

Philosophy Through Affirmative Denial: The Sublime And Negative Signification In The Language Of The Upanishads

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Abstract

The idea of language is one that has been of significant interest to the ancient Indian philosophers. The expression of language that has often been associated to a more systemic development on ‘speech’ has not been merely looked as a medium of communication. To Indic thought, ‘words’ and language have been looked upon as reflection of the cosmic design, a construction of the cognitive ‘truth’ in man or at times, as the ‘truth’ of the cosmos itself. The world, many think, is a direct manifestation of *Bhraman* or the supreme consciousness. The philosophical gravity of the language of the sacred texts can be appraised by the prominent role that they play as one of the most important *pramanas* or the sources of knowledge and lead to the classification of orthodox/heterodox schools of cognition. The Upanishads, belonging to the Vedantic school of thought offers a curious understanding of the implied superior existence through a varied presentation of names and forms. These relationships between the multiple signifiers and a signified ‘essence’ are sometimes pushed towards a representation that puts forth the belief of a difficult existence; one through linguistic absurdity in signification and denial. And hence, we enter into an intriguing realm of the language of loss that moves beyond the loss of language and finally to the linguistic sublime in experience. Thus, my chapter seeks to look into the ‘sublimity’ of experience through language and meaning as I intend to study the major Upanishads. My contention is to develop my argument into what becomes a practice of ‘negative signification’ and affirmative presence of the linguistic/psycho-semantic sublime in Indian philosophical thought. I attempt to trace the different strands of Indian thought on language, grammar and cognition to pursue my argument.

Keywords: language, experience, negative signification, meaning, sublime, representation

“In the supreme Truth , as in the sky, impartite, inactive, quiescent flowers, unsustained and non dual where is room for (mental) construction?”¹

In the above quoted lines from the *Atma Upanishad*, the idea of ‘truth’ that has been so pervasive in all modes of philosophical (and hence political/sociological/scientific) enquiry has found a metaphor of emplacement in the ‘sky’. The metaphor conjures up an immediate optical

perception of a locale beyond tangibility; the psychological effect on a reader carries with itself a sense against definability. Now, definition is a problem of language that has been reiterated from antiquity to the post-modern ages of human civilization.ⁱⁱ However, this very urge to perceive objects of knowledge and define them has been a task of the perpetual and undaunted human urge to conceptualize, cognize and articulate that which is observed/perceived in terms of human understanding. Moreover, this very act of expression through the mediation of language is a veritable testimony to the cognitive process of understanding itself. This process of understanding is thus primarily through an endeavour at measurement and speculation (of quality/quantity/intensity) and those that move beyond the ambit of these are relatively looked upon as fluid or, at times, subjective or often deemed apposite to be put under the more nuanced order of the 'abstract'.

Of course, from here, my suggestions seem to derive at two corollary engagements. First, that this innate human urge of 'measurement' is a 'desire' for the ethical. And that this idea of 'ethics' permeates with the possibilities of aesthetic pleasure. It is 'ethical' in the sense that there lies, with this affinity for 'measuring', the act of associating it with authenticity. In Indic terms this would lead to the discussion of poetics and the probabilities of '*anukarana*' or loyal imitation that our ancient Greek philosophers cited to be a theory in the mimetic representation of the worldⁱⁱⁱ. To Aristotle, the faithful 'representation' of the observed/perceived world was absolutely important for the different uses of literature. In other words, this idea of mimetic representation has been an 'immanent' problem of linguistic expression itself and the multiple tropes of language are rhetorically used to assist in the process of finite comprehension (in this quote, it being the trope of metaphor). Thus, the ethicality of its faithfulness is a perpetual discussion. Second, the act of human articulation too results in a form of psychological aesthetics that is related to the vital pleasure of reading or expressing.^{iv} But our problem in this chapter is to look at expressions of the immeasurable.

If we re-read the quote from the *Atma Upanishad*, we observe that what is seen as 'Truth' is posited against the image of the sky and the conceptual impressions that stem from it. It is attributed with the qualities of being transcendent, passive but conscious and is thought to be the anchor of all things that find sustenance within the world. To be cautious, the understanding into the image of the sky is that of something beyond the coordinates of finitude (and hence, measurement) and is qualified with a temperament of everlasting passive presence. However, it is interesting to note that these qualifiers that are nevertheless indicative of some sort of finite understanding (almost like the finite understanding of 'infinity'), proclaims the subject to be 'unqualified' ("non-dual"). And more paradoxically the language condemns efforts at mental construction. But if this paradoxical self-reflexive assertion is given sanctity, one would question as to what would then be the requirement to use language or articulate in words at all? Or, isn't

every effort in linguistic outreach an endeavour of “mental construction” even if infinite/transcendental or abstract in essence?

The only possible answer can be offered through the continental approach to language apropos the theory of the sublime.^v Through its long history of theorization, the idea of the sublime has been thought to be grand and “venerable”, sometimes “superior to beauty” in its effect, at times intriguingly ugly to the human senses, and mostly one that inspires both “awe” and “terror”.^{vi} This sublime in romantic and post romantic studies has been conceived to relate to the loss of language, a recurrent symptom of the Lacanian ‘Real’ in psychoanalytics.^{vii} The Upanishads as a broader group of Indic epistemological knowledge has repeatedly been insistent on the investigation of the true identity of the self and the “*Atman*” and whether without realizing it or not, embarked on a self-reflexive understanding of language. This problem of associating language to the sublime with the ellipses and the negation (“*neti, neti*”: translated as “not this, not this”) is a study that I intend to undertake in this chapter.^{viii}

But before we try to look at Upanishadic language, it might be important to understand a couple of axillary issues; those that might be fundamental to the greater understanding of my arguments in this chapter.

