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METAPHOR IN THE LANGUAGE OF RELIGION

1. Introduction

Language of religion has been studied from different perspectives by theologians, philosophers, literary critics and linguists. Scholars from these diverse disciplines have focussed on different issues related to the language of religion. Philosophers' primary interest lies in the questions related to the *contents* while linguists are primarily interested in analyzing the *form* of the language of religion. Thus philosophers such as Ayer,¹ Carnap² and Wittgenstein³ discuss questions such as (a) what kind of reality does language of religion depict, and (b) is language capable of expressing religious contents?, and (c) how does language express religion (symbolically, or analogically?), etc. On the other hand linguists such as Ferguson,⁴ Rabin⁵ and Samarin⁶ are primarily interested in identifying formal features (phonetic, phonological, syntactic, etc.) which define the 'register' of the language of religion.

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1. J.A. Ayer, *Language Truth and Logic*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952.
 2. Rudolf Carnap. *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ltd., 1935.
 3. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953.
 4. C.A. Ferguson, The Collect as a Form of Discourse. In *Language in Religious Practice*, W.J. Samarin (ed.). Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1976. pp. 101-113.
 5. C. Rabin. Liturgy and Language in Judaism. In *Language in Religious Practice*. W.J. Samarin (ed.). Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House. 1976. pp. 131-155.
 6. W.J. Samarin, The Language of Religion. In *Language in Religious Practice*, W.J. Samarin (ed.). Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1976.

However, both views have ignored the mutual influence of the form and the content of the language of religion.

Despite the differences in their orientation, one point is unconditionally accepted by all scholars, namely that language is a medium through which religion is expressed. Therefore, religious content and linguistic form are inseparable aspects of the language of religion and that an adequate analysis must take into account their mutual dependency.

This inseparability of the form and content was clearly recognized by Bhartrhari, a 6th century philosopher-linguist who insisted on the study of *Śabda* (linguistic form) and *Brahma* (religious content—the ultimate reality) for an adequate analysis of the language of religion. According to Bhartrhari, by the knowledge of *Vyākaraṇa* (grammar/form) one acquires the knowledge of Brahman, the ultimate reality (content) (*tad vyākaraṇamāgamaḥ paraṇi brahmadhigamyate (Vākyapadīya 1.22)*). The above ideology of Bhartrhari was mainly guided by the assumption that the structure of the language could not be separated from its content, rather, it reflected the structure of the reality.

2. Metaphor: A Point of Inquiry

Metaphor is used in the language of religion in diverse contexts such as the description of the religious experience, nature of the ultimate reality, etc. The linguistic units used in the metaphor include word, sentence, paragraph, or long text. In the light of the above discussion, this paper treats the figure of speech of metaphor in the language of religion as a point of inquiry. The basic assumption in the discussion is that in order to analyze the metaphor, both facets i.e., its linguistic structure and the content of religion have to be taken into account. Two major questions are in focus: (a) what is the primary linguistic unit of metaphor in the language of religion? (a word? a sentence? or a larger unit such as the whole discourse?) and how is the choice of the linguistic unit determined?, and (b) how does metaphor convey the religious content? i.e., what kind(s) of linguistic structures are used to convey the religious experience?

It will be argued that metaphor is based on the semantic properties of the linguistic unit(s), and therefore, it can not be restricted to any particular syntactic unit. It will be further illustrated that the

religious beliefs influence the linguistic structure of the metaphor. Implications of the discussion for linguistic theory will also be discussed. The data is drawn from the religious texts of Hinduism, including the Upanisads, Brahmanas, the Bhagavadgita, and the Puranas.

3. Metaphor : Definition

A simple definition of metaphor can be given as follows (Soskice 1985:15): "Metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another." Soskice notes three important features of metaphor in the above definition: (a) metaphor is the phenomenon of language (as opposed to symbols which may or may not be necessarily linguistic), (b) metaphor does not necessarily involve a physical object, rather, the "thing" in the above definition signifies a physical object or any state of affairs/ a concept or an idea, (c) the word "suggestive" is important since it indicates that the metaphor is understood by a competent speaker of the language, and (d) metaphor is a form of language use. The word "suggestive" in the definition indicates that the relationship between the two 'things' is established and understood due to the shared beliefs of the people in a particular community. The major question which can be asked at this point is how this (metaphorical) relationship between the linguistic symbol and its referent gets established? Do certain linguistic structures have the inherent capacity to suggest certain referents (again, metaphorically) or is this relationship established purely on the basis of the beliefs of the people in a particular community.

