

Bhartrhari's *Sphoṭa* Theory and Saussure's Sign Theory

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Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to explore the two linguistic theories propounded by two different systems of epistemologies. Linguistic theory of sphoṭa was developed and applied in the Indian system of knowledge; on the other hand, sign theory of language was expounded in 19th century Europe. Though by their origin they have been developed in two opposite sides of worlds, by their application they are not far from each other. Linguistic theory of Bhartrhari revolves around sphoṭa; likewise Saussure's linguistic theory is all about the scientific study of signs. This study does a descriptive study of the sphoṭa and sign theories as propounded by the abovementioned scholars. Moreover, this paper uses the comparative methodology to understand the common grounds upon which these two theories are developed. In doing so, it attempts to explain the relevancy of Bhartrhari and Saussure in the linguistic world.

Keywords: *sphoṭa, sign, signifier, signified, dhvani, etcetera*

Introduction

Bhartrhari, a scholar from Pāṇinian School of grammar, studied language from a philosophical viewpoint in his masterpiece the *Vākyapadīya*. He introduced the metaphysical understanding of grammar by juxtaposing śabda to Brahman. The *Vākyapadīya* begins with the description of the Brahman who shows his presence in the world through multifarious manifestations. Bhartrhari considers grammar highly among all sciences as it is the powerful tool that teaches the correct use of language assisting one to achieve the metaphysical goal—the realisation of Brahman as well as the perfection in *lok-vyāvahāra*. Language proficiency is an ultimate goal that a man can desire as a social being.

Bhartrhari as a realist believed words are eternal whether they are conventional or not. Words are essentially dual for when expressed to convey meaning they expose the word-form as well. Word-form appeals first the cognition of the listener resulting in the comprehension of the import of the word. Śabda and sphoṭa—the meaning bearing unit are not differentiated in Bhartrhari usually; they are used interchangeably. According to Bhartrhari, śabdās are indivisible as well as indestructible. Although for grammatical purposes they are divided into phonemes to simplify the analysis of the language property, in *lok-vyāvahāra* they bear meaning only when they are understood as a whole unit.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a European linguist, founded the study of the structural linguistics in his series of lectures. His perspective on language changed the whole concept of linguistic study in European continent. Due to Saussure's pragmatic and rational approach to the language, linguistics is considered as a science today.

Saussure defines language as a system of signs. He says, "Language is system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc." (Baskin 16). Signs are symbols used to communicate. They are conventional as signs derive their meaning from convention which they are developed in. For Saussure, a sound is not language until and unless they bear an idea to be communicated. The sign is a bipartite concept—signifiant (signifier) and signifié (signified).

Sign = signifier (sound-image) + signified (concept)

Both signifier and signifier are the psychological entity according to Saussure.

Research Objective

The scholar aims to study linguistic notion of language expounded by two scholars representing east and west in their respective ascribed works. This study examines the concepts of Sphoṭa as well as Sign and attempts to explain them. Furthermore, both the theories are analysed

by comparing and contrasting each other to bring out the affinity between them.

Research Methodology

This research paper is a descriptive and analytical study of the ideas of Bhartr̥hari and Saussure regarding language. Being a study of two authors and their respective theories, this paper relies on the methodology of comparative literature.

Nature and Definition of Sphoṭa

The theory of sphoṭa was conceived to overcome the problem and shortcoming of language in its comprehension and meaning generation. Sphoṭa is neither the word or sentence nor the sound. Sphoṭa as a concept assists in cognising the sound-form and meaning of the word or sentence. It is a meaning bearing unit which flashes along with the articulation of the word. Sphoṭa makes possible to cognise the vāc (speech) in its whole whether it is conveyed in the form of words or sentences. It is revealed or made known through articulated sounds that also bring into the light the 'word-form' or 'sound-image' and this very image or form also reflects the sphoṭa. Sphoṭa works on two sides; it is both the revealed and the revealer. On the one hand, it is manifested through the sound uttered by the vocal organs; on the other hand, it illuminates the meaning aspect of the language when it comes to light.

Vaman Shivram Apte notes sphoṭa as the "idea which burst out or flashes on the mind when a sound is uttered" or "the impression produced on the mind at hearing a sound" (711). Nāgeśabhaṭṭa traces its origin from the root 'sphuṭ' meaning 'to burst forth'. 'To burst' also stand for the 'revealed'. Therefore, sphoṭa can be defined as "from which the meaning bursts forth, i.e. is revealed" (qtd. in Matilal, Word 78). In his *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, Mādhava explains the etymology of the word as such: 'bursts' means "is made explicit"; thus, sphoṭa is "what is made explicit (vyaḥ)" through sounds or phonemes at the one level, and it is the entity which makes meaning known, on the second level (ibid.). Therefore, the concept of sphoṭa should be defined as a terminology which manifests meaning after being articulated through sounds. For A.B. Keith, sphoṭa is a "mysterious entity, a sort of