Truth to philosophy is a relative pursuit. However, religious doctrines that carry along within themselves a set of dogmatic principles locate their discourse outside the periphery of flexible speculation and thus rest upon the differential axioms of ‘theology’. In this chapter, since I take up Indic philosophical discourse which primarily studies the ‘Sanatan’ or Hindu sense of the sublime, it will be important to understand that ‘truth’ appears in multiple forms of understanding within the language of the texts. In that approach, my method is not to trace the rigidity of meaning in the references (hence my research is not theological) but to study the polyphonic divergences, spiritual elevations and linguistic implications that establish Indic knowledge as one of the most potent and relevant systems across major speculative disciplines even in modern times. Hindu philosophy being intrinsically polyphonic, descriptive and often contradictory to its own set of plural principles gets a ‘monistic’ thrust in the Upanishads. Being associated with the principles, a deeper significance of the ‘names’ and the ‘forms’ remain a greater part of vital understanding. Against this, what constitutes the dialectics between *dharmic* pluralism and spiritual monism is instrumental to create an understanding of a concrete and yet an elusive doctrine of the sublime.

The Indic philosophical knowledge system has relied on a curiously polyphonic epistemology that has, on a rough basis, accommodated diverse views on spiritual thought. The debate regarding whether ‘Hinduism’ is suitable to be pronounced as a ‘religion’ (often doubted from the Western Abrahamic sense) or viewed as an effort to guide through the generalities of life (often spoken by conservatives as “a way of life”) is still a contention. However, within

Hinduism, the plurality of schools leads to variegated layers of meaning production with some of the schools standing completely in theoretical/methodological animosity with the other. Be it for the belief in the six fold *pramanas*, a few or none of them, the different causation philosophies (spanning from the *advaita* and *dvaita* explanations to *vaisheshika* proposed atomic theories), their stricter methods (ranging from pure *pratyaksha* and *shabda* to pure *tarka*) or theistic and atheistic denominations, the culture of debate is one that has perpetually admitted and nourished a stronger sense of language that has been borne out of testimony and the need to establish propositions. Hence while Sanskrit itself forms the neat and regular language by virtue of its linguistically rigid system, there is a colossal difficulty in translating them into the English language given the obvious differences in the languages' radically different syntactic and symbolic orders.^{ix} However, with the tinge of difficulty in trans-lingual pursuits, I attempt to look at the language of 'sublimity' within the broader implications of the Upanishads.

To begin with, the Upanishads are a set of texts that exist in isolated parts at the end of the different Vedas and their sections and are thus often known as *Vedanta* or the end objectives (sometimes understood teleologically) of the Vedas. Being formed out of rigorous oral practices, they refer to the practice of 'sitting down' at the feet of the spiritual *Guru* while being imparted 'transcendental knowledge'. The impact in the intent of the Upanishads has been so great that Vedanta has emerged into a distinctive school of thought with a larger share of adherents and practitioners.^x This Vedantic idea of the transcendental is inexorably related to the problem of language and runs the risk of running too many signifiers without the specific signified(s) and apposite referents. In that case, meaning, being anyway loosely fluid under post modern sanctions, is more than elusive or, as the philosopher Jacques Ranciere puts it, becomes "all too many means nothing at all". This quality of being superfluous is a mighty charge against such elevated language but to think that the Hindu texts would have thought it to be an unnecessary affective affair would mean little truth. Language to a long line of Hindu philosophers have been synonymous to the divine and looked upon more as a manifestation of that superior energy than a mortal creation.

The Upanishads thus belong to the school of Vedantic thought and accepts all the six *pramanas* in their spiritual worldview. In this notable is the *pramana* of the *shabda* (or the sacred word), that stands external to the other five deductive points of conjecture and testimony. These faculties of deduction are mostly based on the operations of formal logic.^{xi} However, *shabda* that is more or less believed by all orthodox schools of Hindu thought has a special place in understanding our problem.^{xii} It is radically counter-intuitive to the set of the other five *pramanas* that attempt to discredit popular hearsay and rely on individual merit of cognition and inferences. In a way, there is an unmistakable liberty at logic in this approach. The belief in *shabda*, on the contrary, is based on established inferences that have been immortalised from a section of Gurus who are believed to have skilled at observing, conducting and noting universal

processes in spiritual seeking. Shabda thus becomes a strong and often superior testimony on all Hindu attempts at 'seeking' *moksha* with a kind of sacrosanct aura that cannot be challenged with individual experiments at seeking.^{xiii} But this has a greater implication. 'Word' that is sanctified and passed on across generations (as in a culture of orality) has a formative function. In the Hindu reading of the sacred scriptures, the words and the language, the function of speech and enunciation is given far more significance than the enunciator himself.^{xiv} In this, speech is not just sacred due to the reverence towards the speaker but it is the speaker who is remembered due to his speech. Hence, the idea of speech being autonomous, non-humanly constructed medium of instruction is a point that is to be duly considered. Moreover, this idea is both elevated and expanded to a status where ancient Sanskrit scholars like Patanjali, Panini and Katyayana refer to the formation of language as a medium of supernatural expression and of the truest 'reflection' of the supreme force '*Bhraman*'.^{xv}