The following discussion in the context of the language of religion shows that in a metaphor, the relationship between the vehicle (the thing being described) and its tenor (the thing being suggested) is established by both the religious beliefs as well as by the structural/ formal properties of the vehicle. First, let us consider example (1) where the metaphor is established (i.e. the relationship between the symbol and its referent is established) by the religious beliefs.

Example 1. śrī bhagavān uvāca
kālo'smi loka-kṣaya-kṛt pravṛddho
lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ
ṛte'po tvām na bhaviṣyanti sarve

The Blessed Lord said: Time I am, destroyer of the worlds, and I have come to engage all people. With the exception of you (the Pāṇḍavas), all the soldiers here on both sides will be slain.⁷

Example (1) is taken from the *Bhagavadgītā* which involves a dialogue between Kṛṣṇa (who represents the all-pervasive ultimate reality) and Arjuna (who represents common man). In this example, Kṛṣṇa is describing his own nature while responding to Arjuna's request to reveal his form to him. Kṛṣṇa identifies himself as Kāla, 'time'. Although the metaphor of time is primarily used here to refer to the destructive power of time and of Kṛṣṇa, it is also used to explain the two-fold nature of Kṛṣṇa who creates as well as destroys the world.

The metaphor *kālo'smi* 'I am the Time' is fully understood only in the context of the religious beliefs of Hinduism. According to the Hindu belief Time is both the destroyer as well as the creator. Therefore, in the above example, Kṛṣṇa's (God's) claim about his identity as Time does not create any contradiction. In fact, the metaphor, 'I am Time' aptly conveys the similarity between God and the Time both being creators and destroyers of the world. Thus, in this metaphor the relationship between the metaphor Kāla 'time' and God is established on the basis of the religious belief.

4. The Question of "Primary Unit"

Several claims have been made about the primary linguistic unit of metaphor. It has been argued⁸ 79.a), Ullman⁹ that the primary linguistic unit of metaphor is *word*; i.e. in a sentence such as life is a rose, rose is a metaphor of life. In contrast to this, Richards¹⁰ and Ricour¹¹ argue that

7. *The Bhagavadgītā* 11.32.

8. M. Black, 'How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson'. In Sacks, Sheldon (ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.

9. S. Ullman, Simile and Metaphor. In Anna Morpurgo Davies and Wolfgang Meid (eds.), *Studies in Greek, Italic, and Indo-European Linguistic Offered to Leonard R. Palmer*. Innsbruck: Innsbruck Beitrage Zur Sprachwissenschaft, 1976, pp. 425-430.

10. I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936.

11. P. Ricour, *The Role of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, 1978. Translated by Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, S.J. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

metaphor is analyzable only in the context of a sentence and therefore a sentence should be accepted as a primary unit of metaphor, since in the above sentence, 'rose' is understood as a metaphor only in the context of 'life'. Although Richards and Ricour have accepted the necessity to include linguistic units larger than word (i.e. sentence) to be linguistic unit of metaphor, they have missed a major point i.e., the primary linguistic unit of metaphor can not be restricted to any particular syntactic unit such as word, sentence, etc.

Consider example (2) which is taken from the Bhagavadgītā. The context of the example is the discussion on the continuous cycle of life and death (Saṃsāra) of all existences in the world. The continuous process of creation, sustenance, destruction and re-creation is symbolized in (2) by the metaphor of the Aśvattha tree.

Example 2. śrī bhagavān uvāca
urdhva-mulaṃ adhaḥ-śākhāṃ
aśvatthaṃ prāhur avyayam
chandāṃsi yasya paṇāni
yas tam veda sa veda-vit

The Blessed Lord said: There is a banyan tree which has its roots upward and its branches down and whose leaves are the Vedic hymns. One who knows this tree is the knower of the Vedas.

adhaś cordhvaṃ praśtās tasya śākhā
guṇa-pravṛddhā viśaya-pravālāh
adhaś ca mulāny anusantatāni
karmānubandhīni manuṣya-loke

The branches of this tree extend downward and upward, nourished by the three modes of material nature. The twigs are the objects of the senses. This tree also has roots going down, and these are bound to the fruitive actions of human society.¹²

In (2) the metaphor is of the Aśvattha—the banayan tree which represents the world. The metaphor spreads over two verses. One point is immediately obvious here that the link between the vehicle i.e.,

