

# Bhartrhari's Language Philosophy

## Linguistic Monism

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**Abstract:** Indian way of thinking from a metaphysical and religious perspective examines language in connection with thinking. Grammarians have found ways to define the essence of the Word, thus building up Grammar and Language Philosophy. Panini's grammar reviews not only basic linguistic structures, but also Man's intrinsic pattern. Panini's followers, especially Bhartrhari, reveal a soteriological dimension of grammar. This philosophical trait of the Word on which Sphota theory is based indicates that the mere Sphota represents the basic structure of consciousness. Sphota concept lies at the heart of contemporary Language Philosophy.

**Keywords:** Indian Philosophy; Grammar; Language; Bhartrhari; Sphota.

### Introduction

Indian philosophy classed within the relationship thinking-language a multitude of themes and concepts which are related to metaphysical and religious beliefs and that are radically different from the European way of relating to the turmoil of the spirit and soul.

*The Corpus of the Vedas* belong to Brahmanism and these contain hundred of thousands of lines considered to be relevant and significant in terms of philosophical meaning. These texts are divided into:

- a) The collection of hymns and sacred formulae (*Samahitos*);
- b) Technical treaties upon rites and sacrifices (*Brahmanas*);
- c) The *Aranyakas* writings that comprise *The Upanishads* and the four fundamental Vedas: *Rig-Veda*, *Sama-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda* and *Atharva-Veda*;
- d) The collection of aphorisms (*Sutras*).

Six subsidiary sciences emerged as part of scientific Sutras (also considered related to Vedas - Vedangas):

- The technique of the vedic sacrifice (*Kalpa*),
- The technique of eloquence (*Shikshi*),
- Prosody (*Chandas*),
- The analysis of the significance of the vedic word (*Nirukta*),
- Grammar (*Vyakarana*),
- Astronomy (*Jyotisha*).

The technique of eloquence (*Shikshi*) reviews not only the right intonation of the hymns but also the phonetical rules „connected to the length of the lines and syllables, of the emergence of meaning but mostly about the right intonation of words - *Samadhi*”<sup>1</sup>.

From *Nirukta* (the analysis of the significance) emerges the science of grammar- *Vyakarana*. In the *Nirukta* treatise, philosopher Yaska, one of Panini's predecessors, elaborates an analysis upon Grammar: becoming, from his point of view, a way of converting words through different means and also giving references upon the four parts of speech and the way names of objects or phenomena derive from the basic verbal element, which is the word (*vāc*).

Indian grammarians sought ways through which sounds can become a word (*vāc*) and more words within a sequence can express ideas. Indian scholars also tried to define *the essence of the word* and give it a metaphysical status. As a consequence, Louis Renou, claimed that „*Indian grammar is based on a substructure of grammatical arguments (...) grammar being the one that binds but also rules the most elevated endeavours of Indian reasoning*”<sup>2</sup>. The same philosopher, Panini (IV-V B.C.) wrote the first Grammar Treaty - The eight lessons (*Ashtadhyayi*) which comprises 3996 rules (*Sutra*) under the form of algebraic formulae, the focus falling on analysis (*Vyakarana*).

Leonard Bloomfield, the promoter of distributionism, a current of linguistic structuralism, considers that the Treaty of the Indian grammarian represents „*one of the greatest accomplishments of human intelligence*”<sup>3</sup>, the only comprehensive description of a language. In other words, an important piece of writing having the status of an extensive Grammar of the Sanskrit language.

Ferdinand de Saussure claims that Panini is the one who discovered what is called zero linguistic entity (*lopa*), which means the intrinsic connection

<sup>1</sup> Louis Renou et Jean Filliozat, *L'Inde classique. Manuel des Études indiennes* (Paris: Payot, 1947), 115-116.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 164-165.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 45.

between the written sign and its signifier. Later, this concept was elaborated in his work called *Course of General Linguistic*.

Panini's grammar explores both linguistic structures such as sounds, words, sentences, etc. and ontological structures of the Human Being. The first follower of Panini's work is Katyayana (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.), who, in his Treaty *Varttika* (*Explanations*), retrieves under the form of 1263 *sutras*, the same rules developed by the „Grand Maester”, Panini.

Another philosopher, Patanjali (1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.), in the Treaty *Mahabhasya* tackles different issues concerning language as a tool of handling reality or expressing thoughts or feelings related to the Supreme Spirit-*Brahman*. Many scholars believe that *Pramana* doctrine is „the means of the right knowledge”<sup>1</sup> and there are only two ways to access it:

- a) The act of knowledge through perception- the present, when the act of knowledge takes place;
- b) The act of knowledge through the *Vedic word*, this being the only way to access True Knowledge.