The Hindu concern with language is more than just phenomenal. Language or speech (even voice) was looked at as an eternal (*nitya*) projection of divine existence. Katyayana reiterates this opinion several times in his *Varttika* and duly mentions that it is not created merely for communication or regular purposes (*karya*). However, when Katyayana was writing this (around 200 BCE), he was perhaps referring only to Sanskrit words and their associations.^{xvi} For he investigates into the nature of the Sanskrit language alone and strongly poses a distinction between the original form of the language and the alloyed derivations/distortions into more regional and mundane usages of the Hindu civilization. Patanjali in his *Mahabhasya* (that was probably written even before Katyayana's *Varttika*), refers to the Sanskrit language to be as sacred as the Vedas themselves.^{xvii} Panini too, while writing much before Katyayana and Patanjali, opined that the divine language is to be followed stringently according to norms while only a "quarter of the real merit of the language" might be accessed by human minds.^{xviii} The impression that we can collect from Panini can speak of a certain amount of mysterious quality that is present within the language and its manifestation. Panini also goes on to assert that the relation between the word and the object it refers to is *siddha* or eternal and hence goes beyond temporality and finite human constructions.^{xix}

Interesting it is to note the direct and indirect attributions of divine projection that is being associated with the very form of sacred language itself. However, we may understand that in the propositions of Panini, Patanjali and Katyayana, language is a form of creation that is meant to serve as the bridge between human quest for liberation and divine assistance. But with the arrival of Bhartihari (c. 450-510 CE), the idea of language shifts from just a divine creation to a 'reflection' of the divine itself. To Bhartihari, word (language) or *shabda* is a direct manifestation of the formless eternal cause *Bhraman* Himself. Thus in his *sphota* theory, Bhartahari traces the 'seeds' of word enunciation and its immediate meaning through a concept of an eternal body of unchangeable semantic association which is as sustaining as *Bhraman*

Himself. Thus he goes on to coin the significant terms ‘shabda-bhraman’ to posit the understanding that it is language that creates the human world in its divine sense. “At the dissolution of each creative cycle, a seed or trace is left behind out of which the next cycle emerges. This nature of the seed from which each of cycle of creation bursts forth is called *Daivik Vaak* or the Divine Word. It is *Bhraman* expressing and embodying itself in the plurality of phenomena that is creation.”^{xx} To him, the *sphota* is the moment of conjunction where the sound of the language “flashes through” (*pratibha*) the cognitive process of the hearer where ‘meaning’ is already present in the unconscious of the subject. What he also implicates is the fact that it is speech and meaning that creates the world of mortality and both aids and hinders the realization of liberation.

Thus the idea of language , with all its multifarious constructions and diverse meanings, trace back to a single entity, the reality, and revive back into language and creation from a trace. From here, we understand the motif of the extra-temporal being pursued by words and their tropes. But this, only issues the probabilities of a deeper problem.

If language is to be equated with *Bhraman*, and meaning is to be always already present in our unconscious, then it would not be wrong to say that we realize *Bhraman* through the tropes of language and in turn, through our “mental construction.” Of course, this is not a problem of separation between the *Bhraman* and the *Atman* (*dvaita* understanding of it), or the proposition of a qualified monism (*dvaita adavaita*). Rather it is to enquire upon language which appears as one of the most potent media of *Bhraman* realization, is negated through the Upanishads under the *Vedanta* methodology.

The Upanishads deal with the concepts of the *Bhraman* and the *Aatman* in subtle ways. Where Vedic language too keeps on making references to a supreme consciousness while recognizing the existence of other deities (with possibly polytheistic and henotheistic ideas at parallel lines), Upanishads are mostly symbolic of monotheism that radically counters ritualistic purposes. To the language of the Vedas, there is a politics of affirmation: that which locates the duties and rituals through which the divine deities are supposed to bestow favours. The Upanishads , on the other hand, move against the expectations of favours and fortune and seek to ‘experience’ supreme consciousness through a negation of possibilities. For instance, the very first verse from the *Adhyatma Upanishad* reads, “*In the cave of the body is eternally set the one unborn. The earth is His body. (Though) moving within the earth, the earth knows Him not. The water is his body. (Though) moving within the water, it knows Him not. The fire is his body...the fire knows Him not. The air is his body...the air knows Him not. The ether is his body...the ether knows Him not. The intellect is his body...the intellect knows Him not...The mind stuff is His body...the mind stuff knows Him not. The unmanifest is his body...the unmanifest knows Him not. The death is His body...death knows Him not. He then is the inner –self of all Beings, sinless, heaven born,*

luminous, the sole Narayana. Superimposition is the thought, "I" am and mine are the body, the senses, etc, which are all other than the Self. Through devotion to Brahman, the wise man should repudiate it.^{xxi}

