Twisted Speech as a Santal Theory of Discourse

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Can oral literature inform us about how symbolic thought works? I propose to analyse Santal metaphors by looking at different genres of Santal discourse, metaphors that give us an insight in categorisation and work as mnemonic devices shaping a local theory of knowledge. My study of Santal discourse relates patterns of speaking to other dimensions of interaction. Pragmatics as presented in this article, however, is informed by analytical concerns developed in anthropology, in particular the study of oral performance. I am concerned, here, by the grammatical and semantic relations between speech events and activities among Santals. To study Santal discourse is to grapple with what Leach (1972) calls the inter-penetration of codes. Santal discourse is constituted by heterogeneity of codes and genres such as myth, narrative, riddles, folk-tales and omens and these forms show some variation from one region to another. Despite the differences, Santal oral forms constitute a universe of discourse.

Twisted speech and metaphors

The Santals have developed a particular conception of veiled language “twisted speech” used both in daily life and in ritual discourse. It induces metaphors and metonyms, which contribute to shape analogical knowledge by providing people with material for reflection and premises for action. Regarding veiled language, Santals adopt two kinds of attitudes: to interpret metaphors they must have in mind a typology of speech events, such as exchanging riddles, interpreting omens, or consulting an ojha (priest and diviner). In these contexts, to make or not to make an utterance becomes a matter of sharing knowledge. This type of linguistic exchange is necessary to show one’s knowledge and become a key social actor. But Santals do not pay attention to the metaphors they use in joking, or insulting each other. At this level, metaphors contribute in shaping conceptual knowledge but are not necessarily interpreted.

Explicit discussions of metaphor have multiplied in the past 50 years and yet for most commentators, a metaphor is an expression that claims similarity or likeness and is intended to be taken non-literally. My own idea of metaphor is guided by anthropological concerns that take into account an interactional conception of meaning. What is being communicated is part of a context and cannot be determined without reference to a speech situation, an approach that differs from that of rhetoricians who analyse metaphors as poetic devices.

Forms of speech

Today, among Santals, traditional speech events are infrequent but they mark important occasions, such as celebrating Jharkhand culture. Customary speech is preserved and reinvented through revivalist movements becoming an object of prestige and a metaphor for resistance to pan-Indian hegemony (Chatterjee 1993, Carrin 2002). Santal cultural figures such as Ragunath Murmu have invented their own script to write Santali (Carrin 2002). Today Santals are conscious that discourse is a tool for resistance and asserting identity. This influences the semantic constraints that mark the situation of discourse.

Santal informants agree that there is a continuum from the most traditional forms of discourse to daily verbal exchanges. The creation myth is held as the most venerable form of discourse; then follows the bahā seren - invocations sung in praise of the bongas (deities) of the sacred grove; đā gama - prayers for rain; and finally bahēn - invocations dedicated to the hill spirits or bura bongas. Then, opinions vary: while some informants hold that the songs of Sohraj sung during the cattle festival are next on the list, others maintain that kāram biti, a recitation to honour the memory of a prestigious deceased, is more important. All seem to agree that mantar or invocations addressed to bongas during healing rituals are crucial, but some argue that they do not trust the ojhas (diviners). But everybody enjoys stories of bongas and witches who attack human victims, and some informants take them as serious testimony of real experience.

All these forms of speech have ritual value and contribute to the dynamics of knowledge. Yet, this picture may be changing: narratives of ancestors are sometimes preferred to other forms of ritual discourse since people defend this kind of knowledge as tradition. Such narratives are valid knowledge, seen as transmitted by the ancestors themselves. Symbolic utterances like omens, riddles and metaphors, on the other hand, are certainly part of the tradition but form a tacit knowledge that is not always consciously memorised. This tacit knowledge is cast in images linked to non-verbal codes, for example, riddles establish analogies between humans and animals, which allude to cooking, eating, defecating, sex and other biological functions. (Carrin-Bouez 1985).

Traditional speech includes both ritual discourse and political oratory. Political oratory, used at the kulhi durup (to sit in the village street), is a ritualised form of speech that allows good speakers to argue in public. In the context of political rhetoric, it is necessary to use euphemisms to avoid conflict. Santals deem it important to negotiate, as did their ancestors in the forest. To manage actual conflicts, orators often allude to previous clan wars when
“brothers were fighting each other and when the horn of epilepsy was sounding.” The ‘horn of epilepsy’ alludes to mythical madness, a hot wind that stirred their ancestors to forget their blood ties and kill each other.

