



PRAGMATICS OF SILENCE AND PLAY: SANKARA AND DERRIDA ON WHAT LANGUAGE FAILS TO DO?

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Abstract

The study brings into dialogue two radically different, yet philosophically convergent figures—Adi Sankara (8 century CE), an ancient Indian philosopher, and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), a poststructuralist and founder of deconstruction—to interrogate the pragmatic afterlife of language once its semantic and representational certainties collapse. While Sankara treats language as a provisional tool to ultimately transcend the empirical reality and reach the ultimate one (*Brahman*), Derrida reveals the inherent instability and the play of meaning within language, making the closure of meaning perpetually deferred. Both the thinkers unsettle the metaphysics of presence, Sankara through his *neti neti* (*not this, not this*) and Derrida through deconstruction, exposing the trace and absence at the heart of signification. The study argues that their respective critiques of linguistic adequacy do not render language useless but rather reposition it as a site of performative, contextual, and existential significance. From Sankara's meditative and focused recitation to Derrida's insistence on repetition with *différance*, a new kind of pragmatics emerge, one that foregrounds the unsayable, the iterable, and the deferred. By juxtaposing these traditions, the study proposes a post-semantic that both honors the silence beyond language and ethical play within it.

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of what language does rather than what it means has come to define the philosophical turn towards pragmatics. As the contemporary thought shifts from semantic to pragmatic concerns, the focus increasingly falls on the contextual, performative, and destabilizing dimensions of the linguistic expression (Bach, 1999). The study responds to that shift by engaging in a critical dialogue between two thinkers separated by centuries and traditions: Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (known as Sankara hereon), an 8th-century CE ancient Indian philosopher renowned for his work in the school of Advaita Vedanta (non-duality), and Jacques Derrida, a 20th-century French philosopher who is widely known for his Deconstruction. At the initial glance, the non-dualistic metaphysical clarity of Sankara may seem incompatible with Derrida's radical indeterminacy, yet both question whether language can ever fully express or capture truth. Both the thinkers in their own ways show what lies beyond or within language, maybe more important than what it straightforwardly signifies.

Sankara's approach to language is embedded in a larger soteriological framework. For him, language operates within the empirical (*vyavahra*) *reality* but ultimately fails to apprehend the non-dual *Brahman*, which lies beyond the subject-object distinction (Dasgupta, 1922; Potter, 1995; Sharma, 2000). Thus, language must be exhausted or transcended through the method of *neti neti* (not this, not this), which is a negation that purifies understanding by stripping away all conceptual reifications. As Sankara comments on the *Bṛhadaranyak Upanishad* 4,5,15 “the self is to be known by navigating all objects of knowledge- ‘not this not this’”¹ (Śaṅkara, *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, 4.5.15, trans. Madhavananda 1935, 552).

Derrida, by contrast, interrogates the Western metaphysics of presence, where meaning is assumed to be stable, immediate, and self-identical (Royle, 2003). Language, in Derrida's



view, is marked by *Différance*, the never-ending deferral and differentiation of meaning, such that no sign ever fully coincides with its referent. He famously writes in *Of Grammatology* (1976) “there is nothing outside the text” not only to deny the empirical reality but to emphasize the inescapability of signification. For Derrida, the meaning is never simply present but is always postponed and fractured by the structure of iteration and context (Caputo, 1997).

This study places Sankara and Derrida in a critical, non-reductive dialogue through five interrelated themes (1) metaphysical frameworks, (2) the relation between language and reality, (3) the foundation and disruption of meaning, (4) the role of recitation and iteration, and (5) the implications of linguistic instability. In doing so, it argues that while Sankara and Derrida diverge in metaphysical commitments, as one is aiming towards transcendence and the other is emphasizing endless play, yet they converge in their suspicion of language’s finality. What comes next, then, is not silence versus speech, but a pragmatic reorientation: language as a site of liberation or linguistic exposure, depending on one’s orientation to the limits of meaning.

2. METAPHYSICAL FRAMEWORKS

A comparative study of Sankara and Derrida must begin by considering the ontological foundations that underpin their approaches to language. Though both philosophers interrogate the limits of linguistic significance, they do so in divergent metaphysical commitments. Sankara operates within the Advaita Vedanta tradition, which affirms the non-dual reality, *Brahman*, while Derrida’s thought is rooted in the post-structuralist critique of metaphysical presence, foregrounding difference as the condition of meaning, deferral, and disruption.

In Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta, reality is singular and undivided. The ultimate reality, Brahman, is characterised as *Nirgun* (without attributes), *Nirvikalpa* (beyond thought), and *Ananta* (infinite) (Dasgupta, 1922). All distinctions, such as subject-object and knower and the known, belong to the empirical domain (*vyavhara*), which is sustained by *māyā* (ignorance) that conceals *Brahman*. Language for Sankara belongs to the empirical realm, as it is a tool that leads to superimposition (*adhyasa*)², which then is negated by *neti neti* leading to absolute knowledge. As Sankara remarks in his commentary on *Brahmasutrabhashya 1.1.5* that “Brahman cannot be the object of perception, nor of inference... since it is beyond all predicates.”

Derrida, on the other hand, inherits and critiques the Western philosophical tendency to ground meaning in presence, whether of the self, the signified, or the origin. He shows that this quest for stable presence is undermined by the very structure of the sign, which is always deferred, differentiated, and contextual. The neologism *différance* encapsulates this insight, it signals both temporal deferral (to differ) and spatial distinction (to differ from) (Derrida, 1982). Meaning, therefore, is never fully present but emerges through an endless chain of substitution and differences.

Unlike Sankara, Derrida offers no ontological anchor beyond language. There is no *Nirgun Brahman* or transcendent referent waiting beyond the play of signs. As he famously writes, “There is nothing outside the text” (Derrida, 1976) language is not a ladder to be thrown away after its use, it is the very ground of philosophical enquiry. His critique of metaphysics targets what he calls logocentrism—the privileging of speech over writing, origin over difference, and essence over trace (Derrida, 1997).

Thus, while Sankara leads towards transcendence through the repetition of language, epistemic claims, Derrida immerses in its imminent instability. Sankara dissolved language to recover the real; Derrida dissolves the real into the undecidability of language. Yet, both signal the need



to interrogate language, not merely as a medium of communication, but as a site of philosophical revolution or disruption.

3. LANGUAGE AND REALITY: REFERENTIAL BOUNDARIES AND ONTOLOGICAL TENSIONS

Sankara and Derrida emphasize the connection between language and reality, while grounded in distinct philosophical foundations. Both of them question the extent to which language can accurately represent or convey reality. Both arrive at a comparable conclusion, but through fundamentally distinct techniques, that language ultimately fails to encapsulate reality.

Sankara's quest to reach and realise *Brahman* begins with assessing the tools of valid knowledge. He accepts *sabda* (verbal testimony)³ as a reliable tool of valid knowledge, as his school of Advait Vedant belongs to the *aastik*⁴ category of Indian philosophy, which believes in the authority of the Veda not because they describe *Brahman*, but because they point towards it through negation and indirect implication (Deutsch, 1973). As mentioned earlier, for Sankara, language functions as a tool of the empirical realm, but at the same time, he also acknowledges language as a tool that points towards the *Brahman*. Therefore, he has an ambivalent view of language. He does not explicitly reject language in any of his works; however, he does make a number of statements that can be interpreted as suggesting a limited role for language in understanding *Brahman* (Potter, 1985). In his commentary on *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.9.1, Sankara while discussing the tools that aid the realization of *brahman*, writes: "Speech does not go there, nor mind, nor sight. Hearing does not go there, nor breath, nor life-force. Nor knowledge, nor understanding, nor wisdom, nor mind. It is not to be attained by the mind" (Gambhirananda, 1989). Another mention can be found in his commentary on *Brahmasutras* 1.1.3, "from which speech returns, together with the mind, without reaching it," implying that *Brahman* cannot be grasped by language. Such quotes are frequently cited to underscore the inherent constraints of language and cognition while attempting to comprehend the essence of *Brahman*. Also, at the same time, he acknowledges the use of language as a means of indicating *Brahman*, as he states in the scholarly analysis of the *Mandukya Upanishad* 1.2.12, he expounds upon his interpretation and comments that, "The word '*Brahman*' is used to denote that which is beyond all words and thoughts" (Gambhirananda, 1989).