University professor Constantin Marin from Jassy (Romania) also emphasizes the fact that the importance attributed to grammar led to turning it into the *Supreme Veda*: „ruminating philosophy in Indian philosophy means thinking as a grammarian”<sup>2</sup>. To sum up, „the logical and grammatical structures of a language influence the way philosophers understand the world. From the point of view of language philosophy, the evolution of archaic languages to the modern ones, represents a generalization of meaning along with a diminishing of value in the relation sign/significant”<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, Eugeniu Coșeriu, in his work entitled *The History of Language Philosophy*, underlines the fact that “language philosophy deals with the core of language itself, and that is why certain aspects of language philosophy can no longer be addressed for the benefit of language in general, but those need to transcend the mere linguistic frame into the language philosophy context”<sup>4</sup>. He also emphasizes that the Indian language philosophy explore both problems and solutions similar to those in European language philosophy: „knowledge (*Jnana*) is identified as *cauza finalis* of every linguistic expression”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Petru Dunca, *Introducere în filosofia Orientului antic* (Iași: Editura Axis, 2005), 150-152.

<sup>2</sup> Constantin Marin, *Filosofia indiană. Izbăvirea sufletească prin cunoaștere și meditație transcendențială* (Iași: Editura Moldova, 1993), 108-109.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 108.

<sup>4</sup> Eugen Coșeriu, *Istoria filosofiei limbajului* (București: Editura Humanitas, 2011), 64.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

The ontological indicator in this equation signals a strong connection between „being/soul and thought which changes the perspective upon the way language philosophy is perceived”<sup>1</sup>.

Overall, the wide spectrum of language philosophy issues, from both epistemic and ontological points of view, is extremely comprehensive.

### **The Word as the ultimate principle. Towards an ontological semantic**

Bhartrhari, the Indian philosopher and grammarian who founded the Philosophical School -Darsana- also wrote the Treaty Vakayapadiya Brahmakanda in which he analyzed Panini's Grammar and also made references to other grammarians such as Pantajali (*Mahbhashyae*).

Metaphysics and Grammar in Bhartrhari's philosophy are „fundamental endeavors on which the Science of Grammar is based”<sup>2</sup>.

On the whole, Bhartrhari underlines the soteriological dimension of grammar, it being the way to salvation and a cure for the contamination of the Word. Grammar „is the most cathartic of all sciences and the brightest of them. It is one of the first steps of accomplishment, it is the genuine and straightforward path for the one who seeks freedom”<sup>3</sup>. Grammar is the Royal Path towards the Supreme Principle, Brahman. „This oneness divided into equal multiples through their unevenness is particular Grammar, and the one who learns and understands it, can reach the Spreme Brahma”<sup>4</sup>.

Even at the beginning of Vakypediase Treaty, we can learn that Brahman – “The Word is the origin of all things. This mere Brahman, without beginning or end, the Primordial Word – an imperative phoneme (Shota) – reveals itself under the form of objects that animate the world”<sup>5</sup>. Thus, everything around is the embodiment of Brahma so, if the Vedas are connected to Brahma's ontological fertility, he becomes the source of all Knowledge. Brahman expresses himself through things, phenomena (the objects of knowledge), beings (all-aware subjects) and knowledge itself. To sum up, this One embodies the seed of everything around: „the form of the subject he knows, the existing objects and knowledge itself”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Adrian Paul Iliescu, *Filosofia limbajului și limbajul filosofiei* (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Petru Dunca, *Ființa-Cunoaștere-Fericire la gânditorii post-paninieni* (Baia- Mare : Editura Poema, 2000), 132.

<sup>3</sup> Bhartrhari, *Vakypadiya*, translated by Madelaine Biardeau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 4.

Bhartrhari names Brahman The Essence of the Word, the most abstract and impersonal of Vedic representations. In Rig Veda, the 1st Hymn, depicts the relationship between language, thinking and reality : „ from the edge of the Sky, those Gods talk about the Word (vāc), which is the mere Universe (Visvam) , but which also transcends beyond it ” .

From the semiotic perspective, vāc means the revealed word which is alive and transferable through the initiatic way.

Brahma writings speak about the connection between The Absolute Reality (Brahman) and the Word: *The Word is Brahman*. Moreover, the Upanishads also reveal the relation between Brahma / Vāc and the sacred syllable - Man/Individual: „as leaves are held together by the branch, the same way, Speech is sustained by Man”<sup>1</sup>

Returning to the Vedic tradition, Bhartrhari praises Grammar, claiming that it is the Royal Path towards the Supreme Brahman. This complex philosophical process related to the Word relies on the Sphota Doctrine, through which it becomes Metaphysics.

### **Sphota - The Basis for the Act of Speech and Thinking**

Bhartrhari is considered to be the father of *Sphota* doctrine developed into the *Vakyapadiya* Treaty. In Kanda I, the reference to the *Word Principle* tints the *Sphota* concept in relation to Brahman, the origin of all Universe, while *Sphota* is the word reflected into the conscience of human beings.

Sergiu Al-George, in his work entitled *Language and Thinking in Indian Culture*, deepens the meaning of *Sphota* in Bhartrhari, saying that it means „ the abrupt, instantaneous epiphany of the global meaning through browsing the multitude of ways regarding the process of expression, a timeless unit from which the succession and differentiation of the sacred substance fades away”<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the relation between form and expression can be encountered in the matrix of phenomenality and multiplicity, or the path to The One –in his transcendental form: „the solution of this dichotomy, still being unsolved in modern Indian metaphysics, was tackled by the ancient philosophy, through means of linguistics in which the absolute of form is not an instance disconnected from reality, but its matrix”<sup>3</sup>.

