

Oral Performance of Sanskrit Mantras in the West: A Pragmatic Approach

(based on examining the situation in Bulgaria)

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How I got interested in this topic?

In 2010 I initiated a Sanskrit course at the East-West Indological Foundation in Sofia. I expected not more than 5-6 people to register in the course, because they had learned Sanskrit with me some years ago in optional Sanskrit courses at the Indology Department of Sofia University and in the MA Program on Indic studies at the New Bulgarian University. But to my surprise more than 20 people of varied educational and professional background started to attend the classes. Most of them were yoga practitioners, ISKCON devotees, followers of Ayurveda or of the Vedic astrology (*jyotish*) who inspired by their spiritual interests and practices, come to acquire basic knowledge and competence in Sanskrit in order to get deeper in the meaning of the Sanskrit mantras or parts of different devotional, religious and philosophical texts like *Bhagavadgīta*, *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali, some of the classical *Upaniṣads* etc., which they have studied usually by the help of their Indian gurus. Sometimes I was invited by them to attend the religious sessions of their communities, where the adherents were reciting and singing Sanskrit verses and mantras without knowing the original language at all. Usually during the sessions some person of authority in the community delivers a talk in Bulgarian language, but quoting a lot of verses in Sanskrit.

Another reason of mine to get more involved in the topic of the specific features of the oral performance of Sanskrit mantras and sacred texts by foreigners was my participation in the international conference dedicated to the spread of Hinduism in Europe, organized by the Stockholm University in April 2017¹. Preparing a paper, introducing the spread of Hinduism in

¹ The conference was organized by Dr.Ferdinando Sardella from the Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies (ERG) at Stockholm University in Sweden and Prof. Knut Jacobsen of the Department of Archeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion at the University of Bergen, Norway. The conference was funded by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) and the Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies at Stockholm University.

Bulgaria², I got in closer touch with some devotees of ISKCON in Bulgaria and attended some of the regular sessions of the community at their temple in Sofia. Being present at their sessions, I realized how important it is for them to come together at their spiritual centers or temple and to read, recite and chant for many hours mantras in Sanskrit, to sing verses of *Bhagavadgīta* and *Bhāgavata purāṇa* or to listen to the discourse of a wide range of religious subjects, including also verses recited, chanted, or sung in Sanskrit by an expert/guru of their religious community. The audience repeats the verses after the guru, sometimes he was translating every word into Bulgarian and introducing his commentary.

Main objectives of the paper

Observing the above mentioned oral mantra performances of different Hindu inspired Bulgarian religious communities, I was provoked to ask myself the question: is it relevant to attempt to define these regular public chanting and reciting of Sanskrit *mantras* and verses by Bulgarian (and in wider sense by foreign) yoga practitioners, ISKCON adherents etc. in a pragmatic perspective, and in particular in the perspective of the speech act theory? In my view it is important to highlight also in this respect that these chanting and reciting of Sanskrit *mantras* often happens in the context of different Hindu rituals performed by the members of the communities³.

As it is well known, the speech act theory is generally considered a theory of the language use and belongs to the so called action-based approaches to language, inspired by the seminal work of J. L. Austin, entitled *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and further developed by his colleague John R. Searle. Despite that some later authors like Bach (2006), Bach & Harnish (1979), Allwood (1976) etc., found some conceptual difficulties and questionable conclusions⁴ in the original theory of Austin and Searle the ideas and theoretical

² It was entitled "Hindu-Inspired Religiosity and Spirituality in Bulgaria after 1989".

³ This is by the way another extremely interesting aspect of the presence of Vedic and Hindu culture in Europe, especially the performance of the ancient Vedic rituals in Europe by the members of the Indian diaspora as well as by European adherents of different spiritual and religious movements inspired by Hinduism. More on this topic see in Smith 2000 and in Bechler 2011.