It is interesting to note that the Rig Veda considers the human body to be made up of the five elements (the *panchabhootas*) and locate the *Jiva* within the body. But here, the quote from the *Adhyatma Upanishad* categorically negates identity of oneself through the *panchabhootas*. The language in the Upanishad is redolent with a mysterious tension between the intention on the subject and its identity. It appears unclear whether the verses aim to describe the human body or relate to the form of the *Bhraman* Himself. The verse engages in the perpetual ritual of undercutting its own merit; every sense that is invoked essential for ritualistic veneration in the Vedas is negated as not to be the ideal approach to the realization of the *Bhraman*. Where the *Rig Veda* prescribes definite methods (accompanied by hymns) to perform offerings like the '*Soma Pavamana*' and calls on deities to "enrich strength" from the offerings of fire, ghee and other products and grant their prayers/ desires, the language of the Upanishad seeks to nullify or sensory practices of the body (here being a metonymic representation through the five constituent elements of nature) to realize that the "body" and the "senses" are all 'thoughts of superimposition' and that one's 'self' is unachievable through these.

From a deeper linguistic analysis, the language dismantles all modes of objective signification to project the undefined 'self' as the only sole signified. The presence of the supreme consciousness is not counted on the bodily self offering its veneration (and commodities of sanctity) to the deity to realise consciousness. Indeed, the philosophical problem that splits the Vedas and Upanishads affects the construction of language here. In the Vedas, the way to self realisation is through human desire for strength, progeny, health, wealth and wisdom; all that material, spiritual and corporal gifts that leads to the realization of a divine relationship between existence and essence. However, the Upanishadic language specifies on a essential episteme alone defying all modes of existential understanding. In other words, in the Upanishadic quote, the reality of existence is not through the attributes of the mind and the body but through negating these. In a way, the proposition can be distantly collimated with that of Immanuel Kant's understanding of 'synthetic' assertions themselves. But this study requires further qualification from the *Adhyatma Upanishad* at a greater length.

Let us look at the second and the third verses. "*Knowing oneself to be the subject, the witness of intellect and its operations, reject the ideas of the Self being other than the subject, identifying "I" with that (the subject). // Rejecting conformity with the world, the body and the Shastras, remove superimposition on the self.*"^{xxii} Here, the problem intensifies. If we remember our discussion regarding Bhartahari's understanding of the 'shabda-bhraman', we shall remember that language is touted to be *Bhraman* Himself or at least as a direct manifestation of Him. It is

comprehensible that all cognitive activity that results in speech and expression are but a function of the intellect where, to Bhartihari, the eternal meanings are lodged. These meanings are greatly sanctified in the Vedas which again is held as the greatest refuge of *shabda* as a testimony. So if we are to suspend our identity to the Self away from either language (as an operation of the intellect) or discredit the *shastras*, the schools of Hindu philosophical thought risk paralysis and even complete suspension. If the Vedas are to be looked upon “as the superimposition of the self”, then the very “seed” of creation, that philosophically, is responsible for realizing divine presence is itself dismantled and realization of the Godhead itself becomes perilous (for according to the Vedas, there are prayers and offerings that sustain the world). Evidently, all methods of study under the various orthodox/heterodox (*astika/nastika*) schools, the ‘word’ of those who have attained *Samadhi* would also be dispensed with for a solely individualist sort of realization. This again would refer to a state of being that would deconstruct and displace the entire school of Vedantic thought of which the Upanishads themselves are a member.

Further, the Adhyatma Upanishad proclaims the thought that runs through all the major and minor texts within the canon; that which in the tenth verse mentions, “*Knowing that I am that Bhraman in which this world appearance (exists) like a city reflected in a mirror, find fulfilment, O sinless one!*” Again the seventeenth verse reads, “*With the vision of the non-dual self through unwavering concentration comes the dissolution without residue the knots of ignorance in the text.*” The twentieth verse states, “*One’s Self is Brahma, Vishnu, Indra and Siva, the entire world is oneself, other than the Self, there is nothing.*”^{xxiii}

Here, these verses thus expand beyond the debate of verbal testimony and destruction of the rituals of divine comprehension. The verses, if carefully looked into, starts with the appearances as the “reflection” of the Supreme self and then in the twentieth, calls oneself the Supreme. In a way, this position is one that looks at dissolving the ‘ego’ of the self while creating a greater sense of universal ego. This is an extremely curious position where universality is derived from ‘nothingness’. Brahman is said to be “unmanifested” a number of times as we shall study in the other Upanishads. Hence, to transpose the verse in the truest sense, there would be ‘nothing other than this nothingness.’^{xxiv}

But this would be just to start the discussion. Let us now consider verses from some of the major (*Mukhya*) Upanishads that are dated to have been written at a contemporary time with the ancient Vedas. The *Aitreya Upanishad*, for instance, talks about the cosmogony of this world, relating to the creation of physical qualities and senses, while dedicating a deity to each of these. With this metaphor of embodiment (the deity of these senses were called Idandra or Indra), the text further analyses the “three births” of a man (that deals mostly with procreation and the biological legacy), and narrates what is it that is the self. Here, intriguingly, the ‘self’ is classified to be quite the contrarian to what we derive from the *Adhyatma Upanishad*. In the second verse of the

third chapter, the text asserts , “*It is the heart , intellect and mind that were stated earlier. It is sentience, rulership, secular, knowledge, presence of mind, retentiveness, sense perception, fortitude, thining, genius, mental suffering, memory, ascertainment, resolution, life activities and all others. All these are verily are the names of Consciousness.// This One is (the inferior) Bhraman; this is Indra, this is Prajapati, these are five elements, air, space, air, water, earth and theses all big creatures with the small ones, that are the procreators of others, and referable in pairs—to wit, those that are born of eggs, of wombs, of moisture, of the earth, viz horses, cattle, elephants, men, and all creatures that move or fly or don’t move. All these have Consciousness as the giver of reality, all these are impelled by Consciousness, the Universes as Consciousness as its end. Consciousness is Bhraman.*”^{xxv}

