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The Being of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The ethos of philosophy is to know the unknown. Discovery and invention offer pathways to uncover the knowable, which leads to innovations. Language, the communicative manifestations, are usually attributed to human capacities, which is an anthropomorphic hubris. Other ‘animals’ do have communicative skills--perhaps more intense than ours--which we do not recognize as ‘language.’ The primary focus of this article is to signify the unity of languages that build society and culture as a community of communities. Implicitly, identity, character, and the contours of relationships evolve, and the symphony of languages constructs a culture that sustains humanity. Languages do not die; they are sometimes suffocated. “The being of language” (Foucault, 229: 42)² defines the experience of language in its *Becoming*.

The minutes of my language mean the limits of my world."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

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“...does not the Classical analysis of language and grammatical facts (from Lancelot to the end of eighteenth century) rest on a definite number of concepts whose content and usage had been established once and for all: the concept of judgement defined as general, normative form of any sentence, the concept of *subject* and *predicate* regrouped under the more general category of *noun*, the concept of *verb* used as the equivalent of that of *logical copula*, the concept of *word* defined as the sign of a representation, etc.? In this way, one might reconstitute

the conceptual architecture of Classical grammar”.

—Foucault, 1993: 34

Last summer, I had a distinctly joyful family vacation in Alaska’s wilderness, exploring six hundred miles of majestic mountainous range that encompassed unbelievable glaciers and snow-covered peaks, a testament to nature’s artwork over millions of years, as the Ice Age receded. The music of waves and winds, along with the sights and sounds of flora and fauna, invoked a sense of awe and humility. Jake, our guide in the National Denali Reserve Park, explained how the natives lived 13,000 years ago and developed their five main tribes, now mostly located in Anchorage. The name *Denali*

¹Brij Mohan is recently author of *Return of the Leviathan: Being-For-Others* (Barnes and Noble 2025), *Rediscovery of Society* (Nova, 2022). His forthcoming works include *FLAME: Echoes From Kafka’s Cave* (Barnes and Nova, 2026) and *A Writer’s Block: Memoirs of a Dean*.

²Cf. Foucault, Michel. 1994. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.

evolved to authenticate their culture, identity, and unity. McKinley did not capture the soul of Denali's Indigenous people. The Twentieth Century brought the instruments of greedy modernity--railways, roads, new people--in search of gold, games, and oil.

Our acquisitive instinct is inherently a civilizational ingredient. Capitalism has survived mainly due to its efficiency and functional expedience. Language is a powerful vehicle of culture that sustains its essence and normative and social structures. Culture, in its turn, shapes and develops language as a dynamic process of existence. The ubiquitous universality of language is thus a force that cannot be substituted by any other human quality. In other words, language is a crucial bridge between culture and civilization.

Peter Frankopan, an eminent world historian at Oxford, rivets world history as a junction of cultural confluence: "While such countries may seem wild to us, these are no backwaters, no obscure wasteland. In fact, the bridge between east and west is very the very crossroads of civilization... It was here that civilization was born, and where many believed Mankind had been created--in the Garden of Eden." (2017: xv) Writing about the region, the people of Bactria and the Indus Valley, Frankopan reminds: "*It is the cauldron where language groups competed, where Indo-European, Semitic and Sino-Tibetan tongues wagged alongside those speaking Altic, Turkic and Caucasian. This is where great empires rose and fell. Where the after-effects of clashes between cultures and rivals were felt thousands of miles away*" (2017: xvi; emphasis mine).

James J. Gibson's notion of "affordances" (Searls, 2025) structures, perfectly, the organization of our perceptions. In *Speaking of Tongues*, Coetzee, and Dimópulos (2025) emphasize "negotiation" to ensure that substance is not lost in translation³.

I was born, raised, and mainly educated in India. My hometown, which was located near Aligarh, Agra, and Mathura, uniquely microcosmized the confluence of languages that constituted my communicative learning and development. In a small-town languishing in feudal decadence, I first spoke *Biraj*. My Anglo-Sanskrit School taught me to read, write, and speak Hindi and English. A basic understanding of Sanskrit was required to graduate from High School. Since the triangular location of my early education was heavily colored by Muslim culture, I learned *Urdu* by default. In 1947, after India's partition, *Urdu* was nearly banished from the curricular

requirements. The proximity to Hathras, a nearby city, nourished my romantic aesthetics, where I would go to see Indian films, heavily scripted in Urdu. Before migrating to the U.S. in March 1975, I lived in Lucknow, the lingering monument of sophisticated Mughal culture. Film theatres became my school to learn about the beauty and reality of life. I am thus a product of Hindi, English, and Urdu. Since Urdu was banished after 1947, I could only understand and speak without any ability to read and write. Yet, I remain an enthusiastic lover of Urdu, its poetry, music, and culture.