⁴ Some of them are related to the "lack of treatment of "contextuality" (Allwood 1976) and to the fact that "speech act analysis primarily concerns acontextual utterances by individual speakers in monologue, rather than contextualized utterances uttered by interacting speakers pursuing a joint activity". These authors focused mainly on the significance of the pragmatic features of the linguistic communication and of the communicative intention in the discourse, expressing a certain attitude (desire, belief etc.) of the speaker, which has to be verbalized in such a way as to be recognized by the hearer.

statements of both scholars haven't yet lost their fundamental significance in the pragmatics and have been widely applied to varied fields of the humanitarian knowledge like philosophy of language, literary criticism, religious and ritual studies, communication studies, narratology etc.

At first glance it seems that it is a significant problem in applying these pragmatic approach to the oral performances of Sanskrit mantars outside India (and in wider sense outside South Asia) by foreign people, not fluent in the original language, even not knowing it at all. And this problem is rooted in the fact that the speech act theory originally concerns and interprets linguistic situations in which the participants – speakers and listeners are fluent in the language of the communication and haven't any difficulties to grasp the semantic meaning of the utterances. The speech act theory in this sense is articulated basically to describe and to explore ordinary languages and linguistic situations, not any kind of religious or ritual languages.

The current paper aims to share some reflections on this topic and to suggest that despite all these considerations it is reasonable and well-grounded to interpret and define the public oral performance of Sanskrit mantars outside India by people of different cultural background, of different intentions and motivations as a speech act, truly very specific one, because involves participants who don't know or know only incompletely Sanskrit. According to me, following this approach we could go deeper into the essence of the transnational and transcultural presence of Vedic and Tantric mantras, whose oral performance has been gradually becoming a global phenomenon.

The Present Performance of Sanskrit Mantras in the West from a Pragmatic Viewpoint

Here I'd like to mention that to some extent I was inspired in my attempt to discuss the possibility to interpret the performance of Sanskrit mantras outside India, in the West from a pragmatic viewpoint by some European and American scholars, studying the Vedas, who have been analyzing the Vedic as well the Tantric ritual language from the viewpoint of the contemporary speech act theory – like Wheelock (1982, 2002), Findly (2002), Taber (2002), Potton (1995), Thompson (1997, 1998), Tambiah (1968, 1979) etc.

Wheelock, analyzing the Vedic and Tantric ritual language, pointed out that "the most essential distinguishing feature of ritual utterances is that they are speech acts that convey little

or no information"(1982: 58). Wheelock referred also to Tambiah's view that "in ritual, language appears to be used in ways that violate the communication function".

Since many decades it is a long discussion among the scholars studying the Vedas, concerning the possibility to define the mantra as speech act or even as language⁵.

One of the main reasons to consider the speech act theory, this contemporary "outside" theory an appropriate and relevant approach to the ancient Vedic texts is that the attitude to the language and its performative capacity, followed generally in the speech act theory, is comparable in many respects to the ideas about the sound, speech (vāc) and sacred ritual language (bráhman), evolved over a period of many centuries in Vedic culture and preserved in the texts of Vedic canon, revealing a special attitude to the language and especially to the creative as well as transformative capacity of the spoken Word and becoming a starting point of a remarkable philosophy of language in India.

In this respect I would like to cite Thompson who wrote in his article about the so called brahmodyas (a kind of cosmological riddles) in Vedic discourse: "If I have called attention to pragmatics, and in particular to speech act theory, it is not because I want to make use of the latest fad in literary criticism, but rather because the Vedic tradition itself invites such attention" (1997: 20).

In reference to the topic of my presentation I would like to point out some of Austin's most important and innovative ideas:

- ✓ The verbal utterances, unlike statements, do not "describe" or "report" rather, "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of the doing of an action". And as it's widely known he coined the term "performative" to refer to these kind of utterances⁶.
- ✓ There are three types of speech acts: 1) those in which the act of saying something is to do something; 2) those where in saying something we do something; and 3) those where

⁵ For example Findly (2000); worth to mention is the classical work of Frits Staal (1996) arguing that the Vedic mantra and ritual are meaningless, "syntax without semantics" as he has defined them.