He furthers the argument in his commentary on *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.1.19 "Language is like a dream within a dream. It is even less real than the world, but it seems real," calling it a part of *māyā* or *avidyā* (nescience). Further, he states the statements included in the *Upanishads* (*mahāvākyas*), are fundamentally false due to their linguistic nature, hence classifying them as constituents of *māyā* or *avidyā* (Sharma, 2000), as he states in *Brahamsutra* 4.1.3, "In this state father is no father" and concluding the statement with "The Vedas are no Vedas," implying that once *Brahman* has been realized, even the *Vedas* lose their importance. Conversely, he asserts that language, particularly in the act of hearing Vedas, has the potential to facilitate emancipation. In support of his point, Sankara references the analogy of the serpent and rope. Similar to the potential harm that might arise from mistaking a rope for a serpent, the act of perceiving a falsehood can also serve as a catalyst for attaining liberation (Potter, 1985, p. 53). Although considering the language a tool of *māyā*, he also states that *sabdapraman* (verbal testimony) is the sole way to recognise *Brahman*, as he states that "the acquisition of *brahman* is unattainable through alternative means of knowledge acquisition, such as perception or interpretation"⁵ (Gambhirananda, 1989).



By contrast, Derrida radically destabilizes the assumption that language can refer to a stable reality at all. In his reading of Saussure, he critiques the structuralist claim that signs refer to stable concepts by arguing that the signified is always already a signifier in another chain (Derrida, 1997). Language for Derrida does not stand in a simple representational relation to reality. Rather, it constructs the very possibility of what is taken to be “real,” as he writes in his essay *Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences* “There is no signified that escapes the play of signifiers” (Derrida, 1997).

Moreover, Derrida challenges the entire Western philosophy that is based on the metaphysics of presence. Derrida’s philosophical methodology involves deconstructing the metaphysics of presence, which includes the rejection of absolute notions such as absolute authority and absolute knowledge. He asserts that these absolutes are inherently violent and discriminatory (Enwald, 2004). Derrida’s famous assertion in his work *Of Grammatology* (1976), “There is no outside-text,” signifies his repudiation of logocentrism, positing that the concept of ‘text’ encompasses a structure that is not a closed system. Instead, it perpetually references other systems ad infinitum, thereby contesting the existence of absolute truth or valid knowledge that could facilitate liberation (Derrida, 1976; Schalkwyk, 1997). Consequently, from a Derridian perspective, Sankara’s belief in the notion of Brahman or any other ultimate reality would be dismissed. He points out in his essay *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences* (1978), he writes

*The entire history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix... is the determination of being as presence in all senses of this world. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence—*eidōs, archē, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.**

By asserting this, he negates the potential for any such idea beyond the continuum of interpretations. For Derrida, *Brahman* parallels the transcendental signified, representing an external reference point that exists outside the realm of human interpretation or language, serving as the foundation for all thinking and knowing. Derrida challenges the transcendental signified, deeming it an illusion (Derrida, 1976; Culler, 1975; Norris, 1991).

His theory fundamentally relies on the decentering of the concept of ‘presence,’ which can never be completely expressed or attained, as it is mediated by language (Derrida, 1976). Derrida would somewhat concur with Sankara, since he posits that language is unable to articulate or attain *Brahman*. Both consider language inadequate for accurately portraying reality, yet their rationales differ significantly.

It is appropriate to assert, that for Derrida, rather than relying on the language of religious texts to unveil truth, he asserts that language is transient and perpetuates the notion that it can never convey any authentic or real knowledge. Nonetheless, through the same statement it can also be implied that he would agree with Sankara on the incapacity of language to represent any reality. According to Derrida, language possesses no stable structure, serving just as a supplemental element that embodies neither presence nor absence, ultimately advancing towards confusion and dissemination (Spivak, 1997). Derrida views this dissemination positively as it acknowledges a “creation of meaning that is always already fragmented” (Derrida, 1993). Given the nature of language, it is impractical to recover or alter the integrity of the original meaning.



