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THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF THE RITUAL AS  
AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE CONCEPTS IN  
ANCIENT INDIAN TEXTS (THE BRĀHNAŪAS)

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The concept of a secret language dates back to the Indo-European era. Researchers dealing with the reconstruction of Indo-European poetic tradition compared the oldest literary texts (such as *the Iliad* and *Edda*) and noticed two planes of discourse, which they called "the language of men" and "the language of gods." (Watkins 1970). The language of men constitutes the lower level — the level of everyday conversation. The language of gods belongs to the sphere of formalised poetic statements. As Cavert Watkins puts it, in the archaic lexis there was an opposition between semantically unmarked expressions used every day and rarer, more "weighty" phrases that were semantically marked (Watkins 1970: 2; Watkins 1987: 270-299). The principles of creating and distinguishing the language of gods from the language of men are very precise; a detailed analysis would not fit into the spatial constraints of the present article. In general terms, the polarity between the language of gods and the language of men consists in differentiating between the commonplace and the ancient or traditional, between ordinary poetic expressions and a higher poetry which may be described as prophetic, and finally, between the explicit and the vague and implicit (Watkins 1970: 13-16).

The oldest Indian literary text, deeply rooted within the Indo-European tradition, is *The Āgveda*. It is generally assumed to have been composed around the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (Gonda 1975: 22),<sup>1</sup> and taken its final form around the 7<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>According to Jamison and Witzel (1992) the hymns of *The Rig Veda* were created between 1900 and 1100 B.C. and constitute a collective work of several generations of poets and kings living at the end of this period. See: Witzel 1995: 97-98.

century B.C. (Gonda 1975: 15) Although *The Āgveda* is a collection of hymns addressed to the gods, it had more than just religious functions. The authors of the hymns used them to express their metaphysical views. Moreover, they tried to create a language capable of conveying these beliefs. This is another issue too broad to be discussed in the present article. In general terms, the authors of *The Āgveda* used a metaphorical language with a distinct, multi-layered structure that evoked many associations and allowed poets to express many levels of meaning (Jurewicz 2010). The metaphors in *The Āgveda* may be treated as conceptual metaphors, i.e. not merely literary figures of speech, but ways of arranging and expressing thoughts. Cognitive linguistics, as defined by Lakoff, offers methods which are particularly useful in analysing such metaphors (Lakoff 1987; Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Lakoff, Turner 1989; Jurewicz 2010).

The poetics of *The Āgveda* is a continuation of the Indo-European tradition (Watkins 1982: 104-120; Watkins 1997). The very idea of a poet who is both a prophet and a priest preserving and continuing the oral tradition derives from the Indo-European culture — and the authors of *The Rig Veda* perceived themselves in such a way (Watkins 1987). Texts which are composed, memorised and passed on orally must be suitably structured. Their language is highly synthetic, consisting of short, conventional phrases. Viewed outside of their cultural and ideological context, such works of literature often seem incomprehensible. However, these phrases are constructed and arranged in a pattern that refers to the original context, so that the knowledgeable reader may understand the whole meaning of the phrases. According to Watkins, such phrases may be treated as different realisations or different depictions of the same text. Synchronously, the text can be perceived as a kind of thematic "deep structure"; diachronically, it may be regarded as a "proto-text". Such texts are defined, firstly, by means of determining its specific semantic features. Secondly, it is defined through momentary pronouncement of those features (Watkins 1982: 118). Indo-European poetic tradition stipulates a close cooperation between the author of the text and the reader (listener), who is equally important in assigning meaning to the words. Such ideology is present in *The Āgveda* as well as in later Indian texts.<sup>2</sup> I am of the opinion that the oral transition of texts had a significant influence on the Indian worldview. It may be assumed that it necessitated the emergence of two cognitive skills: the ability to move past the detail to the abstract and to generalise, as well as the propensity for deep analysis. The first of these skills was used in constructing synthetic and conventional phrases, whereas the second was necessary in understanding them.

*The Āgveda* may be perceived as an example of constructing the language of gods. A prominent Russian expert on *The Āgveda*, Professor Yelizarenkova,

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<sup>2</sup>Including the classic works of Indian *belles lettres*, that present the events of the plot in a very concise form, focusing on elaborate descriptions of the characters, the setting and the era in which the story takes place; see: Trynkowska 2003.

emphasizes that the text is composed primarily in the language of gods — the everyday speech of men is not reflected in this work (Yelizarenkova 1993: 83-85). Returning to Watkins' description of the language of gods, one may say that the entire *Āgveda* consists of what is ancient, traditional, prophetic, vague and hidden (Watkins 1970: 13-16).

