the *parā vāc* level of pure Consciousness, not a complex bioelectrical feedback loop.

Abhinavagupta posits that śabda (the sound-word) is united with artha (meaning) only at the level of paśyantī vāc. If so, we are no longer in a realm that physical sciences can grasp.

I guess that Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo would likely argue that rejecting the hypothesis of a trans-rational origin of language and metaphysical theories of consciousness may be the root cause for a series of paradoxes in consciousness studies and cognitive science. For instance, Darwinian approaches struggle to explain the remarkably rapid emergence of the cognitive abilities that led, almost abruptly in evolutionary timescales, to the development of human language and closed the gap with animal communication solely through natural selection and random genetic mutations. A highly debated issue commonly referred to in evolutionary linguistics as 'Darwin's problem.' The roles of social interactions and cultural evolution have certainly played significant parts, but it remains unclear whether this fully accounts for the phenomenon. Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary linguistics would support a modern culturalist approach that emphasizes the inseparability of language and culture, asserting that grammar, vocabulary, and meaning are deeply influenced by cultural and psychological aspects rather than being solely biological phenomena. Especially with those who posit that lexical items or content words (such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives) emerged before grammatical items and function words (like auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and articles). However, he would also contend that even before this cognitive leap, words existed with a more flexible, fluid, and plural significance, where the distinction between nouns and verbs was blurred due to the absence of a clear subject-object distinction. These eventually evolved into the conceptual clarity we recognize today, a development attributed to the emergence of the faculty of consciousness we refer to as 'mind.'

Another pivotal concern in the philosophy of mind is the 'binding problem.' It delves into how the brain integrates or 'binds' diverse sensory experiences and information fragments into a unified, coherent conscious perception and semantic whole. Despite the brain processing information from multiple independent sources in different ways and brain areas, conscious experience is perceived as seamless and integrated. For example, the meaning of a sentence can't be deduced by summing up the significance of the single words. Rather, only after the sentence has been read until the end does the relation between the words and its context become clear. Then, suddenly, by an almost instantaneous 'binding act,' meaning emerges in our conscious awareness. Researchers across neuroscience, psychology, and the philosophy of mind have proposed various theories suggesting specialized neural mechanisms or processes that enable such information integration from different sources. However, the issue remains more unresolved.

Abhinavagupta and Sri Aurobindo would likely have pointed out that a science focusing solely on the physical plane—that is, the vaikharī vāc level of speech—will never, not even in principle, comprehend how consciousness links symbols to meaning and 'binds' or 'integrates' features into semantic wholes at the parā vāc level. In their view, the process operates in the opposite direction, not adhering to a bottom-up logic in which the sum of the parts constructs the whole but, rather, through a top-down process. Starting from the parā vāc, the original undifferentiated seed-idea, with its truth of significance in the form of the seed-sound, is already 'bound' as an integrated semantic whole without subject-object distinction. There is no binding necessary in the first place. Instead, it is fragmentation that gradually appears as artha and śabda split by descending toward the physical plane.

Even if only for speculative purposes, we accept Abhinavagupta's experience of the four levels of language and Sri Aurobindo's Real-Idea as a pre- or trans-rational thought-essence not as mere abstract philosophical speculations but as insights reflecting some deeper truth about our cognitive nature, this could significantly impact research in the field of artificial intelligence. If the mind and what lies beyond the mind exist outside of matter and cannot be reduced to physical brain processes, and instead reside on other planes of existence, then any aspiration to create human-like non-conscious artificial general intelligence (AGI) in a material

aggregate like a computer will inevitably remain unattainable. Computers are unconscious material entities that compute, whereas, according to this perspective, the mind is neither material nor computational and is reliant on something fundamentally conscious. AI might achieve the level of madhyamā vāc, in which cognition manipulates words, sentences, grammar, and syntax, distinguishing between object and subject. That's what we see LLMs are capable of achieving. However, they would object that AI will never ascend to the semantic level of paśyantī vāc, let alone parā vāc, or the unified undifferentiated vision of the Supermind, as these levels transcend rational, computational, and physical existence. Recent advances in AI indicate that despite their remarkable success, machines remain incapable of developing a semantic awareness of the world, remaining passive black boxes without agency and consciousness. Perhaps, this is because 'understanding' is essentially the act of hearing the inaudible Word.

In any event, by approaching things integrally and contextualizing them, Eastern language theories do not contradict their Western counterparts. In fact, attempting to unite, integrate, and harmonize both perspectives might lead to new insights. Even if we embrace a naturalistic approach Abhinavagupta's and Sri Aurobindo's mystical visions might contribute to illuminate areas where contemporary philosophy and science struggle to find answers. To fully embrace this integral approach, we must view the big picture in its entirety and synthesis, going beyond single approaches with their distinct strengths and weaknesses. To do this, we might need to quiet the intellectual mind in order to perceive the distant call of a transrational mind.

In his Tractatus, Wittgenstein famously declared, "*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*" However, popular wisdom acknowledges that sometimes 'silence speaks a thousand words.' If we remain silent-minded, we might become able to grasp the inaudible sound emanating from the higher levels of speech even before words are spoken and enjoy our 'aha-moments.' We might then realize that language is not the product but, rather, a discovery of the mind of a sign-producing universe and that communication beyond language exists—especially the language of the spirit that comes from the vibrations of the soul.

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