

# **Toward a Buddhist theory of language**

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The purpose of this paper is:

1. To point out that there is a Buddhist theory of language;
2. To make explicit the fundamental premises of the Buddhist theory of language, and to show that they are implicit in the most basic principles of Buddhism as set forth in the first teaching of the Buddha—the Four Noble Truths;
3. To assert that the Buddhist theory of language is better than the theory of language that currently dominates the linguistic universe of discourse—better as a scientific theory on scientific grounds as measured by scientific standards, i.e. as measured by the empirical standard, i.e. it can explain the facts better;
4. To briefly sketch one line of argument that provides an abundance of empirical evidence that proves that the Buddhist theory of language is better;
5. To assert that the Buddhist theory of language is also better than the theory that currently dominates the linguistic discourse on humanitarian grounds, i.e. it explicitly addresses the problem of human suffering, and it helps to explain human suffering, and thus it can help to alleviate human suffering;
6. To urge you, as linguists, as Buddhists, as human beings to try to understand the Buddhist theory of language, and to try to see that it is better, and to try to apply it to the study of language and to the problem of suffering, and to try to develop the Buddhist theory of language further.

## **1. The fundamental premises of the Buddhist theory of language**

Before I begin to explain how the fundamental premises of the Buddhist theory of language are implicit in the Four Noble Truths, there are two potential sources of misunderstanding I would like to obviate.

The first comes from the point of view of linguistics. I have found that when I begin to talk about the Buddhist theory of language to linguists, they frequently tend to be dismissive because they assume that I am talking about one of the ancient Sanskrit linguistic theories, such as those of Patanjali or Panini. Most linguists take the view that, while these theories may be interesting, perhaps, as historically significant developments, as historical relics, they are shallow and simpleminded as compared to modern linguistic theory. So when I say that I am going to talk about

the Buddhist theory of language, it is as if I were proposing to explain the relevance of the bicycle to modern rocket science. However, the only thing those Sanskrit theories have in common with the Buddhist theory of language is that they come from the same part of the world and that they were formulated in the same, or related, languages, i.e. Sanskrit and/or Pali. So I want to make it clear that I am not talking about those ancient arcane Sanskrit theories of language.

The second source of misunderstanding comes from the point of view of Buddhist scholars. When I talk about the Buddhist theory of language to Buddhist scholars, they frequently think I am talking about, or should be talking about, a theory of language that grows out of the Buddhist theory of the psychology of thought, which was already highly developed in the most fundamental Buddhist canon, preeminently in the Abhidhamma, in terms of the five skandhas—the five “aggregates of thought” (Sanskrit *vijñāna-skandha*, Pali *viññāna-khandha*).

I agree with those Buddhist scholars that a Buddhist theory of language must be consistent with the Buddhist theory of the psychology of thought as set forth in the Abhidhamma. But the science of linguistics came into being at the turn of this century as an autonomous science, and it is necessary that it remain autonomous. The science of linguistics was born of the struggle to attain and maintain a point of view that is independent of the conventional point of view, because that point of view is the object of its study. Thus the science of linguistics must constantly struggle against the common tendency to subordinate linguistics to other points of view, particularly the conventional point of view, but also the points of view of other sciences, which are to some extent contaminated by the conventional point of view, which includes that of the science of psychology, but it is also independent of all other sciences, down to and including biology and chemistry and physics.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there has been, alas, widespread violation of this principle in recent years, a consequence of the desperation that has resulted from the theoretical disintegration that has resulted from the failure of the prevailing line of theoretical development, a failure that the Buddhist theory of language is capable, I will argue, of rectifying.

Thus from the purely linguistic point of view, linguistics and psychology are seen as two very different sciences. Obviously, the phenomena the two sciences deal with are closely related, perhaps identical to some extent, but the ways these two sciences approach the phenomena are very different, and the key difference is this: Language has perceptible form whereas thought does not. And linguistics takes the form of language as its primary data. Thus linguists endeavor to describe and gather and organize examples of linguistic form from one language, from various dialects of one language, from various related languages, and from unrelated languages. This collection of linguistic forms is the corpus, the body of data, that

linguistics endeavors to explain. This body of data is the empirical ground of linguistics. And so what linguists do is try to discover generalizations, laws, about the form of language, about the forms of particular languages and about families of languages and about language in general. And to posit and test theories that might be able to explain those laws. So the goal of linguistics is to discover the laws that govern the forms of language.