It is therefore understandable that writing comments to *The Rig Veda* became the driving force of Indian thought in later centuries. The oldest group of commentaries is the *Brāhmaṇas*, a huge collection of prose (written around 10<sup>th</sup> — 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) (Gonda 1975: 360). The *Brāhmaṇas* are, in their most evident syntactic layer, a guide to rituals, especially offerings made during public rituals (*śrauta*), which are not described in *The Āgveda*.<sup>3</sup> Rituals portrayed in the *Brāhmaṇas* included public recitations of fragments from *The Āgveda* (and other *Vedas*), and one of the purposes of writing commentaries was to explain why a particular extract is read at a given moment. The *Brāhmaṇas* also describe the processes of making different kinds of offerings, dispersing various doubts and disputing with other prescriptive texts.

I hold the view that the commenting nature of the *Brāhmaṇas* manifests itself not only in the description of the rituals. These texts constitute a commentary to *The Āgveda* not least because they continue the tradition of creating a language of gods. Once again, what is meant is more than a linguistic exercise, but also an attempt at specifying the worldview and ways of expressing it. There is, however, one crucial difference between the *Āgveda* and the *Brāhmaṇas*. The former text does not explicitly state how the language of gods is to be created, even though it gives some clues allowing us to reconstruct the process, whereas the *Brāhmaṇas* — at least partially — offer a direct prescription.

One example of these direct statements that reveal the methods used by the authors to construct the secret language of gods can be found in the so-called etymologies.<sup>4</sup> In its most evident layer of meaning the etymologies in the *Brāhmaṇas* are fragments describing the origins of various terms. From a linguistic perspective, they are, frankly speaking, of very little use.<sup>5</sup> This is why the first scholars interested in ancient India voiced highly critical opinions on the etymologies found in the *Brāhmaṇas* (Gonda 1975: 377 n. 63). However, it was soon discovered that these etymologies resulted not only from the need to trace the origins of words. Gonda claims that the authors of the etymologies aimed at revealing the mysterious connections between the world and the domain of the invisible. The effort had practical results, as Indian philosophers believed that

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<sup>3</sup>For information on rituals in *The Rig Veda* see: Potdar (1953), Kuiper (1960), Falk (1997).

<sup>4</sup>The Sanskrit term for "etymology" is *nirukta*; see: *The Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.3.3.

<sup>5</sup>As it is in the case of the so-called folk etymologies, they are based on semantic transposition (interpreting the meaning of a given term by associating it with a similar word)

language has the power to influence the world — knowing the name of a given phenomenon was tantamount to gaining control over it. As Gonda puts it, the ability to describe the origin of a term made it possible to penetrate the hitherto unknown nature of the object or person and to hold power over it (Gonda 1975: 377).

It is therefore apparent that behind creating the mentioned etymologies lay the need to explain the workings of the world and to gain control over them. There is, however, one more supplementary aspect of this process of creation. In the *Brāhmaṇas* the effort of coming up with etymologies of different terms was aimed at systematising information about the world and methods of effective conduct. It was also meant to systematise the language that expresses this knowledge. In other words, creating etymologies meant creating a system of terms and concepts. The present article shall focus on describing this last aspect of creating etymologies.

The system of terms constructed in the etymologies is based on the language of gods. The principal aim of writing etymologies was to reconstruct this tongue. The second objective was to determine the relations between the languages of gods and men. The etymologies are created under the assumption (never explicitly stated) that the name of an object refers to its essence and emphasises the feature that is decisive. The lack of this feature means that the given object stops being what it is. This stipulation is expressed in the language of gods.

Etymologies based on such an assumption may be seen as definitions, although it must be emphasised that in this case definition taxonomies grounded in European logic are not applicable. Even the distinction between stipulative and persuasive definition seems inadequate here. On the one hand, the etymologies from the *Brāhmaṇas* are persuasive definitions: in seeking the nature of phenomena and explaining it, they transcend the domain of linguistics (Adjukiewicz 1965: 83). On the other hand, there can be no doubt that they aim at creating not only the definitions of objects and phenomena, but also definitions of terms, which is the characteristic feature of stipulative definitions.

