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# Audumbarāyaṇa revisited\*

(*Śrījñānāmṛtam. A Memorial Volume in Honour of Prof. Shri Niwas Shastri. Ed. Vijaya Rani and V.K. Goyal. Delhi: Parimal Publications. 1996. Pp. 197-201.*)

The last time an article was dedicated to the *Nirukta* passage referring to Audumbarāyaṇa's views on speech (1.1-2) is more than 30 years ago. Since then, if I am not mistaken, only one footnote (Biardeau, 1964: 413-14 n. 3) and part of a discussion addressing a different question (Aklujkar, 1978: 149-151) have touched upon it. This relative lack of interest is not explained by a presumed solution of all the problems this passage contains. Quite on the contrary, the author of the most recent article dedicated to this passage, Nils Simonsson (1961: 22), states right at the beginning that it would certainly be futile to consider or to try to persuade others that the interpretation to be presented in his paper is the final one. Madeleine Biardeau (1964: 414 n. 3), similarly, characterizes her interpretation as "forcément conjecturale". And indeed, one may doubt whether a final interpretation of this passage will ever be reached. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to think that all possibilities have been fully explored. The present note is meant to be a modest contribution to the discussion, by drawing attention to some hitherto insufficiently studied points.

To begin with the passage as it appears at the beginning of Simonsson's article:

- (1) *indriyanityaṃ vacanam audumbarāyaṇaḥ.*
- (2) *tatra catuṣṭvaṃ nopapadyate 'yugapadutpannānām vā śabdānām itaretaropadeśaḥ śāstrakṛto yogaś ca.*
- (3) *vyāptimattvāt tu śabdasyāñīyastvāc ca śabdena samjñākaraṇaṃ vyavahārārthaṃ loke.*
- (4) *teṣāṃ manuṣyavad devatābhīdhānam.*
- (5) *puruṣavidyānityatvāt karmasampattir mantro vede.*

The first point to be noted is that this passage appears to refer to an opposition between physical sound and non-physical forms of language. The word *śabda* would then refer to physical sound, which is described as *ayugapadutpanna* "not produced simultaneously". It seems probable that individual [198] speech sounds (phonemes) are meant,<sup>1</sup> but for the argument it does not matter if *śabda* is believed to refer to whole words, or even to complete sentences, as long as the physical manifestations of these

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<sup>1</sup> Compare the similar concern in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* on P. 1.4.109 vt. 10 (ed. Kielhorn, vol. I, p. 356, l. 5 f.): in the word *gauḥ* the sounds *au* and *ḥ* are not there while *g* is being pronounced, and the same is true of the other sounds; sounds disappear as soon as they have arisen (*uccaritapradhvaṃsināḥ khalv api varṇāḥ*); no single sound is the companion of another sound (*na varṇo varṇasya sahāyah*).

entities are meant. These physical sounds are contrasted with non-physical linguistic entities, which are described as *vacana* (1), and perhaps also by the word *saṃjñā* (3).<sup>2</sup>

The problems discussed in this passage seem to be connected with a view of language as essentially consisting of physical sound. These problems are:

- (i) How can words, if they consist of (or are) entities which do not even exist simultaneously, be divided into four categories? How can they refer to each other? How can grammar connect them?
- (ii) Why were these fleeting entities used in the first place in the process of naming?
- (iii) How can Vedic mantras have any effect if they are nothing but unstable and fleeting sounds?

Problem (ii) needs some comments. The compound *saṃjñākaraṇa* (3) — and this is the second point to which I wish to draw attention in this paper — may refer to more than just ordinary naming. We find a similar expression in *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* (ed. Jambuvijaya) 2.1.18: *saṃjñākarma tv asmadvīśiṣṭānām liṅgam* "The activity of naming allows us to infer the existence of beings superior to us". The reference is here to the process of naming by superior beings, no doubt Ṛṣis, at the beginning of time, when language was introduced. There is no need to recall here that many early civilisations consider naming to be the primary function of language (Staal, 1979: 4 f.). We find this idea in India already in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>3</sup> The problem [199] addressed in the *Nirukta* might very well be: why did the ancient Ṛṣis use in this connection the medium of sound, which disappears as soon as it is produced, and not any other, more durable, medium? The answer is given in (3): because sound is pervasive and utterly small. In other words, the use of the medium of sound has, besides some undeniable drawbacks, some equally undeniable advantages, which few other mediums will be able to match.<sup>4</sup>

Problems (i) and (iii) demand as answer that speech does not only exist in the form of fleeting sounds. This answer — or rather, two of them — is indeed found in the passage: speech is constantly present (*nitya*) in the *indriya* (1); and the Vedic mantra is constantly present in human knowledge (*puruṣavidyānitya*) (5). Understood in this way, the word *nitya* in (1) and (5) expresses the opposite of momentariness: it is true that physical sound is momentary, but speech has another form which is *nitya*, which survives at least long enough for a classification of words to make sense, etc.<sup>5</sup> Which is

<sup>2</sup> Similarly Biarreau, 1964: 414 n. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., RV 10.71.1, in the translation of Louis Renou (1956: 71): "O Bṛhaspati, ce fut là le premier commencement de la Parole, quand ils (i.e. the first poet-seers, referred to by the word *dhīra* in the next stanza; J.B.) se mirent en branle, donnant une dénomination (*nāmadhēyaṃ dādhanāḥ*) (aux choses)."

