Lecture 2: Non-Western Linguistic Traditions

Linguistics tries to describe and explain Language. People have thought, and wondered about language throughout recorded history (and most certainly beyond). As part of human thought, Linguistics was part of philosophy (the 'Mother of all sciences') for hundreds, even thousands of years (before it branched off and became a science in its own right). In many cultures, linguistic analysis was part of religious studies and writings (particularly in discussions of the religiously preferred spoken and written forms of sacred texts in Hebrew, Sanskrit and Arabic). However, it appears to our - granted, limited - knowledge that linguistic speculation and investigation have gone on in only a small number of societies:

"To the extent that ***Mesopotamian***, ***Chinese***, and ***Arabic*** learning dealt with grammar, their treatments were so enmeshed in the particularities of those languages and so little known to the European world until recently that they have had virtually no impact on Western linguistic tradition. Chinese linguistic and philological scholarship stretches back for more than two millennia, but the interest of those scholars was concentrated largely on phonetics, writing, and lexicography; their consideration of grammatical problems was bound up closely with the study of logic." [1]

Modern linguistics is based on European intellectual tradition originating in Ancient Greece. Both India and China had produced native schools of linguistic thought – in fact, some of the achievements of Indian linguists precede equivalent Western developments by more than a thousand years, but European thinkers were not aware of their ideas (there was little international travel in those days!)

Ancient India

The oldest Indian text, **the Rigveda**, claims that ***vāk*** (speech) is god-inspired. Already by 1200 BC, the oral tradition of reciting **the Vedas**[1] word-to-word and sound-to sound became an essential part of Indian education. Scholars were driven by the need to preserve the Vedas in their original form**.** They wrote many treatises on how to recite and interpret the sacred texts 'correctly' (spoken vernaculars at later times were very different from the original language of the Vedas). These treatises present a meticulous analysis of Sanskrit grammar, describing the structure of Sanskrit words by splitting compounds into words, stems, and phonetic units. They represent the beginnings of morphology and phonetics, which had a great influence on Western linguistics over 2000 years later. The focus of Indian grammarians, therefore, dictated by the need to 'freeze' Vedic Sanskrit in time, was not on linguistic change over time, but rather on the description and analysis of **Sanskrit** ('*perfect*' or '*complete*'):

> Indian linguistics was not itself historical in orientation, though its roots lay in the changes languages undergo in the course of time. But the topics covered by modern descriptive linguistics: semantics, grammar, phonology, and phonetics, were all treated at length in the Indian tradition; and in phonetics and in certain aspects of grammar, Indian theory and practice was definitely in advance of anything achieved in Europe or elsewhere before contact had been made with Indian work. The stimulation afforded by Sanskritic linguistic scholarship carried by Buddhist monks into China has already been noticed. European scholars realized immediately that they had encountered in India a mass of linguistic literature of the greatest importance and stemming from an independent source, even though their interpretation and full appreciation of it was in part halting and delayed.
>
> (Robins 1997:170)

---

[1] The **Vedas** (Sanskrit वेद *véda*, "knowledge") are a large body of texts originating in ancient India. Composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism (Wikipedia).
The Sanskrit word *véda* "knowledge, wisdom" is derived from the root *vid-* "to know". This is reconstructed as being derived from the Proto-Indo-European root **uveid-*, meaning "see" or "know" (Ibid.).

Over the next few centuries, clarity was reached in the organization of sound units, and the stop consonants were organized in a 5x5 square (c. 800 BC), eventually leading to a systematic alphabet, **Brāhmī**, around the 6th century BC (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedas).

In **semantics**, the etymologist **Yāska** (c. 5th century BC) claimed that meaning is expressed/ carried by the whole sentence, and that word meanings are created by their *use* in the sentence. This is a very important observation regarding the most important function of human language – creation and transfer of meaning.

Pāṇini (c. 5th century BC) opposed the Yāska view that sentences are primary, and proposed a grammar for composing meaning from morphemic roots. His *Eight Books*, translated only in **1891**, was the earliest work of *descriptive linguistics*, as well as the first individually authored treatise on **Sanskrit**. According to some sources, he was born about 520 BC in Pakistan Died: about 460 BC in India. Despite the discrepancy in dates, **Pānini's grammar of Sanskrit** was definitely written between **600 B.C.** and **300 B.C.** Panini is famous for his economy of expression – he managed to describe the whole of Sanskrit grammar in just 4,000 consequential aphoristic rules or *sutras* (strings), each building on the previous one. These sutras

1. Mapped the semantics of verb argument structures into *thematic roles*, which express time-space and causal relationships between the major sentence constituents (S/V/O)
2. Provided *morphosyntactic rules for creating verb forms* (**conjugations**) and noun forms whose seven cases generate the morphology of noun inflections (**declensions**)
3. Analyzed how these morphological *structures are influenced by phonological processes* (e.g., root or stem modification).