Thus, Sankara distinguishes between an ineffable real (*Brahman*) and its linguistic approximations, while Derrida denies the existence of a pure reference outside the chain of signifiers. Sankara maintains that reality precedes language and must be realized through its transcendence, while Derrida dissolves the very possibility of an extralinguistic real, embedding meaning within an endless play of signs. Yet a shared concern underlies both approaches: the suspicion that language, as commonly conceived, fails to capture the real. Sankara addresses this failure through ontological hierarchy while Derrida through epistemological subversion. Both thereby unsettle, the confidence in language's referential transparency, one by affirming, the unspeakable real, and the other by exposing the textual condition of all supposed reality.

4. LANGUAGE AND MEANING: FOUNDATIONS AND DISRUPTIONS

The inquiry into meaning is central to both Sankara's metaphysical investigation and Derrida's deconstructive endeavor. Despite their divergent approaches, Sankara examining the issue via a spiritual, ontological perspective and Derrida employing a post-structural linguistic critique, both philosophers fundamentally undermine the notion that language can provide definitive, immutable, or self-sufficient meaning.

In the discourse on language and meaning, it is crucial to note that Sankara was not a grammarian and hence lacked a distinct linguistic theory of meaning; yet, his perspectives on the subject are compiled and analyzed from his numerous commentaries. He attributes his insights to Panini's grammar (*Vyākaraṇa*) and frequently references Panini in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* to clarify linguistically intricate matters. The complete *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* comprises Sankara's interpretation grounded in linguistic significance and alternative interpretations. At the outset of *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Sankara elucidates how human beings get meanings through the notion of superimposition (*adhyasa*) in *Adhyasabhāṣya*. Superimposition is the process by which erroneous concepts, including language and meaning, are imposed upon non-dual Brahman (Gambhiranada, 1989). He writes,

Nevertheless, owing to an absence of discrimination between these attributes as also between substances, which are absolutely disparate, there continues a natural human behaviour based on self-identification in the form of "I am this" or "This is mine". This behaviour has for its material cause an unreal nescience and man resorts to it by mixing up reality with unreality as a result of superimposing the things themselves or their attributes on each other.

This superimposition arises from the intrinsic contradictions that dictate the connection between words and their meanings, which is the principal reason Sankara categorizes language as a component of *māyā* or *āvidyā* (nescience), while yet acknowledging its use in navigating the empirical (*vyavahrik*) reality (Gambhirananda, 1989).

For Sankara, the Vedas and Upanishads are eternal, and he regards their teachings as true and hence, it may be inferred that the relationship between words and their meanings is also eternal. Sankara asserts in his commentary on *Brahmasūtras* 1.3.28 that he supports the Mimamsa perspective that the link between words and their meanings is everlasting, he writes

since the relationship between such generic words and their meanings, as for instance cowhood and cows, is seen to be eternal (i.e. beginningless). Not that the distinguishing characteristics (ie. genus) of the cows etc. are created afresh each time these cows etc. are born; for the individual forms of substances, qualities, and actions g'one can have origin, but not so their distinguishing (general) characteristics (i.e. genus). And words are connected with the general characteristics and not with the individuals... (1.3.28)



And concludes the argument with *even though the individuals are born, the distinctive general characteristics (or features) remain constant, so that this creates no difficulty about the eternality of the words cow etc*⁶.

Additionally, in the same sutra, Sankara analyzes the concept of *sphota*, asserting that creation emanates from language. *Sphota* asserts that letters, with beginnings and endpoints, cannot convey meaning autonomously instead, meaning emerges from the unity of a word, termed *sphota*, an eternal essence encompassing all actions and significations. Sankara presents Upavarsa's assertion, which counters critiques concerning the inherent beginnings and endings of letters by positing that letters are, in fact, words themselves. It asserts that letter identification is more influenced by the similarity of utterances than by species or likeness. Letters are consistently recognised as identical in each iteration. This indicates that a term, such as 'cow', appears to be reiterated many times instead of being two distinct words. He also examines the potential influence of pronunciation changes on letter recognition. He asserts that despite differences in pronunciation, the fundamental characteristics of the letters remain constant, as identity recognition relies on these characteristics rather than sound variances. Ensuring consistency is crucial to avoid conflicting perceptions that may result from variations in expression, such as nasal quality or pitch. At the conclusion of this sutra, Sankara repudiates the notion that differences in pronunciation might alter the essence of letters, advocating instead for the premise that the identification of letters is intrinsic (Gambhirananda, 1965).