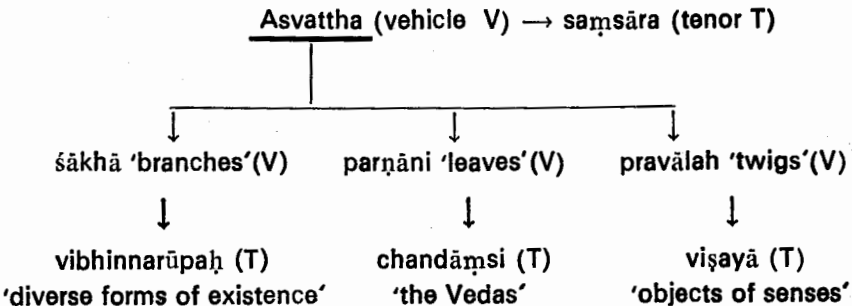
12. *The Bhagavadgītā* 15.1:2.

the banyan tree and its tenor is established only in the context of the Hindu beliefs in the text of the Bhagavadgītā (the context of the metaphor).

Now let us consider the relevance of the religious beliefs for the metaphor. Asvattha-banyan is a peculiar tree in India. Its branches grow upward, and the roots down into the ground where they are regenerated in the form of the twigs again. This continuous process of regeneration illustrates 'temporary' as well as 'eternal' dimensions of the tree, the branches of which signify the continuous process of death and regeneration. Within the system of Hinduism illustrated in the Bhagavadgītā the world of matter is created, it sustains itself and it is destroyed only to be re-created. Also, according to the system of the Bhagavadgītā, individual human beings go through the processes of creation, sustenance, death and regeneration. These processes are viewed as part of *Samsāra* "the wheel of eternal return."

The metaphor in (2) of the *Aśvattha* tree is suggestive of this "wheel of eternal return." Without the context of the system of the religious beliefs, the link between the vehicle and its tenor cannot be established. Similarly, the major metaphor of the *Asvattha* tree is accompanied and accomplished by several metaphors such as *chandāni yasya patrāni*. 'Its leaves are the Vedic hymns; *viṣaya-pravālah* "twigs are the objects of senses," etc.

The above discussion on example (2) raises a question regarding the primary unit. Should we consider it to be a word i.e., *Aśvattha* or the whole sentence or the whole utterance? or one major and other minor metaphors? This metaphor can be analyzed as follows: there is one central metaphor of *Asvattha* tree which has several submetaphors as its subparts as shown in the following diagram:



The relationship between the submetaphors and the central metaphor may be viewed as of the parts to the whole in which the submetaphors are parts of the central metaphor of the Asvattha tree. While the Asvattha tree is the central vehicle of the world, the parts of the Asvattha tree, i.e., the branches, leaves, and the twigs are the vehicles of the diverse existences, Vedic hymns, and the objects of the senses respectively. Note that the part-whole relationship between the submetaphors and the central metaphor is understood only in the context of the religious beliefs. The following discussion shows that we find at least three major linguistic units of metaphor; i.e. a word (3), a sentence (4), and the whole utterance (i.e., a myth) (5).

(a) *Word*

tvameva mātā ca pitā tvameva
tvameva *bandhuśca sakhā* tvameva

You indeed are mother, father, brother, friend.

In (3), which is a prayer to God, several word-metaphors are used such as *pitā* 'father', *mātā* 'mother', *bandhu* 'brother, relative', and *sakhā* 'friend'. In (4), the metaphor spreads over the whole sentence. One set of objects (i.e., chariot, the lord of the chariot, charioteer and reins) is used as a vehicle for the other set of objects (i.e., body, self (*ātman*), intellect, and mind, respectively). The metaphor is not restricted to the individual words, rather, the inter-relationship among parts of one set is also used as a vehicle for the inter-relationship among parts of the other set., i.e., the chariot, (*ratha*), the lord of the chariot (*rathin*), the charioteer (*sārathi*), and reins (*pragraham*) are inter-related in the same way as the objects in the other set, i.e., body (*śarīram*), self (*ātman*), intellect (*buddhi*), and mind (*mana*).

(b) *Sentence*

In example (4) the metaphor refers to the body as a chariot, the mind as reins and the self as the lord of the chariot.

ātmanaṃ rathinaṃ viddhi, śarīram rathaṃ eva tu:
buddhim tu sārathim viddhi, manaḥ pragrahaṃ eva ca.