   In addition, Pāṇinian grammar also provided a list of 2000 verb roots to which these rules are applied, a list of sounds (the so-called *Shiva-sutras*), and a list of 260 words which were exceptions to his derivational rules.

The phonological structure Panini outlined includes defining a notion of sound universals similar to the modern conception of *phoneme*, the systematization of *consonants* based on oral cavity constriction, and *vowels* based on their height and duration. Many scholars believe, however, that it is his idea of constructing word and sentence meanings from morpheme that is 'truly remarkable in modern terms' (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_linguistics; retrieved March 27, 2010).

In the times after Pāṇini, Indian grammarians also debated whether word-meanings were *conventional* or *eternal* (same as the *nomos* - *physis* debate in Ancient Greece). They distinguished 3 types of meaning: the *individual*, or *concrete* (*this cow*), the more abstract *universal* type (*cowhood*), and the *image* (*draw the cow*).

About a thousand years after Panini, **Bhartrhari** (c. 6-7th century AD) developed a remarkably insightful *philosophy of meaning*. His work *Vākyapadīya* (literally, "On Words and Sentences") expounds his doctrine of *Sphoṭa* (*bursting*, *opening*) and states that a **sentence should be interpreted as a single unit** which "conveys its meaning 'in a flash', just as a picture is first perceived as a unity, notwithstanding subsequent analysis into its component coloured shapes" (Robins 1997:173). In other words, he claimed that the sentence is not understood as a sequence of sounds, morphemes and words put together, but transfers its complex and indivisible meaning in a flash, and that the full meaning of each word is only understood in the context of the other words around it.

In the Vākyapadīya, Bhartṛhari views *sphoṭa* as the human 'gift of speech' which reveals our consciousness. The notion of "flash /insight" or "revelation" is central to the *sphoṭa* concept; it refers to the psychological aspect of speech. Bhartṛhari distinguished three levels of *sphoṭa*:

1. *varṇa-sphoṭa*, at the syllable level, representing an abstraction of sound (phoneme)
2. *pada-sphoṭa*, at the word level, and
3. *vakya-sphoṭa*, at the sentence level.

In verse I.93, Bhartṛhari states that the **sphota** is the universal linguistic type – sentence-type or word-type, as opposed to their tokens (sounds). He makes a distinction between **sphoṭa**, **which is whole and indivisible**, and **nāda**, **the sound, which is sequenced and therefore divisible**. The *sphoṭa* is the causal root, the intention behind an utterance (similar to the *lemma* in most psycholinguistic theories of speech production). However, Bhartrhari believed that *sphoṭa* arises also in the listener (in this, it is different from *lemma*). Uttering the 'nāda' induces the same mental state or *sphoṭa* in the listener - it comes as a whole, in a flash of recognition or intuition (*pratibhā*, 'shining forth'). This is particularly true for *vakya-sphoṭa* or sentence-vibration, where the entire sentence is thought of (by the speaker), and grasped (by the listener) as a whole.

Ancient China

Similar to the Indian tradition, Chinese philology, *Xiaoxue* or "elementary studies", began as an aid to understanding classics in the Han dynasty (c. 3d c. BCE). *Xiaoxue* came to be divided into three branches: *Xungu* (or "exegesis"), *Wenzi* ("script [analysis]") and *Yinyun* ("[study of] sounds") and reached its golden age in the 17th. c. AD. The glossary *Erya* (c. 3d c. BCE), comparable to the Indian *Nighantu*, is regarded as the first linguistic work in China. *Shuowen Jiezi* (c. 2nd c. BCE), **the first Chinese dictionary**, classifies Chinese characters by radicals, a practice that would be followed by most subsequent lexicographers. Two more pioneering works produced during the Han Dynasty are *Fangyan*, the first Chinese work concerning **dialects**, and *Shiming*, devoted to **etymology**.

As in ancient Greece, early Chinese thinkers were concerned with the relationship between names and reality. Confucius (6th c. BCE) famously emphasized the moral commitment implicit in a name, (*zhengming*) stating that the moral collapse of the pre-Qin was a result of the failure to rectify behaviour to meet the moral commitment inherent in names: "Good government consists in the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son... If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things." (*Analects* 12.11,13.3).

