CHAPTER II

THE BIRTH OF 'MEANING'
A Systemic Genealogy of Indian Semantics

I. SEGREGATION OF MEANING AND LANGUAGE

Etymology and semantics in India emerged, if not as linguistic disciplines then, in any case, as discernible fields of intellectual activity a propos of language, long before logic was formed. In this respect, the situation was just the inverse of that in Greece. Aristotelian logic imparted its influence to grammatical categories. In the Stoics’ tradition, logic was given obvious preference to their linguistic doctrines. Both of these facts, undoubtedly, predetermined the fates of grammar for centuries. Up to the beginning of the 20th century, and particularly with the influence of the Port-Royal logic, grammar was not a science of language as a specific object of studies, but a normative knowledge based on axioms and ways of predication of various subjects and relations. These axioms were idealized in the form of grammatical categories which were called the ‘parts of speech’. In fact, the mathematical method, through the mediation of logic, usurped the matter of language.

We see a picture of the inverse composition in India. There the rules of logic had to be emancipated under and from the rules of grammar. The most immediate evidence of this fact is that Indian formal logic never knew symbolization, and its development was processed within the natural language material. Therefore formal logical structures were invariably loaded with its specifics [1]. Only in the final run of their long history did a few logicians of the Navya Nyāya school succeed in proving, in a manner somewhat resembling modern logical positivism, that many problems of their science should be attributed to effects of linguistic origin [2, 3].

In contrast to this, the segregation of language and meaning was attempted and achieved at an astonishingly early historical stage. Regardless of how precise our datings of the first cultural manipulations (i.e., editing and composing) with the Veda are (but certainly much before the 6th century B.C.), all the signs of a remarkable maturity of semantic thought working with language as an object, are at hand. But
inasmuch as such disciplines as semantics and linguistics did not exist at that time, these most important and interesting developments can be studied and reconstructed only by the methods of the sociology of knowledge [4, 5].

It is well known that the Vedic authorities originally set up, and later maintained, three possible approaches to the Veda as a special kind of object. They considered these approaches to be the triune objective of ‘worship’ (upāsana), ‘ritual action’ (karma), and ‘knowledge’ (jñāna or vidyā). Speaking more precisely, they regarded the Vedic text as open to commentary from these three standpoints. Of course, commentary means ‘interpretable with reservation’, i.e., the position of a commentator itself implies the impossibility of providing an exhaustive interpretation of the text commented on: something should remain unexplainable, to keep the appropriate ‘hermeneutic distance’. It was only natural for the Vedic exegetes to suggest that certain failures in understanding the meaning of some ‘elementary’ verbal messages received from the Vedic text are excusable and even justifiable, insofar as these ‘elements’ might have parts inappropriate for different uses.

But this ‘multiple positioning’ is helpful in rendering only one of the possible and required approaches to the Vedic text, as it involves just one side of the problem, namely, the apologetic side. But there emerged another necessary approach, the critical one. Even the earliest of all [texts], the principal Rgveda Samhita, is the product of a most radical transformation of the hypothetical, ‘preceding’ collection of mythological hymns, into a composition which comprised all its elements as ‘mythological’ but only in the architectonic sense, i.e., taken separately. But if taken in its proper systemic meaning of a samhitā, a compositionally and syntactically whole body of language, it looked as though its presumed ‘mythological’ content was completely discarded by its users, the subjects of its total meaning. This paradox will be elaborated upon in due course but it seems clear that this radical transformation of social uses of the Veda was achieved in a series of disputes as to whether the Veda has a specific and unique meaning, or not.

In this connection, three different points of view were emphasized. According to one of them (the so-called Aitihäsika), the Rgveda, for example, is a text relating, in the immediate historical sense, some real facts of the past and thus confirms the reality of the Vedic deities only as historical personages. This opinion strongly resembles Eugemerean theories of myth in the West, and it seems to be an old and popular