<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to be sure whether Yāska actually thought of other mediums that might have been used by the Ṛṣis. Falk (1993: 241 f.) argues that there is no evidence in the *Nirukta* that its author was acquainted with script and writing.

<sup>5</sup> This does not necessarily exclude the meaning "eternal", for which Brough (1952: 76) proposed the alternative "being located in", hence "constantly associated with". The interpretation here offered leaves place for both these meanings.

this other form? According to Audumbarāyaṇa, speech resides in *indriya* (1). Simonsson observes quite rightly that we shall probably never know what exactly Audumbarāyaṇa meant by his aphorism (p. 26), mainly because we do not know what he meant by *indriya*. Is perhaps the mind (*manas*) intended, which is, according to *Bhagavadgītā* 10.22 (cp. 13.5), the *indriya* par excellence?<sup>6</sup> Biardeau considers it very likely that *indriya* here means "l'organe de la parole". The concluding line of our passage, which for all we know represents Yāska's [200] position, does not present this problem of interpretation. It allows of the interpretation according to which the Vedic mantra resides in human knowledge.

The above reflections lead to the following translation (which follows Simonsson's as far as possible):

- (1) According to Audumbarāyaṇa, speech resides constantly in *indriya*.
- (2) In this [context the following objection has been raised:] The fourfold classification of words does not hold good, nor the reciprocal reference of sounds (or physical manifestations of words, sentences) which are not produced simultaneously, nor the relationship postulated by grammar.
- (3) [Reply:] But because sound is pervasive and utterly small, naming, which serves the purpose of worldly intercourse, [has been done] with the help of sound.<sup>7</sup>
- (4) They (i.e., sounds)<sup>8</sup> designate gods in the same manner as they designate human beings.<sup>9</sup>
- (5) The mantra in the Veda accomplishes the ritual,<sup>10</sup> because it is constantly present in human knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

[201]

It is not impossible, but not sure either, that Audumbarāyaṇa's opinion expressed in (1) coincides with the one expressed in (5).<sup>12</sup> It would seem, moreover, that (2) - (5) constitute a unit: (2) raises an objection based on the assumption that speech = sound;

<sup>6</sup> Kahrs suggests the faculties *vāc*, *prāṇa*, *caḥsus*, *śrotra*, and *manas*, which are often referred to in the Upaniṣads; e.g. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.3.2 ff.; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.2.3 ff.; 2.11.1; 5.1.1-5; *Kena Upaniṣad* 1.1-2.

<sup>7</sup> In this interpretation the double use of *śabda* in (3) is essential, and does not show, as Simonsson (1961: 27 n. 1) thought, that the expression *vyāptimattvāt tu śabdasyāñīyastvāc ca* may have been an old formula which was taken over without change. Kahrs refers me in this connection to Smith, 1953: 138, where this "formula" is mentioned.

<sup>8</sup> Simonsson (1961: 25) objects to the equation of *teṣām* with \**śabdānām*, pointing out that (3) contains no plural of *śabda*, to which *teṣām* could refer. To this the answer must be (i) that (2) contains a plural of *śabda* (*śabdānām*), and (ii) that Yāska sometimes uses singulars and plurals in a somewhat erratic way; in Nir. 1.1, for example, *nāmākhyāte* and *nāmākhyātayor* (dual) are immediately followed by *bhāvapradhānam ākhyātam* (sing.) and *sattvapradhānāni nāmāni* (plural!).

<sup>9</sup> This may of course mean that Vedic words are used as among human beings. This would agree with Yāska's own observation to the extent that Vedic words may be linked to 'worldly' roots and vice versa; see Nir. 2.2: *athāpi bhāṣikebhyo dhātubhyo naigamāḥ kṛto bhāṣyante/ .../ athāpi naigamebhyo bhāṣikāḥ/ ...*

<sup>10</sup> I.e., with Simonsson, the mantra is for the accomplishment of ritual (*bahuvrīhi*), or it is the accomplishment of ritual (*tatpuruṣa*) (Strauss, 1927: 113; Brough, 1952: 77).

<sup>11</sup> Contrary to Simonsson, I assume suppletion of genitive \**mantrasya*, rather than of \**śabdasya*.

<sup>12</sup> According to Simonsson (1961: 29), (1) implies for Yāska limitation to the individual, whereas (5) implies that sound transcends individuals and generations.

(3) responds, by first explaining why there are sounds at all in connection with speech; (4) elaborates, stressing the wide realm of use of sound; (5), finally, undermines the objection by pointing out that, at least in the case of Vedic mantras (which interest Yāska in the first place), speech is not just sound. Audumbarāyaṇa's opinion expressed in (1) seems to do no more than introduce the discussion: (2) cannot really be read as a reaction to (1), for the objection embodied in (2) loses all its force once position (1) is accepted.

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