Know the Self as the lord of the chariot and the body as, verily, the chariot, know the intellect as the charioteer and the mind as, verily, the reins.¹³

in example (5), the whole utterance (i.e., the myth) from the *Brahmavai-varta Purāna* is a metaphor of *eternity Time* and the role of *karma* as assumed in the religious system of Hinduism. Consider example (5).

(c) *Myth*

"The life and kingship of an Indra endure seventy-one eons, and (a) when twenty-eight Indras have expired one Day and Night of Brahma has elapsed; (b) but the existence of one Brahma, measured in such Brahma Days and Nights, is only one hundred and eight years. Brahma follows Brahma; (c) one sinks, the next arises: the endless series cannot be told. There is no end to the number of those Brahmas-to say nothing of Indras.

"But the universes side by side at any given moment, each harboring a Brahma and an Indra: who will estimate the number of these? Beyond the farthest vision, crowing outer space, the universes come and go, an innumerable host. Like delicate boats they float on the fathomless, pure waters that form the body of Vishnu. Out of every hair-pore of that body a universe bubbles and breaks. Will you presume to count them? Will you number the gods in all those worlds - the worlds present and the worlds past?"

(d) A procession of ants had made its appearance in the hall during the discourse of the boy. In military array, in a column four yards wide, the tribe paraded across the floor. The boy noted them, paused, and stared then suddenly laughed with an astonishing peal, but immediately subsided into a profoundly indrawn and thoughtful silence.

"Why do you laugh?" stammered Indra. "Who are you, mysterious being, under this deceiving guise of a boy?" The proud king's throat and lips had gone dry, and his voice continually broke. "Who are you, Ocean of Virtues, enshrouded in deluding mist?"

13. *Kathopanishad* 1.3.3.

(e) The magnificent boy resumed: *"I laughed because of the ants. The reason is not to be told. Do not ask me to disclose it. The seed of woe and the fruit of wisdom are enclosed within this secret. It is the secret that smites with an ax the (f) tree of worldly vanity, hews away its roots, and scatters its crown. This secret is a lamp to those groping in ignorance. This secret lies buried in the wisdom of the ages, and is rarely revealed even to saints. This secret is the living air of those ascetics who renounce (g) and transcend mortal existence: but worldlings, deluded by desire and pride, it destroys."*¹⁴

The myth is about Indra, the god of heaven who due to his excessive ego wants to build an enormously large and lavish palace which would be of unprecedented importance in the universe. The myth is a metaphor of a common man who due to his intense attachment to the material world and ego becomes oblivious to his transitory existence in the "eternity" and "time". His karma (actions) is guided by his greed to possess material pleasures, which bind him down to the cycle of rebirth and influence the form which he assumes in the following birth (i. e., Indra becomes an ant). Although there are some key notions expressed through the word - metaphors in this myth, they are adequately analyzed and/or understood as part of the larger metaphor expressed through the whole myth. Let us consider the major notions in this myth. The underlined passages (a) - (g) mark the key-notions in the myth. With those major concepts, Viṣṇu the god of sustenance explains the secret of the universe to Indra. In (a), (b), and (c) the notions of Eternity, the cycle of rebirth, and transitoriness and insignificance of individual existence are suggested (d) is suggestive of the role of karma in the process of rebirth. The parade of ants is the metaphor of Indras who, due to their ego, vanity and evil actions (*karma*) were reborn as ants. (e), (f) and (g) are suggestive of how one who is attached to this material world is destined to suffer due to his ignorance about his existence in the eternity and Time (i.e., he is reborn as an ant). The above seven notions individually may not be viewed as metaphors but together they form the whole myth which functions as a metaphor of eternity, time, cycle of rebirth and the role of karma. The above myth is in fact an elaborately structured metaphor.

The above three present a very small sample of metaphors observed in the language of religion and point out that the linguistic unit of meta-

14. As translated by H. R. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. Joseph Campbell (e.d.), Pantheon Books. 1947, pp. 3-11.

phor can be a *word*, a *sentence*, or a *myth*. In order to justify the statement that metaphor is not restricted to any particular syntactic unit, it is essential to identify the function of metaphor and moreover demonstrate that any one of the syntactic units can be used for the metaphor to carry out that function.