One general dilemma in Bhartrhari’s theory, particularly in *Sphota*, is related to the connection between *Form (Rupa)*, *Particular Form (Svarupa)* and *Gender (Jati)*. If *Sphota* is considered the Particular Form of the word which lies on thinking, than, the same *Sphota* reveals itself through sound: „ within a word,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, I, 223.3.

<sup>2</sup> Sergiu Al. George, *Limbă și gândire în cultura indiană* (Pitești: Editura Paralela 45, 2005), 246.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 248.

*the form and the meaning of it are brought into light (...) the name related to the object in question, has its own particular form*”<sup>1</sup> Thus, Sphota represents the reflection within the conscious mind in order to substantiate the act of knowledge.

To sum up, the class of words represent the objective reality which corresponds to the Sphota conscious moment. Sphota is, therefore, *the word from inside*, which blocks the symmetry between the objective and subjective dimensions. Sphota maintains the acts of speech and knowledge that it also expresses. Bhartrhari transforms the word into a rapport of mental reality. So, there is a clear difference in the definition of Sphota by Patanjali (as an everlasting form of the perceptible sound) and by Panini (the perceptible sound is nothing else but the means of communication by connecting the speaker to the hearer).

These theories fill in the outlook upon Knowledge in Indian tradition – knowledge pre-exists in each *Atman (Individual Spirit)* under the form of Sphota, but it is limited by the accomplishments or failures from the previous lives.

Another difficult question to answer that appears Sphota is connected to the fact if it is One or a Multiple. In fact, it is about different facets of Sphota, the fundamental or the subsidiary sound which alters the speech of every individual. Thus, Bhartrhari distinguishes two levels of revelation: the first one in which Sphota can be perceived within basic, fundamental sounds, and a second one within the flow of speech of every speaker. The same Indian grammarian explores even deeper the meanings of Sphota: „ *the sound is perceived, as a bell ring, (...) before any noise other sounds are born within themselves (Sphota) the same as flames produce other flames*<sup>2</sup>. *The duration of Sphota is not significant (...) an object becomes known when the word is being uttered*”<sup>3</sup>

The grammarian explains in *Kanda II*<sup>4</sup> that there are not only words in a sentence and forms of words, but these also need to be connected to one another in order to convey a meaning. The logical argument of this theory has to do with Sphota which appears within the conscience like a genuine wholeness of the word which corresponds to a concept. In other words, Bhartrhari, instead of finding unity at the level of perception, he seeks it at the level of thought, more precisely at the level of the word itself. Moreover, Sphota is considered a *word by itself*.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhartrhari, *Vakyapadiya*, 50b, 66a.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 104–106.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 102.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 28–29.

Therefore, we can easily notice that the idea of a linguistic interest and pursuit appeared and developed in India long before Occidental concern towards this matter. Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Cours de linguistique generale*, defines the phoneme as being a distinctive unit of a language<sup>1</sup> and also claims that within a linguistic system, the sound represents a mark on the double axis of selections along with other sounds, ideas quite different from the ones of Leonard Bloomfield (from Prague), who supports the idea that the sound is a minimalistic, distinctive part, „ *the center of the word* ”<sup>2</sup>

Theories concerning phonemes and words have also been developed by N. Chomsky and many other postmodern linguistic schools by exploring the essence of language and speech, all these essentially contributing to the development of language philosophy.

### Conclusions

Indian perspective upon the connection between thinking-language and reality tackle a large number of topics filled with religious and metaphysical meanings. Indian grammarians sought ways through which sounds could make up words, and the sum of words could convey meaning according to reality. Thus, grammar not only analyzes basic linguistic structures, but also ontological construction of the Human Being. In other words, language philosophy researches the essence of language in relation to the nature of individuals. The Indian perspective offered language philosophy a broad range of theories to be studied.

Beginning with Panini's Grammar, as a key point in the analysis of the word, and continuing with his followers such as Katyayana, Patanjali or Bhartrhari, there emerges a linguistic monism loaded with metaphysical meaning. It is a glorification of Grammar's metaphysical status. Grammar has a soteriological dimension, being the Royal Path towards the Supreme Principle- Brahman.

Moreover, Bhartrhari identifies the Essence of the Word with Brahman (the Supreme Principle) and also comes up with a fundamental concept on which speech is based, namely Sphota. Therefore, Sphota represents the basis in the act of Knowledge and ensures the continuity and flow of speech: it is the fundamental sound that reveals itself in The One and The Multiple.

As a consequence, there emerges the idea of an Ultimate/Basic Atom of language which develops itself up to the point it conveys meaning and, ultimately forms the sentence. Modern, Occidental linguistics also retrieved this concept by taking it even further and making it relevant in the development of language philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale*, (Paris : Payot, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Bloomfield, *Language*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 68.

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