The fact that the etymologies from the *Brāhmaṇas* cannot be classified as either stipulative or persuasive definitions, may be explained by the following: the mentioned view that language has an actual influence on the world is based on the concept of direct relation between the language and its referents, which is characteristic for ancient India. In this view, the language of gods *is* the world. In other words, when the gods express something in words, they "utter objects".<sup>6</sup> This is why etymologies appear in descriptions of the beginning of the world, a

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<sup>6</sup>This relation between the words and the outside world is particularly visible in the description of creation in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 2.2.4. The Creator throws milk mixed with hair into the fire, saying "drink, while burning" (*oṣhaō dhaya*), thus creating plants whose Sanskrit name (in plural) is *oṣhadhayas*. Uttering the name of the plant changes the hair into *oṣhadayas*. In other words, what the Creator said is willed into being.

time when the language of gods must have been used. "Uttering objects" may also be done by people who know the language of gods (not everyone was privy to its secrets).<sup>7</sup>

In the *Brāhmaṇas* the process of creating the world is described as the process of making the first offering by the gods. This ritual act is the means to express the nature of divine words and objects. The sacrifice — meticulously described in the *Brāhmaṇas* — is a microcosm, a model of the world enacted on the altar. All necessary utensils and actions correspond to various aspects of the world and the processes taking place in it.<sup>8</sup> The model is complete — the world contains nothing that would not be a part of an offering. As it is in the case of the language of gods: the sacrifice *is* the world.

It is therefore apparent that, from the point of view of the authors of the *Brāhmaṇas*, the order of description and the order of actions are one and the same thing. In my personal opinion, this is the reason why the definitions constructed in the etymologies are both stipulative and persuasive. This fact influences the choice of terms interpreted in the etymologies pertaining to the ritual order. It must be emphasised, however, that the *Brāhmaṇas* describe not only the ritual process itself, but also — through describing the model — explain the workings of the world. Defining the ritual terms makes an opening into the world and allows a better understanding.<sup>9</sup>

To analyse the etymologies from the *Brāhmaṇas*, I shall divide them in two groups, according to the way they are explained. In both cases the search for the origins of a given term is at the same time a quest to find its hidden nature. In the first group, the etymology is created directly on the basis of an everyday word, phonetically similar to the one being defined. This type may be explained by the model: "X" therefore "X'" [he "saw" (*apaśyat*), therefore "an animal" (*paśu*)]. The second group of etymologies is more complex. The supposed origin of the word has a slightly different pronunciation than the term being defined. What is

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<sup>7</sup>A person who had such knowledge was called "one who knows thus" (*evaōvid*).

<sup>8</sup>For example, the necessity of placing a lotus leaf at the centre of the altar of fire is explained in the following manner: "He then puts down a lotus-leaf. The lotus-leaf is a womb: he hereby puts a womb to it [for Fire to be born from]. And, again, why he puts down a lotus-leaf; the lotus means the waters, and this earth is a leaf thereof: even as the lotus-leaf here lies spread on the water, so this earth lies spread on the waters. Now this same earth is [Fire's] womb, for [Fire] is this earth, since thereof the whole [Fire] is built up: it is this earth he thus lays down" (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 7.4.1.7 — 8). The model of the world on the altar has an even broader scope. The Creator manifests Himself in the world, and so the offering is also a manifestation of the Creator, while the feelings experienced by people taking part in the rite reflect the experiences of the gods.

<sup>9</sup>It was also believed that the rites performed at the altarpiece influence the state of the world and the processes therein.

more, the original word is often entirely artificial, created solely for the purpose of explaining a given term. This meta-name is based on a word used in everyday speech and is created directly from this term. Thus, the etymology is created in three stages: "X", therefore "X'", therefore "X'" [he "was at the lead" (*agre*), therefore "leading" (*agri*), therefore "fire" (*agni*)]. The first type shall be called "two-stage etymology", whereas the second will be referred to as "three-stage etymology."<sup>10</sup>

Although European taxonomies are not appropriate for Indian thought, for the sake of clarity we may divide the etymologies in the *Brāhmaḍas* into conventional categories. The two-stage etymologies seem to have more in common with persuasive definitions. The three-stage etymologies contain some features of stipulative definitions, as the term that is being defined is written in quotation marks. It must be emphasised that this distinction takes into account the tendencies within the two types of etymologies that may only be considered important from our point of view. In the *Brāhmaḍas* they are of no consequence.

Apart from analysing several examples of the etymologies and presenting arguments to confirm the thesis that they are in fact attempts at creating definitions, I would like to describe the most important cognitive techniques used in constructing etymologies and the relations between these etymologies and Indo-European poetic tradition. The present research is based on the Sanskrit version of the *Brāhmaḍas*. Sanskrit words are transcribed according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration.