And so the enterprise of linguistics does not depend in any way on the psychology of thought. Indeed, it is just as reasonable to expect that linguistics will shed light on the psychology of thought as it is to expect that the psychology of thought will shed on linguistics. In short, linguistics does not begin with psychology; it begins with the forms of language.

So what I am talking about here as the Buddhist theory of language is not dependent upon a theory of the psychology of thought. It is a theory of language that is prior to and independent of any theory of psychology, Buddhist or otherwise.

Let me emphasize once again that I am not claiming that thought and language are unrelated. I am claiming that we linguists can and should develop a theory of language from the beginning, from the ground up, and not on the basis of a theory of psychology. I will try to clarify the problem of point of view more fully below in section 2.

I have no doubt that it would be interesting and valuable to try to understand how the Buddhist theory of language and the Buddhist theory of the psychology of thought, as set forth in the *Abhidhamma*, fit together, for surely they must. But that is quite a different matter, and one which is subsequent to the present endeavor, because one must have a theory of language before one can see how it might relate to a theory of psychology.

So what I want to do here is to try to develop the foundations of the Buddhist theory of language from the beginning, from the ground up. And here I am taking as the ground the first and most fundamental teaching of the Buddha, which is the Four Noble Truths. In passing I note that, although there are many different schools of Buddhism, they all agree in regarding the Four Noble Truths as the fundamental ground of Buddhism.

The main point I want to make then is this: There is a Buddhist theory of language and the foundations of the Buddhist theory of language are implicit in the Four Noble Truths. Let me turn now to explain how the basic premises of the Buddhist theory of language follow from the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that the normal human being is plagued by chronic suffering (Pali *dukkha*). And so this is the first premise of the Buddhist theory of language.

### **The first premise of the Buddhist theory of language:**

*The normal human being is plagued by chronic suffering.*

In as much as this premise is very different in character from the basic premises of the conventional theories of language, it is important to briefly explain how it frames the Buddhist theory of language. First, let me say that I did not just stick this premise here to make it look like this is a Buddhist theory. This premise is integral to the Buddhist theory of language. It does real work: it determines how the Buddhist theory of language frames the field of language and it determines how the Buddhist theory of language approaches language.

First, on the level of logic and concept, this first premise functions to frame and focus the point of view that the Buddhist theory of language takes. In this regard this first premise is like the premises of conventional theories of language. That is, it frames language in terms of logic and concept. However, contrary to the basic premises of conventional theories of language, the first premise of the Buddhist theory of language says that what is first and most fundamental in language is not logic or grammar, not phonology or morphology or syntax, indeed not any aspect of form at all. Further, and also contrary to the premises of conventional theories of language, this premise says that what is first and most fundamental is not reference or semantics, not implication, not connotation or denotation, not metaphor or metonymy, indeed not any species of meaning, at least not in the ordinary sense of meaning. Further, and again contrary to the premises of conventional theories of language, this premise says that what is most fundamental is not the physics of sound (acoustic phonetics), not the physical character of the articulatory apparatus (articulatory phonetics), not the physiology of the nervous system or the brain, indeed not any aspect of physicality at all. This premise says that what is first and foremost in framing the human situation in general, and thus human language in particular, is something quite different, namely, suffering.

Of course we must recognize that suffering may have a physical aspect: If I get hit by a stick, or if I break a leg, I will suffer. But such suffering often, if not always, has another aspect that is not physical. This, at least, is what the Buddha teaches. Grammatically speaking, the point of the Buddha's teaching is that a sentence like "I got hit by a stick" not only has an object ("stick") but a subject ("I"). So, while we may agree with conventional wisdom that it is useful and beneficial to investigate the physical aspects of suffering, the Buddha's teaching