**Metaphors as a coherent semantic domain**

Santal metaphors form a coherent semantic domain. Some seem to be sensory images, like echo-words composed of morphemes which carry meaning in one type of discourse, but are applied to characterise another reality: thus the echo-word *poloc*‘poloc’ which usually applies to “a small quantity of sperm” gets another meaning during the name-giving ceremony where it alludes to the “birth of a child.” In echo-words, the repetition of the root stresses the meaning: thus *saguc baguc* — “a confused speech” describes two stars that get too close in the sky, provoking an eclipse, which the Santals associate with incest (Bodding 1929: 269). The translation of a spatial into an auditive code is common in Santali where, for example, a talkative person is called *lapar lapar* - an echo-word describing a quick movement of the tongue.

How do Santals talk about their own speech? In Santali, the most frequent term to convey the idea of “speaking” is *ror*, and the substantive of the term means “speech, word.” To speak implies a movement from inside to outside, talk is a “door” (*silpin*). We may note, here, the expression *ror chuti* - “to free one’s talk, to joke.” But in certain contexts *ror* means “to criticise,” *kani karon te gutiye ror keda* — “he has scolded his servant.” The term *lat* “to say, to tell, to inform” is often affixed in expressions such as *lat doho* “to tell information” while the term *galmarao* means “to converse, to discuss” and is used to convey the idea of a discourse between lovers.

Santal discourse is compared to a fire since one must get warm to speak well. But heat is associated with rage: *edreye sengel ena* — “to consume oneself with rage”. The term *sengel* “fire” appears in different contexts to evoke a “dry” talk that, one suspects, is under the influence of witches and malevolent *bongas*. The insults of angry women (*eger*) are dangerous as they go deep inside the skin. And the proverb says: women’s reproaches (*ruhet*) penetrate the skin, sharp as the stones on which one sharpens one’s knives.”

Ritualised speech protects the person from the uncontrolled speech of those who utter angry words (*eger katha*). Some examples of ritualised speech are found during hunting where the *dihuri*, the hunting priest, asks villagers whether everybody is at peace or whether they have quarrelled. They should answer that all is fine, that they will take what is good in each other’s talk, which means they should not quarrel during the hunt. Indeed, the hunt is when the priest settles disputes and tradition is cultivated. Juniors must learn from their elders how to shoot and share game, as speech should be straight like an arrow. But the hunters wait for the signal of the Dihuri Baba, the “father of the hunt”, as they should not wound animals for the sake of killing. The same concerns apply to speech — men should measure their words, unlike women whose jokes are thorny, or witches whose words are magical arrows (*ban*) killing their victims.

**The vegetal metaphor as an internal metaphor**

Sapir and Crocker (1977) stress the problem of internal metaphors, which they oppose to external or ordinary metaphors. In Santali, good speech is straight as the village street (*mucat*), which applies to chiefs who take good decisions. But ancestors often talked using *benthal katha*, which are twisted like branches, as truth is not simple. The image of a branch makes us aware that Santals conceptualise discourse as a living kind. Internal metaphors imply a relation of predication between a natural species and the members of a given society.

Internal metaphors are constituted of a series of oppositions (some of which correspond to different levels of vegetal taxonomy) that connect known aspects of the world. First, trees allude to mythical times when Santal ancestors were resting in the forest under two kinds of trees: *sal* (*Shorea Robusta*, L) and *mohua* (*Bassia Latifolia*, Gartn.), which are valued in rituals and connected by analogy with body substances. The bone is compared to the branch and the flower to the uterus. (Carrin 1986). Ritually, some metaphors linking bone and grain occur as twisted speech during both the name giving ceremony and funerals. After the cremation, the mourner takes the bones of the deceased and puts on them a flower.
This is called *jan baha* “to make a flower out of bone” implying the regeneration of the patriline.

Two other figures, from clanic myths, stress the identity of humans and trees: thus *bid dare*, “to lift a branch of *sal*” alludes to the gesture of the chiefs during the migrations, who used to brandish a branch of *sal*, symbol of the ancestors, towards the sky to rally their companions. Even today, such a branch is planted at crossroads to inform villagers about a meeting, the number of leaves indicating the number of days before the event. Planted with its leaves downwards, the same branch indicates that a meeting will sanction a transgression of endogamy. The branch as metonymic for the person appears in different contexts: the expression *karam dar* “branch of the karam tree” is used to address a ceremonial friend. More globally, branches and saplings (*dar*) allude to grand-children, roots (*rehe*) to ancestors, and climbers (*nanri*) to friends, in ceremonial speech during marriage or in narratives about the ancestors. The same metonymy applies to parts of the tree, linked to parts of the body: branch relates to arm, roots to feet, leaves to ears, bark to skin, sap to blood, trunk to body, upper branches to head and so on.

The image of the ear is also rooted in narratives, as ancestors used to rest under trees to listen (*anjom*) to the tradition “with their ears under the leaves.” Here, leaves allude to ancestors and continuity. Reciprocally, to touch somebody’s ear marks an engagement: young couples catch each other’s ears to get betrothed. During the marriage ceremony, the bride’s parents warn the parents of the boy that they have given the flesh and the bones of the girl but “have kept the blood from the ear”, a way to say they will keep an eye on their daughter, even after marriage.