This idea of plurality that is almost drawn in to be originating from one source, is not just a tension between a multifaceted existence and a monistic explanation but one that plays frivolously with multiple signifiers to refer to a single signified. What is important here is to ‘locate’ that signified. In the sentence that states, “*Consciousness is Bhraman*” , the signified *Bhraman* finds a state of mind as its equivalent in ‘consciousness’ which in turn has multiple signifiers. However, ‘consciousness’ itself has no specific qualifier but is indicated by the attempts to ‘essentialize’ a forged unity of sense and mind, of thought and language.^{xxvi} Now if the signified itself is devoid of qualification and language, and if the signifiers refer to one another to finally locate the ‘deferred’ signified (as in the case of Derridean deconstruction), we enter the dubiousness of the sublime.

The idea of the sublime features with the deepest understanding of that which is present and is perceived by the senses but is not applicable to be processed by the intellect. It is an experience of the first order. Interestingly, right from the French translation of Longinus’ treatise *Peri Hypsos (Of Elevation)*, ‘sublimity’ has been an understanding that has drawn references to that which is sensed beyond language but is nevertheless attempted to be described through the same. With Longinus bringing it down to the domain of language, he studied Homer (especially Homer’s idea of elevation in *Iliad* through speeches of the character of Ajax), and concluded that “the silence of Ajax in the Underworld is great and more sublime than words.”^{xxvii} At this Longinus concluded that “Sublimity is the echo of the soul...and as if instinctively our soul is uplifted by the true sublime , it takes a proud flight , and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard.”^{xxviii} But most importantly, Longinus proposed that while language is commonly looked upon as a medium to “record” the experience of the sublime, language carried within itself the potential to create sublimity.^{xxix} This concept of the ‘literary sublime’ was transformed into the ‘natural sublime’ by the British Edmund Burke in the 18th century associating ‘sublime’ with ‘delight’ that caused anxiety through its grandness.^{xxx} From here, Immanuel Kant associated the ‘sublime’ as thwarting of mental faculties, dwelling beyond the ambit of sensory or imitative representation where “we suddenly find ourselves

nothing to the natural world.”^{xxxix} This sense of a ‘loss’ (in senses and words) was studied duly by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and called to be the man’s pre-Oedipal state of the “Real”.

Thus I carry two important impressions from this brief genealogy while studying the language of the Upanishads. First, that language can itself result in an experience of the sublime and secondly, this language is not the language of embellishment or communication but the language of loss.

This same understanding is broadly present in the *Kena Upanishad*. In investigating the nature of Bhraman, the text defines Him as the “*ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of the speech, the vital air of vital air, and the eye of the eye....but He is also that which is not uttered by speech, that which does not think with the mind, does not see with the eye, does not hear with the ear, does not smell with the organ of smell.*”^{xxxix} This paradoxical language that employs multiples signifiers in an urge to signify the concrete but later, only dissociates symbolic references with the signified is a signification of ‘nothing’ or something that escapes the faculties of both cognizance and language. What it then really refers to is the “nothingness” of the signification; a sense of loss in the language amid all the psychological fulfilment of the experience. Bhraman is then the experience of the sublime that evades “all mental construction” (through language) and seeks to admit its presence only through negating its experience. The *Kena Upanishad* furthers this idea by asserting that “*If you think, I know Bhraman rightly, you have known but little of Bhraman’s true nature...I think not I know Bhraman rightly nor do I think it is unknown. I know and I do not know also. He among us who knows that knows it; not that it is known nor that it is not known.*”^{xxxix} This is then not just a case of the “floating signifier” that is admitted into the politics of presences, the *Upanishads* is a textual case of affirming through absence; the floating signifier affirms language by failing to refer to the concrete, the *Upanishadic* texts insist to affirm the presence (of something in the ‘nothingness’) by negating language itself. I propose to call this as ‘negative signification’ or the ‘signification of the sublime’.

The *Katha Upanishad* posits similar instances. In the twenty third verse from the second part of the First Chapter, we find “*The Self cannot be attained by the study of the Vedas, not by intelligence nor by much hearing. Only by him who seeks to know the Self can it be attained. To him, the Self reveals its own nature.*” Or “*Let the wise man merge speech in his mind, merge that mind into intelligence, the intelligent self into the Mahat. Let him merge that Mahat into the Purusha of the Bhraman, the peaceful self.*”^{xxxix} These references of “merging”, a motor verb of contraction is equally to negate the possibilities of language and references. For language itself promotes plural possibilities of existence and signification. This negation however contains in it the experience of ‘supreme bliss’ which is an idea of all uncertainty, awe, fear and attraction. The dissolution of the social and biological self (both through anatomical and social signifiers of

reference) for a non-signifying ‘real’ self is one that is ‘escapist’, romantic and assertive, one that loses oneself through consummating in him all modes of signification (“I am *Bhraman*”).