He also states the importance of context, stating that complete meaning can be known by looking at the sequence of the words, implying that the individual meaning of a word can be determined by the place where it is occurring. Nonetheless, this remains inadequate for Sankara, who, in his commentary and interpretation of the *Brahmasutras*, initially differentiates between primary (literal) and secondary (metaphorical) meanings (Grimes, 1991) as while interpreting and commenting on various upanishads and *Brahamsutras*, he often applies secondary meaning when the primary meaning is found to be unintelligible⁷, in fact in case of doubt regarding interpretations, he offers different interpretations⁸, however while doing this, he sticks to simple rule that different statements can have different meanings as long as meaning is uncontradicted.

Derrida's critique of meaning originates in a different idiom. Building on Saussure, he argues that the meaning of a sign is not inherent, but through *différance*, not through presence, but through absence. Derrida's concept of *différance* captures the idea that the signified always already functions as a signifier (Derrida, 1997). He asserts in his essay *Différance* (1967) that "*différance* is literally neither a word nor a concept" (7). The modified spelling "remains purely graphic; it is read or written, but it cannot be heard," (7) As Nicholas Royle aptly puts it, "*Différance* is what makes presence possible while at the same time making it differ from itself" (Royle, 2003). It (*Différance*) brings two ideas together of deferring and differing, as Derrida puts in the final chapter of *Writing and Difference* (1967),

Différance is to be conceived prior to the separation between deferring as delay and differing as the active work of difference. Of course, this is inconceivable if one begins on the basis of consciousness, that is, presence, or on the basis of its simple contrary, absence or non-consciousness. (88).

This indicates that the significance of language is inherently unstable and deferred, since it functions as a structure of inconsistencies (Chatterjee, 1985). Derrida emphasises the significance of the idea of supplement⁹ in his theory, rejecting the possibility of linguistic certainty regarding meaning. Unlike Sankara, Derrida illustrates that meaning is not anchored



in any metaphysical reality; he asserts, “Meaning must await being stated or written in order to occupy itself and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning” (Derrida, 1967). He concludes that language is arbitrary and imposes no limitations on the diversity of meanings and interpretations that readers may derive from the premise that language lacks an absolute, external reference point.

Derrida would, however, somewhat concur with Sankara about the significance of context. Derrida asserts that meaning is perpetually contingent upon context, which is inherently unstable (Derrida, 1982). He extensively discusses, in his work *Signature Event and Context* (1988), his engagement with J.L. Austin’s Speech Acts theory, which posits that speech acts transpire within a certain context. He asserts that no solitary, unified context exists, as several contexts necessarily coexist simultaneously. The term “context” denotes a construct that individuals create throughout the reading process. The “context” to which one alludes does not exist until it is established (Royle, 2003), suggesting that all entities possess relational worth rather than intrinsic or transcendental value. When Sankara asserts that meaning can be discerned from the context of words and utterances, Derrida counters by arguing that if meaning is contingent upon context, then that context is human-constructed and therefore unstable.

Despite their different goals, Sankara’s pursuit of transcendental liberation and Derrida’s interrogation of metaphysical assumptions both thinkers question whether language can anchor meaning. Sankara moves beyond meaning to *brahman-jnan* (knowledge of the *brahman*) and Derrida remains within the play of language to reveal that all such constructions are structurally unstable. Thus, meaning, in both frameworks is rendered problematic, for Sankara due to the unreality of linguistic objects; for Derrida, due to the endless deferral inherent in signification itself.

5. RECITATION AND ITERATION: SACRED REPETITION AND ECONOMY OF REWRITING

This thematic axis delineates a crucial domain in which Derrida and Sankara elucidate the performative and volatile nature of language, but with fundamentally divergent objectives. Both philosophers consider repetition fundamental to the transmission and disruption of meaning, however they approach this concept from fundamentally divergent ontological and epistemological perspectives.