## I. TWO-STAGE ETYMOLOGIES

The first example is the etymology explaining the names of earth (the Sanskrit terms *bhūmi*, *pāthivī*, *gayatrī*). The general concept of earth is expressed through periphrasis: "this" (*iyam*),<sup>11</sup> which reminds us that these texts were meant for oral distribution, where the performer could always point to the ground and say "this":

'This (earth) has indeed become (*abhūd*) a foundation!'. Hence it became the earth (*bhūmi*). He spread it out (*aprayat*), and it became the earth, (*pāthivī*). And she (the earth), thinking herself

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<sup>10</sup>In some cases of three-stage etymologies the term being explained and the meta-name are one and the same word (e.g. *Gopatha Brahmana* 1.1), but they are defined in a three-stage fashion nonetheless.

<sup>11</sup>My interpretation of the periphrasis differs here from the one presented by professor Pelc (1971), in whose opinion the personal pronoun "he" is not descriptive and therefore cannot be considered a periphrasis. In the *Brahmanas* the pronouns "he", "she" and "it" (*ayam/iyam/ayam*) are used both as pronouns and in the mentioned function of the substitute for the name of a given object (e.g. earth).



quite perfect, sang; and inasmuch as she sang (*āgāyat*), therefore she is *Gāyatrī*. [...] And hence whosoever thinks himself quite perfect, either sings or delights in song. (6.1.1.15)<sup>12</sup>

The names of the earth reflect its nature. The term *bhūmi* captures the nature of the earth as the basis of all creation. The word *pāthivī* emphasises the vastness that lies in the nature of the earth (the literal meaning of the word is "vast, broad"). Being broad and being a basis are essential features of earth: what is unsteady and narrow cannot be earth.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it may be assumed that the earth is defined as this which is broad and constitutes the basis.

The reason for calling the earth *gāyatrī* is analogous. This name expresses the nature of the earth as something perfect and complete. It is to mean not only that the earth is a perfect creation of the gods. The perfection or completeness of the earth also results from the fact that it is the basis for all things.

This notion is reinforced through conceptual metonymy, i.e. the mental operation which gives access to a concept *via* a concept belonging to the same conceptual domain.<sup>14</sup> This cognitive technique is very common throughout the *Brāhmaḍas*. In the case of the etymology for "earth" the authors use a type of metonymy that allows for identification of the offspring with the parent. The earth is the basis for all things not only in the physical sense, but also due to the fact that it is the mother of all that covers her. Being the mother of all things, it *is* everything.<sup>15</sup> This is why the earth is called perfect and complete. The quality is expressed by the term *gāyatrī*.

Metonymy has been a valid, naturally used conceptual strategy since Indo-European times. Figures of speech used in Indo-European poetic tradition include merism, i.e. a combination of two nouns which are very near synonyms. The semantic scope of this figure of speech extends the meaning of each of its components, e.g. the phrase "barley and spelt" is used to denote all cereals. As pointed out by Watkins, merism is based on the relation of closeness and metonymical thinking (Watkins 1982: 107-18, 117). By knowing this cognitive strategy and its usage, the reader (listener) is able to decipher the meaning of the figures of

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<sup>12</sup>Translation by Eggeling (1993-1994).

<sup>13</sup>See: *The āgveda* 6.47.20. The fragment expresses horror at the sudden narrowness of the earth, which is usually broad. Cosmogonies in the *Brahmaḍas* mention pre-creation earth as floating freely on the waters — the act of creation is the act of stopping the earth's movement (*Śatapathabrāhmaḍa* 2.1.1.8 — 9, *Taittirīya Brāhmaḍa* 1.1.3.5).

<sup>14</sup>E.g. a specific part of an object gives mental access to the whole, the concept of cause gives conceptual access to the concept of effect. For more on conceptual metonymy see: Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

<sup>15</sup>See: *Śatapatha Brahmana* 7.4.1.7 — 8, (quoted in footnote no. 23), 6.1.1.14, 6.1.2.33, 6.2.2.32. *Śatapatha* 6.1.3.11 states that: "[everything] is the waters, inasmuch as from the water everything here is produced".

speech created by the author. This linguistic figure of speech has its roots in the conceptual metonymy. I hold the view that the composers of the etymologies in the *Brāhmaṇas* referred to this poetic tradition and assumed that their audience would be familiar with conceptual metonymy and its linguistic realisation.