This idea runs through the Chhandogya Upanishad too. “*The mind is the Bhraman, thus one should meditate...the akshara is the Bhraman...// The Sun is the Bhraman.*”^{xxxv} While the language may seem to be an echo of the thesis for the floating signifier, the difference lies in the philosophies; one that looks at the nothingness of the implied, the other at the consummation of that ‘nothingness’ without implications. On a social level, the stories of the denunciation of social orders including caste, the attribution of the *bhramin* status to the boy without lineage, the explicit mockery of ritualist bhramins all deny the greater uses of ‘speech’ that is said to have a vital role in creating identities and the social orders as repeatedly mentioned in the Vedas (Rig and Yajur) and briefly alluded to in the *Bhagavad Gita* as a prescription by God. From this perspective, the Upanishads not only deconstruct the ritualistic canon of other Hindu religious texts but subvert the notion of the self by destroying all social markers of signification to the self.

This idea of the negative signification of sublimity occurs in the *Taittiriya Upanishads* as well. In the “Seventh Anuvaka”, the text mentions, “*For whenever an aspirant gets fearlessly established in this un-perceivable, bodiless inexpressible and un-supporting Bhraman, he reaches the state of fearlessness. For, whenever the aspirant gets fearlessly established in this un-perceivable, bodiless, inexpressible and un-supporting Brahman, he reaches the state of fearlessness. For whenever the aspirant creates the subtlest differences in it, he is smitten with fear. Nevertheless that very Bhraman is a terror to the so called learned man who lacks the unitive outlook.*”^{xxxvi} Here, however, our idea of the Upanishadic sublimity changes drastically and the theory of the sublime departs from the continental understanding of it. In the continental philosophy, along with awe and immeasurability, cognitive failure and that of language, the realization of finitude against infinity, terror and fear played vital roles. In the Upanishads, this latter idea is debunked to invite an idea of the sublime which is consistent and harmonious even through its all pervading, centripetal nature.

The obvious question would be if this can be called sublime at all then. We notice that most of the components of the sublime feeling (in continental thought) anticipates fear but also talks of a consonant feeling of “peace”, “submission” and “greatness” that comes along with it. The dualist nature of understanding thus is only the fearful state of grasping sublimity. The final experience of that sublime in feeling and through the loss of language remains essentially the same even in Upanishadic thought.^{xxxvii}

However, the Upanishads like the Vedas offer an association between language and the *Bhraman*. The *Chhandayoga Upanishad* is one of those few Upanishads that prescribes simple, ritualistic practice; among these, there are advices to meditate on the syllable ‘Om’ that is regarded to be the ultimate manifestation of the impossible and formless supreme power.

In the very first part of the Upanishad, the text mentions, “*One should meditate on the syllable Om, the Udghita, for one sings the Udghits, beginning with the Om. Of this, the explanation follows...the syllable Om which is called the Udghita is the quintessence of the essences, the supreme, deserving of the highest place and the eighth.*”^{xxxviii} Again, the *Atmabodha Upanishad* asserts, “*He who meditates upon that sole Narayana who is latent in all beings, who is the causal Purusha, who is causeless, who is the Parabrahman, the Om, who is without plains or delusion.*”^{xxxix} The relationship between this syllable, Om, that contains within itself all speech and writing is also the *Brahman* Himself. Then, going by the *shabda-brahman* doctrine of Bhartahari (that aligns with this thought), *Brahman* is in speech but without it too. In that, the signified being an inexorable component of sound should be present in speech too and thus stand contrary to my argument. But the problem is perhaps resolved if we focus on the term “essences”. The *Chhandogya* in the third verse also states, “...the essence of speech is Om.”, which also means speech is not Om, and hence language is not *Brahman*. But the essence of the signifier is the signified that confirms my position on the negatively signified *Brahman*.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* provides with further elaboration of this negative signification. In the third to twelfth texts, it states, “*The Self seated in the waking state and called Vaisnavara who, possessed of consciousness of the exterior...enjoy the first quarter.//The Self seated in the dream state and called Tajisa who possessed of the consciousness of the interior...enjoys the subtle objects is called second quarter//The Self seated in the deep sleep and called Prajna ...third quarter// The Fourth is thought which is not conscious of the internal world...That which is without letter is the Fourth, beyond apprehension through ordinary means, the cessation of the phenomenal world, the auspicious and the non dual. The Om is certainly the Self. He who knows thus enters the Self by the Self.*”^{xi} The last sentence (twelfth text) is extremely significant as it talks about the dissolution of the letter, talks about the transcendent and thus proposes the pure idea of the sublime. Like the continental sublime, the Upanishads too emphasize on the psychological state of the experience, however they seek to understand the ‘experience in the self without projecting the other as a causal agent’ unlike the European urge to understand it as the ‘experience caused by the other.’