Sankara emphasizes the significance of the *mahāvākyas* (great sentences from the Upanishads), asserting that their repeated recitation aids in concentrating one’s attention on the *atman* (eternal self). In the analysis of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.3.28*, he asserts that “the recitation and repetition of the Vedas can facilitate the mind’s readiness for this direct experience,” underscoring the significance of reciting *mahāvākyas* in the direct realization of the *atman* (Madhavananda, 1935). He asserts that the capacity of profound sayings to elevate one’s ideas from the ephemeral to the eternal demonstrates a significant purpose of language; hence, for him, despite language being a tool of *māyā* or *avidyā*, it plays a crucial role in attaining liberation. As he states in the sutra 3.4.38¹⁰, that the repeated recitation of mantras, can help one meditate and concentrate and helps to focus attention to the eternal self (*atman*) (Misra, 1972, Mayeda, 1992).

Derrida refers to this recurrence as iteration and designates these *mahāvākyas* as performative communication or speech. In *Signature Event and Context* (1988), he remarks that the recurrence of performative statements does not just describe an event but also enacts it. Such



statements are contingent upon content, and their repetition may not convey the same meaning or context.

He writes,

One of these essential elements and not one among others classically remains consciousness, the conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject for the totality of his locutory act. Thereby, performative communication once more becomes the communication of an intentional meaning, (322)

This conscious presence of the speakers or receivers who participate in the effecting of a performative, their conscious and intentional presence in the totality of the operation, implies teleologically that no remainder escapes the present totalization. (322)

When a word or phrase is repeated, it occurs inside a different context, leading to a transformation of its meaning that reveals its always evolving character as it modifies, obscures, undermines, and dislocates discourse, ultimately generating something entirely different (Olson, 2002). Iteration adds dehiscence, fissures, constraints, and clefts into discourse, preventing the utterance from being present to itself or its content (Colebrook, 2014). In the Derridian paradigm, the repetitive recitation of *mahāvākyas* is vehemently opposed, as Derrida posits that such repetition hinders concentration and meditation, resulting instead in distortion and disturbance.

What Sankara sees as a means of dissolution into unity, Derrida treats as evidence of irreducible multiplicity. Yet, in both systems repetition displaces the assumption of language as a stable carrier of meaning. Sankara employs recitation as a ladder to be discarded once the summit is reached, whereas Derrida finds in iteration the abyss where every ascent leads to only further deferral.

Thus, while Sankara's recitation gestures towards the silence beyond signs, Derrida's iteration exposes the noise within them. Both, in their own way, unsettle the metaphysics of presence and diverge in their ontological commitments.

6. THE IMPLICATIONS OF LINGUISTIC INSTABILITY: TRANSCENDENCE OR INFINITE DEFERRAL?

Having interrogated the metaphysical, semantic, and performative dimensions of language in Sankara and Derrida, a central concern that arises is how does this instability of language impact, knowledge, truth and liberation. Both thinkers recognise the limitations of language as a transparent medium for truth yet, they draw radically different conclusions from the shared insight. Wherein Sankara gestures beyond language towards transcendental realisation, Derrida affirms the endless movement within language itself.

For Sankara, the inadequacy of language is not a crisis but an invitation to silence language embedded in the name and form (empirical) world that can gesture towards *brahman* but cannot encapsulate it. Therefore, he treats the instability of language as an epistemic limit that must be transcended and suggests the apophatic method of *neti neti* (not this, not this) to dismantle the conceptual constructions. The self (*atman*) identical with *brahman* is realised not through linguistic certainty, but through meditative knowledge that emerges when all linguistic superimpositions (*adhyasa*) dissolve.

Derrida, on the other hand, embraces this linguistic instability, not as an obstacle to overcome, but as the very condition of meaning. His critique of 'metaphysics of presence' challenges the



assumption that there is any pure, self identical meaning beyond the chain of signifiers. Meaning for Derrida is always deferred and mediated by *différance*.

Unlike Sankara's horizon of liberation beyond language, Derrida sees no beyond. The instability of language is not a deficiency but a generative principle that keeps interpretation alive. This divergence shapes, their philosophical legacies. Sankara's project is ontologically anchored i.e, it seeks to stabilise the self in the absolute, whereas Derrida's is anti- foundational that is it displace any final ground.