While discussing the function of metaphor, Soskice (1985:22) points out "The metaphor is established as soon as the reader is able to detect that one thing is being spoken of in terms suggestive of another." This definition notes the primary function of metaphor which is to establish a link between two "things" - one being spoken of and the other being suggested. Since this link is established by the meaning of linguistic unit (meaning being contextually and/or conventionally determined); the criterion of establishing a metaphor is semantic. Thus it is not desirable to impose any particular syntactic unit as the primary unit of metaphor. The criterion for choosing a particular linguistic unit is that it must satisfy the condition of establishing a link between the two "things." Thus if a word such as *pitā* 'father' in (3) is chosen to be the linguistic unit of metaphor, then the link between *pitā* 'father' and God would have to be established within the boundary of the world without any further explicit elaboration on the relationship between the metaphor *pitā* 'father' and its referent 'God'.

One may argue in this context that the question of syntactic unit is totally irrelevant here since metaphor is the phenomenon of language use, and that the syntactic unit which appropriately establishes the link between the vehicle and the tenor is selected for the metaphor. The question still remains regarding the conditions under which a particular syntactic unit (word, sentence, phrase, paragraph, etc.) is chosen. A close examination of the data shows that if the metaphor is based on the denotational or primary meaning of the vehicle, then the linguistic unit is smaller (e.g., word as opposed to a sentence), as compared to the metaphor which is not based on the denotational/primary meaning of the vehicle. This hypothesis assumes that the metaphor based on the primary/literal meaning does not need elaboration, since the link between the vehicle and the tenor is readily established due to the familiarity of the reader/audience with the characteristics of the vehicle. In contrast to this, if the metaphor is based on those semantic features of the vehicle which are not part of its primary meaning, then for the link to be established, further elaboration is essential.

Based on the above observations, I would like to claim that the choice of a particular linguistic unit is determined as follows: When A is (used as) a vehicle which is suggestive of the tenor B, the linguistic unit for A is a word if the *suggestion* is based on the primary meaning (or basic semantic features) of A. For example, in (3) *pitā* 'father' is used as a metaphor of God. Here the metaphor is based on the basic semantic features of *pitā* 'father' i.e. the creator and protector. Therefore, the unit of word (*pitā*), is adequate. In contrast to this, the metaphor of the Asvattha tree in (2) involves those features of the tree (i.e. the branches being constantly regenerated and therefore eternally going through the cycle of *creation, sustenance, destruction, and re-creation*) which are not necessarily part of its primary meaning. Therefore, in order for the metaphor of the Asvattha tree to be suggestive of the world caught in the eternal cycle of *creation, sustenance, and destruction*, further elaboration of the features is essential. Consequently, the unit of the metaphor is not a word (i.e. Asvattha tree), rather, it spreads over sentences (example 2).

As compared to (2) and (3), (5) presents a more complex situation, where the metaphor (the myth) and its referent involve intricate networks of relationships (i.e. a chain of *Indras, their ego, their actions, and ants* on the one hand and *eternity, time, karma, and rebirth* on the other). The metaphor involves various semantic features of the individual parts (of the network) which are not their basic semantic features i.e. a chain of *Indras* marks not the primary meaning 'many *Indras*,' rather it marks transitoriness of each individual *Indra*. Similarly 'ego' does not mark the individuality (which is the primary meaning of 'ego'), rather, it marks the ignorance about the totality and so on.

In addition to this, the metaphor not only consists of the amalgamation of the parts, rather it involves the semantic features of the total network. Therefore, for the link to be established between the two networks, linguistic units of *word*, and *sentences* are not adequate, rather, the elaborate myth is chosen. This point can be briefly summarized as follows: The distance from the primary meaning is proportional to the length of the linguistic unit, i.e. the closer the metaphor to its primary meaning, smaller the linguistic unit.

Closer to the primary meaning/smaller linguistic unit

Examples :

- (1) word (3)
- (2) sentence (5) (2) & (4)
- (3) myth (5)

Distant from the primary meaning/larger linguistic unit

Evidence :

Two types of evidence is available to support the above hypothesis: a) a metaphor is not comprehended unless the primary meaning of the vehicle is known, and that metaphor is understood after elaboration of the semantic features of the vehicle, and b) psycholinguistic experiments show¹⁵ that the metaphors based on the literal meaning are more easily understood than the metaphors based on non-literal meaning. Let us consider an example illustrating the case such as (a). A metaphor such as 'We are all quarks' is not understood without the knowledge of the meaning of the word 'quarks.' In such cases the link between the vehicle (quarks) and the tenor (we) is established by elaborating the features of the vehicle. i.e., quarks are bound elements which cannot function independently of other quarks. In this process of elaboration, the unit of the metaphor is enlarged. Secondly, Ortony,¹⁶ claims that the literal meaning of the words in a sentence such as 'the fabric had begun to fray' is decidedly understood faster than the non-literal meaning of the words (i.e., fabric=inter-relationship of human beings). He further claims that more elaboration of the context is essential to comprehend non-literal meaning.