⁶After giving as examples a marriage vow, the christening of a ship, the bequeathing of a will, and a bet about tomorrow's weather, Austin says: "In these examples, it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. . . . What are we to call an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short, "a performative." . . . The name . . . indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something". (1962: 6–7)

by saying something we do something. He calls these locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts, respectively.

- ✓ “What we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation” (1962: 139).
- ✓ "Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them" (1962: 101).

It is evident from the above quotes that Austin is not particularly interested in locution, in what the words say, in their semantic meaning, but rather in what the words do – that is, in illocution and perlocution.

The Speech-act theory is further developed by John R. Searle (1969). He defines the speech acts as “acts performed in the utterance of a sentence”. These acts include “making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on”; these utterances, then, are “produced with certain kinds of intentions”. Exactly the intention of the speaker is considered a crucial moment in the speech act, bringing about a certain reaction and respond of the recipient of the utterance or even about a certain state of affairs into existence.

What is the intention of the yoga practitioners or Kṛṣṇa devotees, whose life is embedded in the postmodern reality of the contemporary Western world, provoking them to chant together Sanskrit mantras and sacred verses, composed hundreds and even thousands of years ago in a radically different cultural environment? In this respect I will quote the following statement of Alper: “Mantras function and have a ‘meaning’ within a certain universe of discourse, within an articulated and systematized whole, that imposed by a particular use of language in the Indian context, outside of which they can no more exist than a fish out of water, if only because of the great difficulty of defining what a mantra is outside that context” (1989: 300).

Is it possible the mantra to exit outside its own context? Is it possible the utterance of mantras to function as speech act in a context in which neither the speakers nor the hearers are able to grasp their meaning properly. Is it at all necessary they to grasp their meaning or the utterance of this kind of texts is of greater significance and efficiency than what these texts say?

I share the opinion that it is possible, because the comprehension of the semantic content of the Sanskrit texts is of no significance in this specific discourse, possessing many ritual features. For the western participants in their spiritual and religious sessions the chanting of the mantras is a kind of ritual, similar in many respects to the original Tantric spiritual and religious practices (the so called “tantric” *sādhana*) or to the yogic meditation. Therefore this religious performance has nothing to do with the referential meaning of the mantras and verses, but with something else. The main intention of the speakers is to use their speech acts as effective agents of change – of deep inner, even “magical” change for the spoken word possesses the capacity to exercise a power and to create. Much more important for the practitioners is to utter properly the mantra, because only the perfect utterance make it effective as ritual, spiritual and meditative device.

The main goal of the practitioners who live outside the natural cultural context of the practices they perform, is, chanting together Sanskrit mantras and other sacred texts to:

- ✓ escape for a while from their own religious and ideological environment and everyday stereotypes;
- ✓ generate the authenticity of the spiritual event in which they participate;
- ✓ create their appropriate spiritual and religious identity;
- ✓ use them as an instrument to unfold a process of an inner transformation.

The oral performance of Sanskrit mantras, even without understanding the semantic meaning of the utterance is experienced as an effective and transformative ritual activity, helping the practitioners to evolve gradually their consciousness from the level of material to the level of spiritual, from *sthūla* to *sūkṣma*, from the manifested to the unmanifested. The oral performance of Sanskrit mantras and verses functions in this sense as a linguistic device to complete metalinguistic goals, as a powerful instrument to reshape one’s way of thinking, worldview and attitude to the life.

Concluding my presentation, I like to point out that exploring the performance of Sanskrit mantras nowadays in the West, i.e. in an entirely different cultural, historical and ideological

context, in a pragmatic perspective can contribute, at least in my view, to better understand the essence of the mantra as linguistic, ritual, religious and cultural phenomenon.

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