This anecdotal-longitudinal journey to languages signifies how our minds and hearts, as well as beliefs, values, and philosophies of life shape our destiny. Somanath Subramanian wrote about India's 'polyglot identity' in *The New Yorker* (November 2024). The life and death of a language is analogous with the rise and fall of a civilization. I was amazed how Subramanian ignored Urdu's exclusion in independent India. I wrote:

"I grew up speaking Biraj Bhasha. A language common to the area in and around Mathura, my grandfather's home. Then learned Hindi, English and Urdu during the long arduous journey that followed. I wish that Subramanian's detailed piece had spoken further about the post-independence exclusion of Urdu, which is the language of many Indian Muslims and the national language of Pakistan. The Islamization of Urdu is just one of the many sad consequences of India's partition. In 1947, and an example of how languages don't die; they are suffocated."⁴

Subramanian Observed: "In some Indian languages, the word for "language" is bhasha-the vowels long and warm, as in "car" or "tar." It has a formal weight and a refined spirit. It comes to us from the classical heights of Sanskrit, and it evokes a language with a script and a literature, with newspapers and codified grammar and chauvinists and textbooks. But there is another word, boli. It, too, refers to language, but its more accurate meaning is "that which is spoken." In its sense of the oral, it hints at colloquialism, hybridity, and a demotic that belongs to the streets. The insinuation is that a bhasha is grander and more sophisticated than a boli. The language of language infects how we think about language."⁵

Nirad Chaudhari in his classic *The Continent of Circe* wrote about the etymology of 'Hindu' and 'Indian' which are analogous with their Greek and Persian definitions. "The definition originally meant 'an inhabitant of the region of the river Indus' (in Sanskrit—*Sindhu*) but was

³It's highly recommended that my audience comprehend the K.A. Appiah's analysis (*The New Rork Review*, 2025, JUNE 26, 2025: 24-28) on the duality of this discourse.

⁴Letter to the Editor, *The New Yorker*, December 16, 2024: 3 (excerpted).

⁵https://www.magzter.com/en/stories/culture/The-New-Yorker/HOLD-YOUR-TONGUE?srltid=AfmBOoqUSt2FGjY3pqbqPAqW5kxkZVbWcMRNm4teP_h8PvJzhK0sBmvV (Retrieved June 25, 2025).

extended to the people of the whole continent” (1966: 28-29).

Can the world’s most popular democracy protect its languages? Subramanian’s analysis has relevance in today’s reality when unspoken language speaks louder, unmasking prejudices and stereotypes. A south Indian professor—married to a German lady—once asked me: “Why does your sister live in Madars?” I retorted: “Why do we live in the United States?” Chaudhuri called Anglicized Hindus as ‘Brown Colonials.’ My squeamishness was inadvertently obvious.

Speaking of *Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse*—individualism, nationalism, and democracy—Chaudhuri made prescient observations about the decline of the West (1999). The US-Israeli attack on Iran is more than a class of civilizations. It is the specter of the ‘fourth’ horseman, Death, which obliterates the three others. I have assayed about this narcissistic nihilism in *Return of the Leviathan* (2025).

The language of Philosophy is embedded in the power of ‘word.’ Knowledge and truth are concubines of the quest for knowing the unknown. *Words* create a ‘language’ that helps serve both philosophy and knowledge. In his posthumously released book *Truth and Existence*, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote: “An eternal truth is a dead truth that has returned to the In-itself. A truth has not *become*, it is *becoming* [devenante]. And at the end of its *becoming*, it dies. That does not mean that it becomes false. It becomes *indeterminate*... The foundation of Truth is freedom. Thus, man can choose non-truth. This non-truth is ignorance or lie” (1992: 12-13).

Michel Foucault defined the archeology of knowledge in terms of discourses. He writes: “If I spoke of discourse, it was not to show that the mechanisms or processes of language (*langue*) were entirely preserved it; but rather to reveal, in the density of verbal performances, the diversity of possible levels of analysis; to show that in addition to methods of linguistic structuration (or interpretation), one could draw up a specific description of statements, of their formation, and the regularities proper to discourse” (1993: 200). ‘The being of language,’ Foucault manifests the experience of language which:

“...involved an immense reorganization of culture, a reorganization of which the Classical age was the first and perhaps the most important sate, since it was responsible for the new arrangement in which we are still caught—since it is Classical age that separates us from a culture in which the significance of signs did not exist, because it was reabsorbed into the sovereignty of the Like; but in which their enigmatic, monotonous, stubborn, and primitive being shone in an endless dispersion” (1994: 43)

Foucauldian emphasis on ‘the being of language’ doubles down the symbiosis of language and culture on the one hand and knowledge and discourse on the other. *Interpretations* as well as *translations* sustain their dynamic in search of lived experiences. An anecdotal conversation will clarify how perceptual inclinations use a ‘words’ to manifest their biases:

“Where can I find tea begs?” I asked at the checkout of a drug store. The Black lady, squeamishly with a grimace questioned, “What”? We both repeatedly exchange this twice. Finally, I spell ‘tea’—like T, E, A-- to make her understand. At the end, I asked her, “What was so difficult to understand my question?” She responds: “I am American.”

The other encounter at Albertson shows the other side of a similar Q & A. As I approached to check out, I gently asked, “How are you, ma’am?” The Black lady asks: “Are you a professor?” I said, “Yes;” “How do you know that I am a professor?” The lady at the counter said: “You speak and look like a professor.”