Coming back to the etymology of the term *gāyatrī*, it differs from the previously discussed ones in the fact that the term being explained does not stem directly from the words expressing wholeness *sarva* and completeness *kātsna*). The authors of the *Brāhmaṇas* refer to the everyday experience of joy that results from feeling complete and is expressed through singing: "And hence whosoever thinks himself quite perfect, either sings (*gāyati*) or delights in song (*gīte ramate*)." The song that conveys the feeling of perfection becomes the experiential basis that makes it justified to call the earth *gāyatrī*. This is the second human cognitive strategy, characteristic also for the *Brāhmaṇas*, namely metaphorisation.<sup>16</sup> The description *gāyatrī* is based on the metaphor of THE EARTH AS A PERSON (A WOMAN).<sup>17</sup> When a person feels complete, they sing, and so the earth sings too. In other words, singing is a conceptual bridge between the general concept of the earth (*īyam*) and the concept of the earth expressed in the name *gāyatrī*. The verb "to sing" (*gā*) forms a linguistic bridge between the concept of the earth (*īyam*) and the name *gāyatrī*.

The roots of metaphorisation can also be traced back to Indo-European times. Another significant figure of speech used in Indo-European poetic tradition is the kenning, i.e. a combination of two nouns in subordinate relation, which denote some other concept; e.g. the phrase "descendant of the waters" is a kenning for "fire". According to Watkins, this figure of speech is based on similarity and metaphorical thinking (Watkins 1982: 106-108, 117-118). As it is with the case of merism, we can say that kenning is motivated by metaphoric conceptual operations which allow for understanding one thing in terms of another. We can also assume that the recipients of the *Āgveda* were familiar with these mechanisms and their linguistic expressions.

It must be added that in the case of the etymology of the term *gāyatrī*, there is one more conceptual bridge between the general concept of the earth and the notion expressed by the word *gāyatrī*. This Sanskrit term primarily denotes a specific poetic metre used for composing Vedic hymns.<sup>18</sup> It may therefore be assumed that the earth sang in the *gāyatrī* metre. Thus, the basis for the name of the earth becomes clearer: by means of metonymy the earth is described as a "metre" in which it expresses its perfection and completeness. The name *gāyatrī* in reference to the earth is justified not only by the fact that the earth sings,

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<sup>16</sup>For more on conceptual metaphor see: Lakoff (1987: 288, passim); Lakoff and Johnson (1980); Lakoff and Turner (1989: 57ff).

<sup>17</sup>My presentation of metaphors is based on Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

<sup>18</sup>A stanza in this metre consists of three verses, each eight syllables long.



but also by how it sings. It must be added that the term *gāyatrī* was not used everyday, but only in the ritual context.

The fragment of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* quoted above reveals a characteristic feature of Indian definitions. The name that expresses the essence of a given phenomenon is constructed on the basis of its influence. An Indian thinker does not ask "what is this thing?" but "what does this thing do?" The term that expresses the vastness of the earth (*prithivī*) derives from the verb "to stretch, to spread out" (*prath*). This tendency to classify things according to their effect is even more apparent in the other two terms denoting earth. The word that expresses 'being the basis' is not, as one might expect, derived from the noun "basis" (*pratiśthā*), but from the verb "to become" (*bhū-*) a basis. The term expressing the wholeness of the earth is not derived from the adjectives "whole" (*sarva*) and "complete" (*kātsna*), but from the verb "to sing" (*ga*), which describes the inner feeling of completeness.

Another example of etymology that clearly depicts the essence of the object being defined and a dynamic understanding of its nature is the etymology of the word "brick" (*īstakā*):

And inasmuch as [the Creator] saw them after offering (*śtvā*) the animal, therefore they are bricks (*śtakā*). Hence one must make the bricks (*śtakā*) only after performing an animal sacrifice (*śtvā*); for those which are made before an animal sacrifice are [without bricks]. (6.2.1.10)<sup>19</sup>

This is an excerpt from a description of a great fire offering called the *Agnicayana* (literally "arranging the fire").<sup>20</sup> Generally speaking, the ritual involved building a fire altar of clay bricks. The process was accompanied by many animal sacrifices and plant offerings. The term "brick" (*śtakā*) is derived from the verb "to make an offering" (*yaj-*) in its participle form "having made an offering" (*śtvā*). It should be noted that the nature of the brick is portrayed in a very dynamic way — as the object that emerges after the offering is made (the dynamism is difficult to translate into other languages). The essence of the features specified in the definition is clearly visible: those who contradict the nature of the brick by firing them before making an animal sacrifice simply do not create bricks. The practical function of making etymologies becomes apparent: by getting to know the etymology of the word "brick," we begin to comprehend its nature and thus we know when to fire bricks.

The *Brāhmaṇas* also contain the etymology of the term "animal" (*paśu*). This example allows us to understand the significance of context, which is crucial for

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<sup>19</sup>See: *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 6.3.1.2.