5. Metaphor, Linguistic Structure, and 'Transcendent Reality'

It is claimed in the preceeding discussion that the knowledge of the vehicle is essential for the link to be established between the vehicle and the tenor. The question may be asked in this context whether it is essential to have the knowledge of the tenor as well, in oder for the link to be established? If the answer is 'yes', then we have to assume one of the following: a) whenever a metaphor

15. A. Ortony, Some Psycholinguistic Aspects of Metaphor, 1980. In *Cognition and Figurative Language*, R.A. Honeck and R.R. Hoffman (eds). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. pp. 69-86.

16. *Ibid.*

is established, the knowledge of both the vehicle and the tenor is assumed, or b) when the tenor is beyond the range of the knowledge of the human beings, its link with the vehicle can not be established. The above question is particularly relevant in the context of the language of religion where the transcendent reality (eg. god) is the tenor in a number of metaphors. This issue has raised a major controversy among theologians and philosophers who hold diverse views on this issue. According to the empiricists, such as Ayer¹⁷ Phillips¹⁸ and Wittgenstein¹⁹ a metaphor can not have "transcendent reality" as its referent. Their claim is based on the assumption that "transcendent" means 'beyond human condition'; and therefore unintelligible. Therefore metaphors have no purpose in the language of religion since human capacity by definition is limited. Thus metaphor can not have a 'transcendent' referent. Ayer²⁰ states "To say that something transcends human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible and what is unintelligible can not be significantly described....". If one allows that it is impossible to define god in intelligible terms, then one is allowing that it is impossible for a sentence both to be significant and about God.

Second view²¹ is that the reference of metaphors in the language of religion is grounded in what is viewed, determined or construed as transcendent reality within a particular religious tradition. This view is supported by Wittgenstein, who, within his framework of linguistic empiricism, argues for determining meaning or truth of a statement on the basis of its use in a given context. Thus Wittgenstein moved the focus of meaning to the use from the linguistic structure, when he claimed "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from it".²² Within Wittgenstein's framework, a vehicle would succeed or fail to establish its connection with tenor not necessarily because of its inherent capacity/incapacity, rather, because that particular linguistic structure cannot be used as a vehicle for that tenor within a particular religious system. Within this approach, the capacity of a linguistic structure to

17. *Op. cit.*

18. D.Z. Phillips, Religious Beliefs and Language Games, In Basil Mitchell (ed.) *The Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1971. pp. 121-142.

19. L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Edited by Cyril Barrett. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1966.

20. *Op. cit.* p. 156.

21. *Op. cit.*

22. *Op. cit.* p. 109.

become a vehicle for a particular tenor is not determined in an a priori fashion, rather, it is determined within the context (religious beliefs). It is like a pawn in the game of chess whose capacity is judged only in the context of the game. Thus according to the first view, any description (including metaphorical) of transcendent reality is impossible through the medium of language, while the second view stresses the plausibility of such description based on the conceptualization of the transcendent reality in a particular religious system.

In this context, one can take an entirely different position, i.e., metaphors refer to the 'transcendent reality' by demonstrating the failure of the method, device, or conceptual framework to describe it. It is in this context that I will show how metaphors are used to refer to the 'transcendent reality' in the Hindu religious texts. I will present several linguistic structures. My main thesis here is that the linguistic structures used to describe the 'transcendent reality' primarily show the breakdown of the conditions which operate in the world of human experience. Inoperability of the conditions of space, time, the law of causation is taken to be suggestive of "transcendence" from the world of human experience. Examples (6)–(10) outline the structures mentioned above. Consider example (6) which involves the description of Brahman 'the ultimate reality' in Hinduism.

Example 6 Breaking the Barriers: Space

anor aṇiyān mahato mahiyān, ātmāsya jantor nihito guhāyām :
 taṃ akratuḥ paśyati vīta-śoko dhātu-prasādān mahimānam
 ātmanaḥ.