It may be contextually relevant to mention that the above exchange took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where I lived and worked for about four decades. The insinuations reflect how one sees the other. The next instance unveils a rare encounter with raw innocence, still uncorrupted by our civilization:

I was sitting on the edge of a YMCA swimming pool in my neighborhood in Baton Rouge. A young lady with her 4- or 5-year-old son was standing near the steam room. As I noticed, the young kid came towards me and said: “You look like my father.” I smiled and gave him a pat on the shoulder. A few minutes later, they both exited. The little boy once again came toward me and gave me a hug and left with his mom.

I narrated this episode to my wife later. It is etched on my subconsciousness as a conviction about the innate humanity. A different encounter with two Afrikaners whom I accidentally ran into, presented diametrically opposite impact on my psyche. One I met in Europe and the other in Louisiana. The scope and limits of space do not allow me to collaborate. Nonetheless, it is instructive to refrain from any generalization based on race or origin. I have found incredible friendliness in some people from Pakistan and Bangladesh. I speak neither Punjabi, nor Bangali.

Language is both a lake and river. In the first episode I was in a ‘Lake’ asking for ‘tea;’ in the latter, I was in a ‘river’ that streamed. The famed feminist author

Margaret Atwood succinctly said: “War begins when ‘language’ (communication) breaks down.” We can see the horrors of soulless genocide in Gaza and mindless destruction of people and their cultures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. The persisting violence and terror between India and Pakistan—colonially balkanized—is a reminder that weaponization of identities based on lies is prone to disaster. A self-acclaimed socialist, Muslim candidate of Indian origin just shook the political landscape of New York’s mayoral race:

“But Mamdani had a perfect answer prepared. In response to the moderator’s bad-faith question, he said, “I believe Israel has the right to exist as a state with equal rights.... I believe every state should be a state of equal rights.” Rather than giving in to the premise of the question, that any state has the right to an ethnically particularist legal and political character, he invoked the concept of universal freedom and rights for all. **This language resonates well with Americans, especially younger and non-white Americans, who see what Israeli rule over Palestinians looks like and think of apartheid South Africa or the Jim Crow South.**” (The Nation, July-August 2025; emphasis mine)⁶

The power of language cannot be overstated. Frederic Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Naom Chomsky have something in common to comprehend the dialectic of language. Genealogy (origin), discourse (knowledge), and human nature (which Foucault rejects). The “Will” to *power* (Nietzsche), *knowledge* (Foucault) and *reason*, respectively albeit incongruously, underscore language that is crucial to understanding humans and socio-political systems that toward a better society.

The modern civilization has acquired indelible advancements which have uplifted billions of humans on this planet. Yet, there is no evidence that the state of humanity has achieved a higher level of fulfilment. “Success is not progress,” Sartre famously said. “Power over nature,” Sigmund Freud wrote, “is not the *only* precondition of human happiness, just as it is not the *only* goal of cultural endeavor” (1962; 35).

Chaudhuri’s “Three Horsemen” use atavistic language as a predatory tool to perpetuate human misery. As they say, to unring the bell is an impossible task. Innate human morality and reason are still uncorrupted

by civilizational malaise requires humanization of science to achieve a secular world culture which might ensure survival with dignity.

Language is an innate human quality. Culture learned experience shapes this capacity with or without environmental influence. Chomsky, the father of modern linguistics, established this theory. “Homo sapiens is radically different from other species in numerous ways, too obvious to review. Possession of language is one crucial element, with many consequences. With some justice, it has often in the past been considered to be the core defining feature of modern humans, the source of human creativity, cultural enrichment, and complex social structure.”⁷

My approach to the subject transcends both linguistics and grammar. I seek to explore the power and dimensions—nuances, translations, maxims, aphorisms, the ‘being,’ anecdotes—as communicative mechanism that impact inter-and-intra-relationships in human society troubled by the vagaries of a sick civilization.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not employ any of the Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies for Language refinement, drafting background section and did not perform any Task of the technology.

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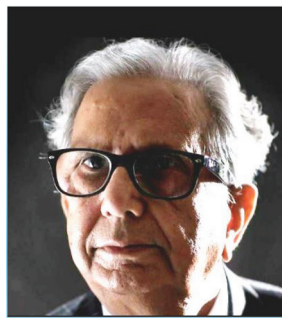
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⁷Noam Chomsky In conversation with Amy Brand. Why Only Us (Berwick and Chomsky, 2017) established this evolutionary basis of language. Cognitive experts now challenge this theory.

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Brij Mohan, Dean Emeritus and Professor of Social Work, Louisiana State University, USA, is an internationally renowned Scholar with expertise in social philosophy, social welfare, public policy and international social development.



He is the author of 26 books and over 400 articles, papers, and reviews. His most recent books include *Development, Poverty of Culture and Social Policy* (Palgrave, 2011), *Climate, Economy and Justice* (Palgrave, 2015), *The Future of Social Work* (Sage, 2018) and *Social Policy on the Cusp* (Nova,

2020). Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith honored him with a Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) and the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India awarded him the Life-Time Achievement Award.

Currently, he is working on *Echoes from Kafka's Cave* (to be released by Barnes and Noble early next year).

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