Both thinkers, however, undermine the confidence in languages and representational adequacy, making a compelling argument to reevaluate how meaning, truth and liberation are conceived. While Sankara moves through language towards silence, Derrida remains within language to interrogate its silences. Thus, the instability of language becomes for Sankara, a path to transcendence and for Derrida, a space for perpetual deconstruction.

7. CONCLUSION

This comparative enquiry has traced the arc of two distinct, yet provocatively, convergent philosophy of language, Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, and Derrida's deconstruction by examining their metaphysical underpinnings, views on language and reality, theory of meaning, approaches to recitation and iteration, and ultimately their responses to linguistic instability.

Both thinkers share a profound suspicion towards language's ability to convey accurate meaning. For Sankara, this suspicion leads to the assertion that language must be ultimately transcended to realize the non-dual self through *neti neti* and contemplative insight. In contrast, Derrida resists any metaphysical closure, proposing that language's deferrals and displacements (*différance*) are not failures, but constitutive of all meaning. In this way, Sankara moves towards silence, while Derrida dwells within discursivity.

Despite their divergent ends, transcendence in Sankara and deconstruction and Derrida, both illuminate the limits of language, linguistic uncertainty, and the philosophical necessity of engaging language as both a problem and possibility. By placing them in a critical dialogue, the study reveals how to thinkers from radically different traditions, interrogate the same fundamental question: what happens when language fails to say the truth?

In their responses, Sankara offers a path beyond words, while Derrida keeps us inside them, forever attuned to their gaps and echoes. The tension between these responses continues to shape the intellectual horizon of philosophy and its future reckonings with meaning, identity, and truth.

Footnote

- 1) In the commentary of the verse 4.5.15, Sankara is states that in duality, one perceives, smells, tastes, speaks, hears, thinks, touches, and knows. However, when Brahman is known, everything becomes the Self and the only way this *self* can be reached is through *neti neti* (not this, not this).
- 2) In the *Adhyasbhashya*, Sankara in his commentary on the section 1, Chapter 1 explains how humans due to nescience (*avidya*) tend to project qualities of unreal on the real self which further conceals the real self, leading humans into an endless play of *māyā*. Further reading *Adhyasbhashya* as translated by Swami Gambhirananda, 1965
- 3) Verbal testimony or *śabdapramāṇa* is a statement made by a reliable person to convey facts. Refer to *Verbal Testimony in Indian Philosophy* by Dr.Jai Singh, 1990.



- 4) Indian Schools have been traditionally classified into six astik (orthodox) and three nastik (heterodox) schools. Astik (Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta) are who accept the authority of the Vedas. For further reading, refer to *An Advaita Vedānta Perspective on Language* by John Grimes (1991).
- 5) In *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.1.2, he evaluates the *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge) like perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*), or postulation (*arthāpatti*), verbal testimony (*śabdapramāna*) and their capability in knowing *Brahman* and accepts verbal testimony as a way to recognise *Brahman*.
- 6) In this *sūtra* 1.3.28, Sankara elaborates on the concept of language and how a word meaning is formed. In these particular lines, Sankara uses the word “cow” and explains how the meaning “cow”, the animal is associated with the word “cow” eternally. For further reading, refer to *sūtra* 1.3.28 in *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, translated by Swami Gambhirananda, 1989.
- 7) *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10, states that secondary (metaphorical) meanings will be used only when, in the given context, the primary meaning of the word is found to be unintelligible (Madhavananda, 1935)
- 8) For instance, *sūtra* 1.3.42, a doubt is raised whether a particular section from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* explains the true nature of the transmigrating soul or establishes the true nature of the transmigrating soul. In this case, Sankara offers two different explanations and accepts both the statements. For further reading, refer *sūtra* 1.3.42, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, 1989.
- 9) A supplement is anything that is added to something in order to enrich it and something that is only an “extra”. For further reading, refer to chapter “...That Dangerous Supplement...” of *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1967.
- 10) In *Brahmasūtra* 3.4.38, Sankara while commenting on how can people realise *Brahman*, comments that one can realise *it* alone through repeated recitation. He also cites *Manu* 2.87 in support of his argument, as the verse cites that by repeating *mantras* alone, one can reach *Brahman*. For further reading, refer to *Brahmaputra* 3.4.38, translated by Swami Gambhirananda, 1989.

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