Smaller than the small, greater than the great, the self is set in the heart of every creature. The unstriving man beholds Him, freed from sorrow. Through tranquility of the mind and the senses (he sees) the greatness of the self.²³

Example (6) is taken from Kathopanisad. The context is of the description of all-pervasive, eternal Brahman – the ultimate reality. When Naciketas asks "What transcends duality, god of Death (Yama) uses the metaphor in (6) to illustrate transcendence of Brahman. Brahman

23. *Kathopaniṣad* 1.2.20.

transcends the barrier of space indicating inapplicability of the limitations of space on Brahman, i.e., Brahman is smaller than small, greater than great the assumption is that neither the lower nor the upper limit of space is applicable to Brahman.

Now consider example (7) which describes Brahman who transcends the barriers/limits as *anādi* 'beginningless' and *ananta* 'endless'. Since "beginning" and "end" are conceived only in the context of time, their negation puts the ultimate reality beyond the limits of time.

Example 7 Breaking the Barriers : Time

anādi, ananta
Beginningless, endless.

Example (8) presents another method of describing transcendence. Here the topic of description is the all-pervasiveness of Brahman. The assumption here is that Brahman transcends comparison/contrast of every kind because every comparison implies duality. Brahman is all-pervasive. Therefore, it cannot admit any duality.

Example 8 Opposite Characteristics

āsino duram vrajati, śayāno yāti sarvataḥ :
kastaṃ madāmadam devam mad anyo jñātum arhati.

Sitting, he moves far; lying he goes everywhere. Who, save myself, is fit to know that god who rejoices and rejoices not?²⁴

aśarīram sarīreṣu, anavastheṣu avasthitam,
mahāntam vibhum ātmānam matvā dhīro na śocati.

Knowing the self who is the bodiless among bodies, the stable among the unstable, the great, the all-pervading, the wise man does not grieve.²⁵

In (8), the "transcendent" reality is described by attributing mutually exclusive characteristics to it, i.e. "sitting he moves far, lying he goes

24. *Kathopanīṣad* 1.2.21.

25. *Kathopanīṣad* 1.2.22.

everywhere" and "bodiless among bodies, the stable among the unstable". Here the logic of the mutual exclusiveness of the characteristics in the above pairs completely breaks down. Co-existence of mutually exclusive characteristics is used to indicate transcendence of the ultimate reality. Now consider example (9) which involves description of the ultimate reality – Brahman. By denying its identity with every existence in the world, the transcendence of Brahman is suggested.

Example 9 Negation

neti neti – (It) is not (this), (It) is not (that).²⁶

The linguistic device of negation is used here to indicate transcendence. The assumption is as follows : if it (Brahman) is not any of the entities of human experience then it must transcend human experience/existence. Now consider example (10).

Example 10 Beyond the Law of Causation

nainam chindanti śastrāṇi
nainam dahati pāvakah
na cainam kledayanty āpo
na śoṣayati mārutaḥ

The soul can never be cut into pieces by any weapon, nor can he be burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor withered by the wind.²⁷

Transcendence of the ultimate reality is indicated in (10) by claiming the inapplicability of the law of causation to it. The assumption is that the soul (Brahman/Ātman) is not subjected to the law of causation, i.e., it can not be cut into pieces by any weapon, it can not be burnt by fire, etc., therefore, it must 'transcend' the law of causation and thereby the world of human experience.

The above discussion raises two sets of questions, i.e. one, from the point of view of the form and the other from the point of view of the content. First, the discussion shows that the function of the syntactic construction varies from one context to another. For example the structures

26. *Bṛhadāraṇyakōpaniṣad* 3.9.26.

27. *The Bhagavadgītā* 2.23.

such as *comparative* (example 6), and *contradiction* (example 8) function as negation which negate the confinement of the transcendent reality within the boundaries of human experience. Similarly, in example (9) negation is used to assert the existence of the transcendent reality. In general, the metaphors in the language of religion above show that the function of a syntactic structure is adequately understood only in the context of the discourse of the text. This brings us to the other side of the issue namely that the above interpretation of 'transcendence' through the above linguistic structures is valid only within the framework of beliefs of Hinduism which is presented in the above discussion, i.e., the following characteristics are assumed to mark the ultimate reality in the view of Hinduism:

- a) the ultimate reality transcends human condition
- b) it is eternal, and
- c) it is all-pervasive

In the absence of this framework, the metaphors in (6-11) can not be interpreted as above. In principle, it is possible to imagine a religion which does not assume 'transcendent', 'eternal' and 'all-pervasive' nature of the ultimate reality. In such cases, (6-11) may well be interpreted as mere descriptions of a non-existent entity or a straight negation of the existence of an entity. The discussion points out that the function of a linguistic structure is determined by the underlying system of beliefs which serves as a context for the discourse.