The animal metaphor as an external metaphor

Domestic animals, insects, water snails and crabs - which are eaten by the Santals - are found in riddles. But tigers and leopards cannot be evoked in twisted speech as they serve as witnesses when somebody takes an oath and says: “Let tigers and leopards eat me if I lie!” External metaphors that are built on comparisons are found in animal riddles. Most often, the hidden term of this comparison refers to another animal or to a human being as in the following: “A black dog is swimming in the river” answer: “A leech”; the implicit meaning is that nobody sees the legs of a swimming dog. But my informants suggest another homology between the dog and the leech: “When we work in a rice-field” they say, “leeches rub our legs just like a dog.”

Yet another riddle built on different premises suggests another aspect of the leech: “A sheep is killed for the one who has no teeth”; answer: “A leech.” Here, the killing of the sheep evokes a blood sacrifice to a mysterious entity deprived of teeth while the answer stresses the blood-sucking nature of the leech, which in its turn recalls the *bonga*.

Some of these external metaphors express paradoxes that get resolved in similarities: tiny animals which seem very strange have, in fact, some hidden human dimensions: “With haste, he has built his house”; answer: *luman*, the silkworm. The silkworm symbolises the taming of wilderness as they produce silk thread, but the Santals talk of the silkworm to evoke the puberty of young boys. Becoming adult implies a risk that is compared to the mutation of the silkworms as they emerge from their cocoons, an image which, in ritual speech, describes the wandering of the ancestors across mythic countries.

Some of the animal riddles are used as warning. It is common to say to a pregnant woman: “Do not look at the tortoise!” (*hembrom*). The Santals think it a taboo for pregnant women to look at the tortoise (flesh and belly), since it evokes the open skin of the baby’s head. Both anatomical parts are “skin under bone”, which is evident for the tortoise but applies equally to the baby whose skull is not yet closed, and reflects the beating of its heart. Both the belly of the tortoise and the skull of the baby are supposed to get harder to become bone. Moreover, the flesh of the tortoise is called “*bonga ko jel*” or *bonga*’s flesh. Infants should avoid touching tortoises as their shadow is not yet fixed, and they may be attacked by *bongas*.

Twisted speech and the hidden intentions of discourse

In daily life as well as in ritual discourse, utterances transfer moral attributes to objects that frame specific kinds of interaction, such as “a fowl promised” or *sim agom*
that denotes a sal leaf wrapping a few feathers of a fowl. In case of misfortune, a kinsman of the sick person dedicates this materialised promise to the bonga, who is held responsible for the disease.

Heavy speech (hambal) conceals the intentions of the speaker. Such a speech traverses the person to whom it is addressed, and the idea of crossing implies death (paromea, he has crossed, he is dead). Some domestic implements have a double meaning. For example, the grinding-stone (gurgu) used to crush the roots of turmeric (sasan) conveys an idea of fertility, since the clothes of the bride and the bridegroom are daubed with sasan water before the wedding. But young men who learn the art of possession sit and turn on the gurgu to get in a trance, which is compared to love ecstasy. Thus the grinding-stone links possession and sexual pleasure. At night, witches crush poisonous roots on the gurgu to provoke miscarriage.

The semantic holism of ritual discourse

The internal metaphors, like “humans are trees,” develop images at different levels of discourse, such as the name-giving ceremony, narratives, riddles, invocations or exorcism. But one category of text, the karma binti, is sung by a guru to honour the memory of a prestigious deceased (goc’karam binti). The Karam narrative elucidates magical properties of trees, which stand for wealth and virtue. It presents some ritual enigmas where taboos regarding trees are questioned: thus it is said, “do not use the soso tree for the funeral pyre, it does not burn.” The paradox is resolved if one knows that for exorcism, ojas make oracular sticks from the branches of soso, which are pliable and, in certain circumstances, spit fire. This fire is compared to Shakti, the cosmic energy of the goddess, or to the ojha’s matted hair. (Carrin, 1997).

Santals use bentha katha to produce metaphors that are linked to form a coherent body of knowledge, like the vegetal/human/animal paradigm. These metaphors may be used in formulas of ceremonial speech or even ritual gestures. During the divorce ritual, the husband tears the leaf but keeps silent: the metaphor is enough. Santal ojas who master ritual discourse comment on bentha katha by arguing that the twisted speech is the original language of the bongas, which men try in vain to imitate. Ojas are fond of telling stories of meetings between men and bongas, where the latter proffer inaudible speech, not to dialogue with humans but to threaten them. (Carrin 1996a). One cannot communicate with bongas since the relationship is asymmetrical. Still, bongas often appear in human form so as to seduce women and trap them so that they forget taboos or transgress sexual rules. The ojas are the best informants about witches as they see witches roam the villages by night, aiming their magical darts at human victims. (Carrin 1996b).