<sup>20</sup>An *Agnicayana* made in India in 1974 was filmed and described in detail by Staal (1983).

deciphering the intended meaning of the etymology. It also reveals the methods of constructing general concepts in the *Brāhmaḍas*:

He saw (*apaśyat*) those five animals, the man, the horse, the bull, the ram, and the he-goat. Inasmuch as he saw (*apaśyat*) them, they are cattle (*paśu*). (6.2.1.2)

He saw (*apaśyat*) those five animals (*paśu*). Because he saw (*apaśyat*) them, therefore they are animals (*paśu*); or rather, because he saw (*apaśyat*) him in them, therefore they are animals (*paśu*). (6.1.1.4)

This etymology derives the word "animal" (*paśu*) from the verb "to see" (*paś-*). This association may at first seem utterly groundless — it may be assumed that it was due to such etymologies that Max Müller, a prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century expert on Indian studies, considered the *Brahmanas* equivalent to "the twaddle of idiots and raving of mad men" that could only be of interest to psychiatrists (after: Bekkun 1997: 69). To see whether he was right, we need to look at the context in which the mentioned etymology appears.

The etymology is included in a description of the *Agnicayana*, the great fire offering. As it has already been mentioned, the creation of the world is presented in the *Brāhmaḍas* as the first sacrifice. In their attempt to explain various aspects of specific rites, the authors make references to this very first offering. The myth behind the origins of the *Agnicayana* is about the Creator giving birth to a son — the Fire (Agni). Agni flees from his father and hides, taking the guise of five animals (*paśu*) mentioned in the quoted passage (a man, a horse, a bull, a ram and a he-goat). The Creator sees these five animals and thinks:

They are Fire [...] Even as Fire, when kindled, glares, so their eye glares; even as Fire's smoke rises upwards, so vapour rises from them; even as Fire consumes what is put in him, so they devour; even as Fire's ashes fall down, so do their faeces: they are indeed Fire! (6.2.1.5)

Looking at the five animals, the Creator sees the hidden Agni — the Fire. The fragment includes a construction of the general concept of fire, as something that glares, emits smoke, burns and produces ash. The starting point for this abstract thinking are the actions related to fire, deduced from the actions of the animals, that are perceived also as general and abstract concepts of living things — seeing, existing, eating and defecating. In a different fragment of the *Śatapthabrāhmaḍa* animals are called "Fire's forms (*rūpa*)."<sup>21</sup> A form is something which is usually

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<sup>21</sup> *Śatapthabrāhmaḍa* 6.2.1.1—3.

perceived by sight.<sup>22</sup> Calling animals "Fire's form" implicates a view that the fire within the animals assumes a visible form. That is why the term "animal" (*paśu*) is derived from the word "to see" (*paś-*). The word *paśu* conveys the nature of the animal as the visible form of fire. Set within its context, the etymology also reveals the views on the concept of fire, whose actions manifest themselves in the actions of animals. The fire is portrayed as the essence of life, invisible without its animal form.<sup>23</sup>

It should be added that the seemingly shocking semantic gap between the term being explained ("animal") and its supposed origins ("to see") is likely to be deliberate. The relations between the languages of gods and men cannot always be obvious and easy to trace, lest the group of chosen individuals, gifted with the skill to understand and seek out etymologies, become too large. The apparent absurdity of the etymology will quickly deter unsuitable people from trying to uncover mysteries not meant for them. Such an idea of the author of etymologies and their recipients is also rooted in Indo-European tradition, where poets were accorded special status within society (Watkins 1982: 105-106; Yelizarenkova 1993: 24f).

## II. THREE-STAGE ETYMOLOGIES

As it has already been mentioned, within etymologies of this second type there is a slight phonetic difference between the source word and the term which is being derived from it. The former is often an artificially created word, a meta-name based on a term used in everyday speech. It may be assumed that these meta-names are considered to come from the language of gods.

It may be shown using the example of the etymology of the word "fire" — *agni*:

Now the embryo which was inside [the egg] was created as the foremost (*agri*): inasmuch as it was created foremost (*agram*) of this all, therefore it is *Agri*: foremost (*agri*), indeed, is he whom they mystically call "Agni"; for the gods love the mystic. (6.1.1.11)

According to this etymology the term "fire" (*agni*) conveys the nature of fire as something first and foremost. This primacy is expressed by the Sanskrit term *agra*. Establishing and giving a name to the essence of a phenomenon or object is the first step in creating its etymology. The word *agra* becomes the basis for

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<sup>22</sup>In later texts, both Hinduist and Buddhist, the form (*rūpa*) is considered the subject of the sense of sight.