Other instances refer to this state of negative signification in various other minor Upanishads as well. For example in the *Amritbindu Upanishad*, verse 6 states that “The Supreme is neither to be thought of (as being something external and pleasing to the mind), nor is it to be thought of (as sense pleasure), but to be thought as the essence of bliss that *Brahman* which is free from all partiality.// *Brahman* is without doubt, endless, beyond reason and analogy, beyond all proofs and causeless knowing the wise one becomes free.”^{xli} This insistence on the lack of ‘proof’ and thus cognitive analysis, beyond reason and hence beyond language and experience confirm the present signified while dissolving the signifiers. The same implication (of rejecting language and *shabda*) is present in the *Amritnada Upanishad* as well. “The wise having studied the *Shastras*

and reflected on them again and again and having come to know *Bhraman* should abandon them all like a fire brand.*/ Having given up *Mantra, Linga and pada*, he attains the subtle seat without vowels or consonants without *Swara*.”^{xlii} Perhaps the closest form of linguistic manifestation is done through the “Om” as we saw in the *Atmabodha Upanishad* and also in the *Bahvricha*, the *Devi* and the *Sita Upanishads* where female power is thought to be as consciousness. This sound ‘Om’ is more like the sound of the eternal signifier that Jacques Lacan calls the ‘rambling’ sound to refer to the pre-symbolic world of the real. The sound of the ‘Om’ as the ‘eternal signifier’ (or the closest possible sound of the sublime in expression) has been dealt with in detail in the *Bhramavidya Upanishad* where it is mentioned that “Om, the monosyllable is the *Bhraman*...Therein is said to be the three Gods...the three Vedas, the three *Matras* and the half matra of the three lettered *Shiva*.”^{xliii} Similar analysis is present in the *Naadbindu Upanishad* regarding the syllable ‘Om’.

The *Ishavasa Upanishad* echoes the same essence in asserting, “*All this is pervaded by Isha, the Lord.// Unmoving it is. It is faster than the mind. The senses cannot reach it, for it proceeds ahead. Remaining static it overtakes others that run...// It moves, it moves not, it is far, it is near, it is within all, it is without all.*”, the perfect state of the psychoanalytic ‘Real’ put into the language of spiritual transcendence.^{xliv} This idea of renunciation of Vedic language and the four varna based social orders are advised in the *Sanyasa Upanishads* too (*Parahamsa, Sanyasa, Vajrasuchika*,) which amongst all other social components insist on denunciation of the *Shastras* and the *Shabdhas* repeatedly. Further, they propose meditation on that single concept of that sublime (and Real), and thus explore the grandness of an ever-present nothingness.

To conclude, Jacques Ranciere’s problem with language (and symbols) ‘of everything meaning everything and nothing at all’ might be true in the Upanishadic stories where the tropes of metaphors and embodiment (through the dialogue between sages and kings, through the metaphors of the horse and the cow, of natural elements and forms of air) is used to refer to the deities and they to the *Bhraman*. However, this ‘nothing’ at all itself is the sublime that is inexplicable but without effective references in language analysis. The Upanishads, in their allegories and symbols, thus become a curious case of negative signification for the affirmative.

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END NOTES

ⁱ See: Michael Nagler, "Aatma Upanishad" in *The Upanishads*, ed. Eknath Easwaran, (New York: Blue Mountain), 2000, 280-287.

ⁱⁱ Language is believed to be a problem as much as in ancient Indian thought and Greek poetics as the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment continental and analytical thought. In the Vedas, language is the primary medium to all truth as it is the most significant aspect of understanding human emotions and their essences in Greek epistemology. Similarly, the continental modern philosophers have explored the deeper relationship between phenomenology, language and existence. In analytical language, formal logic is applied on linguistic endeavours. In post-modern philosophy, the de-centering of structures of language and the fluidity of signification has been a perpetual attempt at study.

ⁱⁱⁱ The theory of 'mimesis' forms a fundamental Greek understanding in Aristotle's art theories. The discussion of 'mimesis' is the central study on lines of genre theory and form development in Western literature and theory. See: Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by SH Butch, (London: Creative Media Partners), 2015.

^{iv} The idea of 'reading' as an activity has been associated from the simple doctrine of pleasure to the active liberating agenda of Marxist literature. However, the psychological effect of aesthetic pleasure, whether plain or revolutionary, occupies an important part of literary study.

^v The theory of the 'sublime' in language and experience has been an important understanding right from antiquity to the modern ages. However, it becomes prominent only after in the eighteenth century after the translation of Longinus' text.

^{vi} The genealogy of the sublime has progressed from the experiential to the aesthetic, linguistic to the post-human and technological through a history across three centuries. The idea of the post-romantic sublime is both through post-modern linguistic and the post-human technological.

^{vii} The idea of the 'Real' in Jacques Lacan is one that is pre-symbolic and pre-imaginary too. The Real is an order with an impossible suggestion of identity before 'ego' is formed and language is acquired. Thus it is beyond signification or even proper understanding. To Lacan, the Real expresses itself in sudden moments of shock and surrender, intense feeling with loss of language where one's own identity is reduced and is threatened with dissolution. See: Jacques Lacan, *Desire and Interpretation*, translated by Bruce Frank, (New York: Wiley), 2021.

^{viii} "Neti, neti" features in the *Bhrihadaranyaka Upanishad* in the enunciations of the sage Yajnavalka.

^{ix} The Sanskrit linguistic system has compounded words and inflections that allow them to have some sort of flexibility in its syntactic structure. This is in relation to the placement of words. English words are not really inflected to a great extent except in cases of gender and number and follows a strict SVO pattern. Naturally English translations of Sanskrit texts require careful study and examination.