The discussion illustrates that metaphor in the language of religion has a split reference to one within the linguistic structure and the other within the system of beliefs (e.g. transcendent reality), i.e. (10) when interpreted outside of the religious context refers to an indestructible entity; when placed in the context of the religious beliefs however, its reference is the transcendent reality.

The discussion leads to another point namely that when presented through the media of metaphor, 'transcendent' can be viewed only as a relative and not an absolute entity. The only knowledge we gain of the transcendent reality is that it transcends the world of human experience.

6. Metaphor as Ritualistic Symbol

Linguistic metaphor plays another role in the religious practices of Hinduism, specifically, in the sacrificial rituals (10th-6th century B.C.).

This role is exemplified in the Brahmana literature. The function of metaphor in the rituals is to establish an identity between ritual-related objects and the phenomenal reality. (for further discussion see Pandharipande 1987). Thus for example in (12) the metaphor establishes an identity between the altar and the woman and the veda and the male respectively. Consider example 12.

Example 12 Metaphor as ritualistic symbol

strī vedih pumān vedahyadvedena vedim sammārṣi mithunat-vāya santatam āhavanīyāt

Vedi (sacrificial altar, fem.) is a woman and *Veda* (sacrificial grass, mas.) is a man.²⁸

The role of this metaphor is different from the one discussed earlier. In the earlier role, metaphor is used as a device to convey the religious system, while in the sacrificial rituals it is part of the "schema" of sacrificial rituals. It does not *describe* the ritual, rather, it participates in it like the sacrificial altar, water, or a vessel. Sacrificial rituals, within the Brāhmanic religious practices, are the methods of controlling or influencing the powers – (natural as well as supernatural) which operate in the world. The method of controlling the 'power' is guided by the following assumptions: sacrificial rituals symbolically re-create the phenomenal reality on the altar. Sacrifice is the re-created universe, in which each sacrificial object symbolically represents part of the phenomenal reality. If this re-creation is accurate and in fact matches the cosmic order, then it would create enormous power similar to cosmic energy. This symbolic re-creation of the cosmic order takes place by establishing identity between the ritual objects and the phenomenal world. This is done by using the linguistic metaphor as in (12). It is believed that the metaphor (i.e., the *strīvedih*, 'the altar is the woman') not only establishes the identity but also infuses the male/female energy into the ritual object. For example the metaphor in (12) establishes the identity of the *altar* and the *veda* with woman and man respectively and thereby infuses female and male energy into them respectively. Consequently, the coupling of the two energies creates enormous cosmic power.

Two points are of importance in this context. One, in this context the linguistic metaphor is interpreted as a symbol similar to non-linguistic

28. *Maitrāyaṇīsamhitā* 4.1.

symbols such as symbolic ritual actions of bowing down before altar or offering of the water or the ritual objects such as clarified butter, etc., which when used properly, give an enormous power to the sacrificer. Second, in the process of establishing a metaphor, grammatical gender of a noun is interpreted as natural gender. For example, *Vedi* 'altar' is interpreted to be a female (or has a female referent) because *vedi* is a feminine noun.

7. Conclusion

The major points in the preceding discussion can be summarized as follows :

- a) The linguistic structure of the metaphor can not be confined to any particular syntactic unit such as word, sentence, etc., since the criterion for establishing a metaphor is semantic and not syntactic.
- b) The choice of a linguistic unit is determined on the basis of the features of the metaphor (symbol).
- c) The major function of the metaphor is to establish a link between the thing which is spoken of and the thing which is suggested.
- d) Twofold function of metaphor is observed in the language of religion: as a linguistic symbol, it describes the 'transcendent' ultimate reality through various linguistic structures, while as an extra-linguistic/ritualistic symbol it participates in the process of sacrificial re-creation of the universe.

The discussion raises the following two questions:

- a) If the establishment of the link between the two things is the condition which determines the lower limit of the length of the linguistic unit, what is the condition which determines its upper limit beyond which the length of the linguistic unit can not be stretched?
- b) It is shown that the function of linguistic structures varies with the context of the extra-linguistic factors such as religious beliefs. The question is can we isolate the function of the linguistic form without any freerence to the extra-linguistic context of its usage.