<sup>23</sup>Strictly speaking, the animal that is fire's form is the visible part of the Creator, as he shares his essence with Agni. Actually it is the Creator who takes on the form of fire and its animal manifestations, in which he is able to see himself.

a term reconstructed from the language of gods — *agri* — which is otherwise nonexistent. The second stage involves creating a meta-name, whereas the third is completed when the meta-name is used to demystify the term that is being defined (in this case: *agni*).

It should be emphasised that the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* describes the defined term, which belongs to everyday language, as "mystic". This reveals how the language of the gods was perceived. According to Watkins, the language of gods was made of what was extraordinary, special, poetic, hidden and mystic. He quotes a fragment of *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* which, in his opinion, confirms this view: the common word "horse" (*aśva*) is juxtaposed with terms taken from the language of gods (*haya*, *vājin*, *arvan*).<sup>24</sup> However, many etymologies from the *Brāhmaṇas* contain the view that it is the everyday terms that describe phenomena in a secret way. This assumption manifests itself in the expression that follows three-stage etymologies: "for the gods love the mystic and are enemies of the explicit."

Charles Malamoud, a French expert on Indian studies interested in this issue, claims that the language of gods in the *Brāhmaṇas* is semantically transparent: the terms are understandable and convey the meaning of their designates perfectly (Malamoud 1996: 197). It results from the already mentioned fact that in the speech of gods there is no difference between the language and the objects described by it. As Malamoud puts it, "the gods have no shadow." By creating the world and the language that expresses it, one creates a shadow — obscuring the original clarity (Malamoud 1996: 200). This departure from the clarity of the world and the language of gods manifests itself in the "secrecy" of the words used in everyday speech. The terms taken from the language of gods are secret only because they are not accessible to us. In fact, it is the words of the language of men that are truly secret, as they do not reveal the nature of the objects or phenomena, so explicitly stated in the language of gods. Luckily for us, the gods, who keep their perfect world concealed from us, left us a clue as to how their language can be reconstructed. We can infer about it from the phonetic similarities between everyday terms and the words taken from the language of gods.

The etymology of the term "fire" (*agni*) has special significance, as its analysis reveals another cognitive process crucial for constructing etymologies — namely the inclusion of a broader context of earlier philosophy. In this case, this mostly means the philosophy of *The Āgveda*. The etymology of the term "fire" appears also in a different passage of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*:

He thus generated him first (*agre*) of the gods; and therefore [he is called] Agni, ["The foremost" is the name of the one we call Agni].  
He, being generated, went forth as the first; for of him who goes first

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<sup>24</sup>*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 10.4.6.1, quoted after Watkins (1970: 5).

(*pūrva eti*), they say that he goes at the head (*agra eri*). Such, then, is the [fieriness] of that fire. (2.2.4.2)

This fragment explicitly states that the aim of etymology is to convey the essence of a given object or phenomenon. The primacy of the fire is called its "fieriness" (*agnitā*) — its essence the feature that determines that fire is fire. The authors attempt to explain this primacy not only by referring to the act of creation (as it was in the previously analysed passage), but also to the everyday experience of marching at the head of a column.

Such an explanation does not seem convincing if considered solely in the context of *Shatapatha Brahmana*, but becomes clearer when one looks to *The Āgveda*. The etymology refers to the concept of fire as described in *The Āgveda* — walking in the vanguard of Aryan tribes.<sup>25</sup> Such descriptions are likely to be based on facts, such as burning down forests and enemy dwellings.<sup>26</sup> Fire also appears in descriptions of the morning, walking at the head of the aurora.<sup>27</sup> These images are taken from everyday experience. Fire was kindled just before the dawn, so its coming preceded the appearance of the morning light. The descriptions of fire walking at the head of the aurora may also be considered a manifestation of a specific perception of the fire — in *The Āgveda* fire was identified with the rising sun.<sup>28</sup>

It is therefore apparent that in *The Āgveda* fire had much to do with primacy — both spatial and temporal. This concept defines the essence of nature as fire, as do images of glaring, heating, burning and producing smoke.<sup>29</sup> This concept of spatial and temporal primacy also contains the ideas of the east and the dawn. Once again, the basis for the association comes from real-life experience. Aryan expansion was directed towards the east, therefore the fire that lead the way was turned towards the east (Heestermann 1983: 76-94; Malamoud 1996: 198). People

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<sup>25</sup>*The āgveda* 3.11.5, 8.84.8, 1.31.5. Passage 10.110.11 depicts fire walking at the head of the procession of gods.