^x The Vedanta school of thought comprises the Holy Gita, the Upanishads and the Bhramasutras.

^{xi} The five *pramanas* are *Pratyaksha* (perception), *Anumana* (Inference), *Upamana* (comparision), *Arthapatti* (postulation), *Anupalabधि* (non-apprehension) besides *Sabda* (word of texts and Gurus).

^{xii} The Hindu orthodox schools are called the *astika* schools which believe in the Vedas as the authentic source of knowledge. These are the Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaiseshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta.

^{xiii} Almost all *astika* schools believe in *shabda* as an authentic *pramana* for yogic practice. Hence, there lies an element of superiority in the *shabda* as a credible testimony.

^{xiv} Many scholars have opined that the names of *Munis* were often not only indicative of one individual but of a category of *Rishis* in the *Guru-Shishya parampara*. This discussion became most widespread while discussing the identity of Bharatmuni in the *Natyashastra*. Similar occurrences have been widely studied in the Bhakti tradition post 8th century CE in Hindu texts with regards to ‘corporeal authorship’ in the cases of Namadeva and Gyandeva in central-western parts of India. See: Christian Lee Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namadeva in India* (New York: Colombia Press), 2011.

^{xv} Panini, Patanjali and Katyayana defined grammar on the lines of language, signification, grammar, sound and meaning in the texts *Ashtadhyai*, *Mahabhashya* and *Varttika* respectively.

^{xvi} Katyayana countered the idea of the ‘sphota’ from Patanjali in his *Mahabhashya* where he questioned how sentences can have fixed meanings and can be realized as one unit of meaning through the sound of those words when each syllabic sound ceases to exist after a new syllable is uttered. He insisted on how the sounds were registered in ‘memory’ to derive an accurate meaning at the end of a sentence.

^{xvii} Patanjali insisted that both Sanskrit and other languages could communicate but it is only the Sanskrit language that produces religious merit. Sheldon Pollock studies the usage of Sanskrit from the pov of religious merit in his *The Language of the Gods*.

See: Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Pre-Modern India*, (London: The University of California Press), 2006.

^{xviii} Panini, Patanjali and Katyayana defined grammar on the lines of language, signification, grammar, sound and meaning in the texts *Ashtadhyai*, *Mahabhashya* and *Varttika* respectively.

^{xix} These exchanges and commentaries in Sankritic grammar led to the rise of the understanding of speech as regular, symmetrical but still mystic in religious understanding.

^{xx} See: Bhartrihari, *The Vakyapada: Critical Texts of Canto 1 and 2 with English Translations*, translated by K Pillai, (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas), 1971.

^{xxi} See: Vyasa, *Adhyatma Upanishad*, translated by Swami Tyagananda, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society <https://vedantasociety.net/store>

^{xxii} Ibid , 2, 3

^{xxiii} Ibid, 10,17,20

^{xxiv} The other prominent quote that validates the argument is “The non occurrence of the impulse to enjoy or have in regard to objects of enjoyment asks the acme of detachment. The highest pitch of awareness is marked by the non occurrence of the egoistic sense. Ibid, 41.

^{xxv} See: Vyasa, *Aitreya Upanishad*, translated by Swami Tyagananda, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society <https://vedantasociety.net/store>

^{xxvi} Essentialization of a self that does not “seek” an object but responds with passive identification with negative signification for an affirmative presence is an experience without language.

^{xxvii} See: Longinus, “On the Sublime”, translated by H.L.Havell, (London: McMillan and Co), 1890, 11.

^{xxviii} Ibid , 9.2, 7.2.

^{xxix} See: Longinus, “How Words Influenced the Passions”, translated by H.L.Havell, (London: McMillan and Co), 1904.

^{xxx} To Edmund Burke, John Milton’s grand and elevated language was the epitome of the literary sublime

^{xxxi} Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by J H Bernard (London: Macmillan), 1914.

^{xxxii} See: Vyasa, “ First Chapter” in *Kena Upanishad*, translated by Swami Tyagananda, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society <https://vedantasociety.net/store>

^{xxxiii} Ibid, Chapter 2.

^{xxxiv} Ibid, 1.ii.13

^{xxxv} See: Vyasa, *Chhandogya Upanishad*, translated by Swami Tyagananda, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, 3,9, 1. <https://vedantasociety.net/store>

^{xxxvi} See: *Taittiriya Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884.

^{xxxvii} The same in Prasna Upanishad. "You should know that Purusha who is worthy to be known and in whom are transfixed the parts like spokes in the naive chariot of the wheel, so that death may not afflict you anywhere. //To them he said I know this Supreme *Bhraman* thus far only. Beyond this, there is nothing."

See: *Prasna Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884.

^{xxxviii} See: *Chhandogya Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884, 1, i, 3.

^{xxxix} See: *Atmabodha Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884, 4.

^{xl} See: *Mandukya Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884, 8-14.

^{xli} See: *Amritbindu Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884, 6, 9.

^{xlii} See: *Amritnanda Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884, 1-4.

^{xliii} See: *Bhramavidya Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884, 1-4.

^{xliv} See: *Ishavasha Upanishad*, translated by Max Muller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1884, 1.