However, what is the reality implied by a name? The later Mohists or the group known as School of Names (ming jia, 479-221 BCE), consider that *ming* ("name") may refer to three kinds of *shi* ("actuality"): type universals (horse), individual (John), and unrestricted (thing). They adopt a realist position on the name-reality connection - universals arise because "the world itself fixes the patterns of similarity and difference by which things should be divided into kinds". The philosophical tradition is well known for conundra resembling the sophists, e.g. when Gongsun Longzi (4th c. BCE) questions if in copula statements (*X is Y*), are *X* and *Y* identical or is *X* a subclass of *Y*. This is the famous paradox "a white horse is not a horse".

Xun Zi (3d c. BCE) revisits the principle of *zhengming*, but instead of rectifying behaviour to suit the names, his emphasis is on rectifying language to correctly reflect reality. This is consistent with a more "conventional" view of word origins.

The study of phonology in China began late, and was influenced by the Indian tradition, after Buddhism had become popular in China. The rime dictionary is a type of dictionary arranged by tone and rime, in which the pronunciations of characters are indicated by *fanqie* spellings. Rime tables were later produced to aid the understanding of *fanqie*.

The ancient commentators on the classics paid much attention to syntax and the use of particles. But the first Chinese grammar, in the modern sense of the word, was produced by Ma Jianzhong (late 19th century). His grammar was based on the Latin (prescriptive) model.

Mesopotamia: the Basrah School

Mesopotamia (the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, now part of Iraq) also produced eminent Arab scholars, commonly referred to as the **Basrah School**:

Asma'il (740-828): he was a scholar and anthologist, one of the three leading members of the Basra school of Arabic philology. A gifted student of Abu Amr ibn al-Alaa, the founder of the Basra school, Asma'il possessed an outstanding knowledge of the classical Arabic language. On the basis of the principles that he laid down, his disciples later prepared most of the existing collections of the pre-Islamic Arab poets. He also wrote an anthology of mostly religious poetry.

Sibawaihi (760-793?) was a celebrated grammarian of the Arabic language.
After studying in Basra, Iraq, with a prominent grammarian **Khalil**, Sībawayh received recognition as a grammarian himself. Sībawayh is said to have left Iraq and retired to Shīrāz after losing a debate with a rival on Bedouin Arabic usage. His monumental work is al-Kitāb ("The Book") was frequently used by later scholars.

Khalil (718 – betw. 776 & 791): an Arab philologist who compiled the first Arabic dictionary and is credited with the formulation of the rules of Arabic prosody. His dictionary is arranged according to a novel alphabetical order based on pronunciation, beginning with the letter *ayn.*

Al-Farabi (870 – 950 AD) was a brilliant philosopher who wrote more than 100 works; unfortunately, only a small number of them have been preserved. Most of his works are treatises in logic and the philosophy of language (he was particularly interested in the relationship between speech and thought), as well the philosophy of politics, religion, metaphysics, psychology, and natural philosophy.

Most Arabic scholars were inspired by the desire to promote Islam and to preserve the 'truth' of the Qur'an:

"…The inspiration for Arabic grammar came from religion; the need for it was created by the commingling within Islam of the Arabs and the non-Arabs. The methods of observation and induction yielded the discovery of the main body of "laws" in the working of language; the only snag was that the laws of language are not so uniform and immutable as the laws of nature" (A History of Muslim Philosophy: Grammar & Lexicography).

"The intellectual activity of the early Muslims stemmed directly from their devotion to religion. The Arabs had throughout been sensitively proud of their language; contacts with foreigners were regarded by them as derogatory to pure Arabism. However, before Islam any corruption of the dialect was but a social drawback; after Islam any lapse from the norm inevitably led to distortion of the sacred text with dire consequences both in this as well as in the next world. Curiously enough, it was Islam itself which brought about the commingling of the Arabs with the non-Arabs on a vast and unprecedented scale. In the very second decade of the Hijrah the Arabs were carried on the crest of a wave of military conquests across the bounds of their homeland to settle down in the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Persia, Syria, and Egypt. At the same time there was a large influx of aliens, mostly prisoners of war, into the principal towns-Makkah and Madinah--of Arabia itself. Before long there appeared for the first time in history a considerable and growing number of neophytes seeking initiation into Arab society with a conscious effort to learn, imbibe, and serve that new religious culture which was only couched in Arabic and had its prototype in Arab milieu. Naturally enough, the inaptitude of these neophytes in the use of the Arabic tongue excited the laughter of the younger folk in Arab households; it also shocked the elders as it amounted to inadvertent profanity and distortion of the Qur'anic verses.' The corruptive effects on the new generation of the Arabs-the townsmen among them were no less disconcerting; the daily usages marked a sharp decline from the Qur'anic idiom. Thus, there is little doubt that about the middle of the first century of the Hijrah the Muslims were squarely face to face with

their foremost literary problem, viz., the need for the preservation of the Qur'an. The Arabs needed reinforcing their own natural way of speech with a discipline of conscious effort; they were also eager, in keeping with the true spirit of Islam, to pass on to the myriads of non-Arabs, who daily swelled the ranks of the faithful, not only the religion and the practices of Islam but also the language as a key to a first-hand knowledge of its primary source or sources (Arab Literature: Grammar & Lexicography; Chapter 2).