<sup>26</sup>The destructive nature of fire as a weapon against enemies is described in: Blair (1961), Kaelber (1979); see: *The Āgveda* 6.22.8. On fire destroying stone barriers see: e.g. *The Rig Veda* 8.60.16, 10.45.6, 4.3.14.

<sup>27</sup>See: *The Rig Veda* 4.13.1, 7.8.1, 7.9.3, 10.1.1, 10.8.4, 10.45.5.

<sup>28</sup>On identifying fire and soma juice with the rising sun see: Macdonell (1987: 93), Oldenberg (1993: 63—64), Jurewicz (2010: 134ff, 157 ff).

<sup>29</sup>See: *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 6.2.1.5. I am of the opinion that the nature of fire as the phenomenon that glares, heats and burns, belongs to common knowledge that transcends culture. *The Āgveda* conveys that message e.g. by calling fire "the bright signal" (*ketu*) that appears in the darkness of the night as a harbinger of light and as an offering (e.g. 5.7.4, 3.29.5, 10.88.12). Passage 10.16.4 mentions the destructive (burning) and benevolent (heating, cooking) properties of fire, calling it *tanu*, which may mean "the nature, the essence" . Smoke in *The Rig Veda* is called "the sign of fire" (10.12.2), which also suggests that fumes constitute a part of the fire's nature.

kindled the fire with their faces turned towards the east, and therefore *to* the east.<sup>30</sup> Fire was always kindled at dawn — also associated with the east.

It should also be observed that the spatial primacy of the fire refers not only to "the front" and "the east", but also to "the top". This tendency manifests itself in various descriptions of fire in *The Āgveda*. The flames are depicted as going up to the sky.<sup>31</sup> The fire is identified with the rising sun, in whose nature it is to ascend.

This multi-dimensional primacy of the fire is expressed in *The Āgveda* by the term *agra*, meaning "first, foremost, the best" as well as "the head, the front, the beginning, the dawn, perfection, the top, the surface." (Grassmann 1873: 10-11). It is also conveyed by other terms with a similar meaning of "being at the vanguard, being first, being in the east" (mostly by the term *purās* and its derivatives).<sup>32</sup> It may therefore be concluded that *The Āgveda* creates a general concept of the primacy of fire (both spatial and temporal), expressed with the use of various terms.

In explaining the origins of the term *agni*, *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* refers to the concept of fire known from *The Āgveda*, narrowing its scope to spatial supremacy — it is in the nature of fire to take the lead (2.2.4.2). Passage 6.1.1.11 of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* constructs the notion of temporal precedence on the basis of spatial primacy: by stating that fire was created foremost, it declares its spatial and temporal precedence over everything else. To name this primacy, the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* creates the term *agri*, choosing from among several terms used in *The Āgveda* the root that is phonetically closest to the word *agni*. It is clear that the reference to *The Āgveda* allows us to see the rational grounds for the etymologies form from the *Brāhmaṇas*, both on the conceptual and the lexical level.

### III. SUMMARY

1. The etymologies in the *Brāhmaṇas* are in fact definitions aimed at describing the nature of a given object.

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<sup>30</sup>This may be deduced from the use of the adjective *pratyāñc* which originally meant "walking from the opposite side". It was most often used in relation to the aurora, which reinforces the meaning of "the east" by presenting an image of a man looking in the direction of the rising sun, standing "opposite" to it (*The Āgveda* 1.92.9, 1.124.7, 5.80.6, 7.76.2). The word *pratyāñc* appears in relation to fire in passage 10.141.1.

<sup>31</sup>See e.g. *The Āgveda* 1.59.5, 3.5.10, 3.27.12, 7.16.3, 10.8.6, 10.45.7.

<sup>32</sup>See: e.g. *The Āgveda* 1.170.4, 7.1.3 (*purās*). "Preceder": *The Rig Veda* 1.188.11, 10.110.11, 10.124.1 (*purogā*), 3.11.5 (*puraetā*), 8.84.8 (*puroyāvan*). This precedence of Agni is expressed by the name *purohita* (literally: "placed in front"), which also has the figurative meaning of "priest": see *The Āgveda* 1.44.10, 1.94.6, 3.11.1, 8.27.1.



2. The nature of the object is determined on the basis of its effects and activity.
3. The creation of an etymology involves metonymy, metaphor, abstraction and generalisation.
4. The context, both synchronic (the text in its entirety) and diachronic (references to earlier texts, in this case to *The Ágveda*), plays a crucial role in understanding the etymologies.
5. The etymologies belong to the poetic tradition that can be traced back to Indo-European times.

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