Coherence of twisted speech as a kind of knowledge

How can a discourse which is conveyed by different kinds of utterances and repertoires of speech forms represent a single body of knowledge? Geertz (1983) has shown that knowledge is ineluctably local, indivisible from people’s instruments and encasements. Barth proposes to break with the implicit presupposition of cultural unity, to distinguish and analyse the “internal processes of differently constituted traditions of knowledge.” (2002: 3). Two kinds of knowledge are at work in Santal society: the knowledge of ordinary people, which relates to the tradition transmitted by the ancestors; and the secret knowledge of the ojha who belongs to a broader tradition that is mixed with popular Hinduism tinged with tantric or shaktist elements. We have seen how Santals reflect on their own linguistic activity. They conceptualise the good knowledge of the ojha (bidia) as a language to appease malevolent bongas, while witches have stolen the bidia and perverted it. This local conception of knowledge enables us to evaluate how metaphors shape a model of knowledge production and transmission. The field covered by metaphors includes both daily communication and ritual discourse, two modes of speech, which are parallel, as can be seen from words that have a double meaning.

I have used an interactional conception of metaphor, inspired by pragmatics, to analyse how different figures are displaced from one level of discourse to another. The pragmatic approach has allowed me to consider some objects as support of speech, as when words stand for objects; and to materialise intentions of discourse, as we have seen with the grinding-stone and the winnowing van.
Internal metaphors like “humans are trees” organise knowledge - including folk-classifications - but they also produce other figures that delimit semantic fields: thus vegetal metaphors concern rites of passage, and animal metaphors stress the difficulty of getting mature. Analysing Santal twisted speech, we have noted the centrality and recurrence of some of these tropes - the bone and the flesh standing for the permanent and ephemeral - as if minor genres were contributing to shape analogical knowledge.

The same analogy of bones and grains produces and organises metaphors at different levels of discourse. Internal metaphors show how different parts of the tree become equivalent to different parts of the human body. External metaphors show how the transformation of flesh and bone is a common central paradigm for animals and humans. The recurrence of these metaphors means they are embodied in ritual, as we have seen from the sequence of funerals, where the mourner makes flower out of bone, a symbol of regeneration of the lineage.

Knowledge of metaphors varies greatly between persons: for common people, riddles and jokes are easier to remember than stories about ancestors or narratives concerning the bongas, which may relate to individual experiences and are not evoked publicly. Common people memorise the “little talk” they have to remember on ritual occasions like name-giving and marriage but this knowledge is limited if we compare it to the ojha’s oratory art. The ojha tries to enhance any ritual he performs by displaying two kinds of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge is characterised by stories concerning the ancestors and is shared with senior men. His second knowledge includes change in tradition (Carrin 1986) since ojhas are more or less Hinduised and share a broader flux of knowledge which takes its roots, in Bengal, in popular as well as sect Hinduism, evoking Balinese moral and ritual system of thoughts. (Barth 2002).

But metaphors also stress the importance of tacit communication in a society where secrecy and witchcraft are central. Among Santals, to tell the truth requires divination as if it was difficult for ordinary people to guess what their addressee really wants to hear. Metaphors must fit the audience. How to speak truth and be a good orator when the audience has become heterogeneous, some sharing the values of their Hindu neighbours while others are steeped in tribal revivalist ideas? Those who cannot impose their speech lack prestige, while those who want to convince or seduce are drawn to use sweet words, to resist the sarcasm of good orators. It is important to be able to decode metaphors to guess at the hidden intentions of protagonists of discourse, as men, bongas, witches or even ojhas usually lie. But how can one avoid lying in a changing world where the basic criteria of truth are changing? And how are metaphors able to inform Santals of the process of knowledge production and change in tradition? Most Santals understand these figures while ojhas monopolise some sectors of knowledge such as ritual discourse and knowledge of the pharmacopia.

The conceptual structure of the ojha’s knowledge is different, since he is used to confronting the knowledge of his colleagues who may belong to different traditions. The systematic nature of the ojha’s knowledge reflects his ability to unite a heterogeneous set of skills and beliefs into a coherent discourse. The metaphors that the ojha uses help him to conflate the diversity of his inspiration into a model that he can transmit to his disciples. In opposing the knowledge of the common man to that of the ojha, I have tried to show how several branches of knowledge coexist, stressing that the metaphorical base of both sustain a tacit communication between Santals. But the ojha’s metaphors seem superfluous to ordinary people, since they do not link into everyday knowledge and ritual discourse, which for them shape both the worlds they perceive and the image of the world that they cast into rituals.
References


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