11/03/2012

A re-cap:

- **Chinese linguistic thought**
    - goes back more than two thousand years
    - Its main focus was largely on phonetics, writing, and lexicography
    - Grammar was studied as part of *logic* (study of reasoning)

- **Indian linguistic theory – 3 outstanding scholars:**
    - **Yaska (c. 5th century BC)** claimed that meaning is expressed/ carried by the whole sentence, and that word meanings are created by their *use* in the sentence.
    - **Panini (5th century BC)** viewed Language as an integrated system; opposed Yāskas view that sentences are primary; proposed a grammar for composing meaning from morphemes; described the grammar of Sanskrit in just 4000 rules
    - **Bhartrhari (5th-6th centuries AD)** developed the doctrine of *Sphoṭa* (*bursting*, *opening*) and stated that a sentence should be interpreted as a single unit which conveys its meaning 'in a flash', just as a picture

- **Linguistic Thought in Mesopotamia (the Basra School: 8th-10th centuries AD)**
    - Arab scholars were inspired by the desire to promote Islam and to preserve the 'truth' of the Qur'an:
        - **Asma'il** (740-828): he was a scholar and anthologist; he wrote an anthology of mostly religious poetry.
        - **Sibawaihi** (760-793?) was a celebrated grammarian of the Arabic language.
        - **Khalil** (718 – btw. 776 & 791): an Arab philologist who compiled the first Arabic dictionary.
        - **Al-Farabi** (870 – 950 AD) was a brilliant philosopher who was particularly interested in the relationship between speech and thought.

References

(1) Encyclopedia Britannica 2004 Deluxe Edition CD
(2) R.H. Robins: *A Short History of Linguistics,* 4th Edition, 1997, Longman: New York
(3) Pieter A.M. Seuren: *Western Linguistics: An Historical Introduction* 1998, Blackwell Publishers: Malden, Mass.
(4) Theodora Bynon and F.R. Palmer's *Studies in the History of Western Linguistics* 1986, Cambridge Press: New York).
(5) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_linguistics; retrieved March 27, 2010

Retrieved on 7 March 2006 from: from http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/S_0079.HTM

Sanskrit is the oldest and richest language of India. The study of this language has continued for about five thousand years. The oldest form of this language is found in the *Rgveda*. The composition of the *Rgveda* is supposed to have taken place in 2500 BC. This language was called a Vedic language from the time of the *Rgveda* to the UPANISAD. In ancient times the language, used only in the public domain, was called **bhasa**. When it passed through a process of reform or purification, it was called *Sangskrta* (*Sam -kr + ta*).

There are two stages of Sanskrit from the chronological point of view, eg Vedic and later Vedic (or Laukika). The later Vedic language is also called Classical Sanskrit. The main difference between these two languages is in their instinctive accents. In Vedic vowel sound there are three kinds of pronunciation, eg *udatta* (high), *anudatta* (low) and *svarita* (mixed), but in Sanskrit this distinction is not maintained.

… Sanskrit is a language in the Indo-European family of languages. It belongs to a sub-branch of Indo-Iranian. … It has some startling similarities with Greek and Latin. For this reason, it seems that these languages originated in the same place and they are thus known as basic Aryan or basic Indo-European languages.

The Sanskrit language has no particular alphabet. Wherever the language studied, the alphabet of that area is adopted for it. But the Nagari or Devanagari alphabet is widely used and internationally accepted for Sanskrit.

… Sanskrit is an inflectional language. In this language the role of case-ending, and of suffix and prefix is very significant. A word used in a sentence with an inflection is called *pada*. A word without inflection cannot be used in a sentence. For this reason, the change of the position of a *pada* in a sentence does not alter the meaning, and for this reason there is no rigid rule for the positioning of a word in sentence constructions.

There are three genders in Sanskrit (masculine, feminine and neuter) and are three numbers (singular, dual and plural). In the verb form there is no change of gender but it has three numbers and three persons (third, second and first). To indicate the tense and mood (including past, present and future tense), there are ten classes of verbal forms. In brief these are known as ten *la-karas*. The roots are divided into three groups-*parasmaipada*, *atmanepada* and *ubhayapada*. Sanskrit is an ornate language and numerous metres are seen in Sanskrit verse. Since it was regularized according to the grammar of Panini, no noticeable change of this language has taken place for a long time now.