hypostatization of sound" (387). Bhartr̥hari's metaphysical and philosophical approach to linguistics must have been the source of Keith's false notion of his sphoṭa theory. This shows his inability to grasp the essence of Bhartr̥hari's linguistic idea. He traces his linguistic philosophy from the Brahman who is untraceable, timeless and indestructible. Śabda shares the same characteristics as sphoṭa in Bhartr̥hari's linguistic understanding. John Brough also does not accept sphoṭa as a "mysterious entity". According to him, "there is nothing "mysterious": it is merely an abstraction to assist us in the handling of our linguistic material. . . . The fact that the sphoṭa itself cannot be pronounced is a characteristic shared with the phoneme and any other linguistic abstraction" (409). Brough believes, "the sphoṭa is simply the word considered as a single meaningful symbol" (ibid.). Bhartr̥hari's use of śabda in *Vākyapadīya* has multiple connotations. It refers to language as a complete or meaningful sound or word. Sometimes it is considered sphoṭa.

Cardona says "A sphoṭa is an unanalysable entity, without parts. It is not a sound or conglomerate of sounds. For sounds serve only to manifest (vyañji) a sphoṭa. It is units called sphoṭa which make up the linguistic system a speaker has in his intellect and whereby he communicates" (301). There is no English term which faithfully resembles the sense of the Sanskrit term sphoṭa, it is nearly impossible to translate this concept. Nevertheless, Patnaik suggests few equivalent terminologies in English which comes close to the sense of the term sphoṭa such as the "Real-word," "Logos," "Real Language," the "Bearer of meaning," etcetera (46). John Brough studies sphoṭa as a linguistic sign. According to him, the sphoṭa is "simply the linguistic sign in its aspect of meaning-bearer" (406).

The theory of sphoṭa as a linguistic entity was fully explored and established by Bhartr̥hari. In *Vākyapadīya*, he provides sphoṭa a new sense, thus, differing from Patañjali's meaning. As we understand Bhartr̥hari, we find that he develops sphoṭa as a term which is not a physical entity but a psychological entity. It is a linguistic unit consisting of two aspect—word-form and word meaning. In these duality of the sense of language—one is the cause of the reflection of sphoṭa and the second is the cause the meaning. With each articulation of the sound, an underlying source of speech-sound and import are visible

along them. Bhartṛhari puts it thus in the verse I.44 of Vākyapadīya:

Dvāu upādanaśabdeṣu śabdau śabdavidō viduḥ
Eko nimittaṃ śabdānām aparca'rthe prayujyate

Pillai translates: "Grammarians consider that there are two 'word-entities' (ie, two elements) in functional words, one (ie, the sphaṭa) is the cause of the (production) of words and the other (the speech-sound) is used in connection with meanings" (sic) (9). The Vritti explains it further that the principle of sphaṭa entails that the system language, sounds carries the import of meaning which explains that the speech sound illuminates the meaning. In another word, "from the differentiated, the undifferentiated word is born and it expresses the meaning. The word assumes the form of the meaning and enters into relation with it" (qtd. in Iyer, Vākyapadīya [I] 53).

Sound is the root cause of the linguistic manifestation which is followed by sphaṭa recognised as real word by the grammarians. Furthermore, sphaṭa make the meaning comprehension possible, thus, it is the basic principle of the function of language. According to Patnaik, it is the "linguistic potency" which is revealed by the sound (Śabda 48). Thus, the audible sound (nāda) is the causes the expression of sphaṭa which becomes the cause of meaning expression. In the words of Matilal, "Nāda manifests sphaṭa and sphaṭa conveys meaning" (Word 85). On the other hand, Patnaik believes, sphaṭa is falsely assumed as the "bearer of meaning": "Sphaṭa implies the total "unit of linguistic potency"—which when expressed is diversified into two elements, sound-word and meaning-word" (49).

The sphaṭa has dual aspects; the sound activates sphaṭa which results in the activation of the other side of sphaṭa that reside within the listener. Hence, the listener bears the same sphaṭa. As the speaker and the hearer share the same linguistic convention, the activated sphaṭa within the listener helps him to comprehend the sound articulated by the speaker. Sharing the same sphaṭa, then, indicates that one has the same language tradition.

Language in its pre-verbal phase, Bhartṛhari believes, the form and the signification cannot be differentiated. This stage is called the potential state wherein the word and the import are not separated from each other. This stage is

compared with the 'yolk of peahen's egg'. This stage of language is also known as the paśyanti. Another stage is the intermediary stage (madhyamā vāk) which falls between the pre-verbal stage and the pre-articulation stage. Here the word and the idea still remain undifferentiated; however, to the speaker it is differentiable to an extent. In another word, the speaker is able to separate the thought and the language as two distinct entities before the speech. As a result, the speaker successfully produces a distinct sound for each idea.

Sphaṭa as a Linguistic Symbol Unit

John Brough and Ajodha Nath Hota explain the sphaṭa doctrine of Bhartṛhari. Their scientific explanation dispels the mystical aura surrounding sphaṭa theory. Bhartṛhari, propose three facets of linguistic structure:

- Prākṛita-dhvani: a phase prior to linguistic manifestation. It is a preparatory stage that is connected with the mind; it shows a temporal distinction. It is the "phonological structure, the sound pattern of the norm"; or, from different perspective, "the name of the class of which the various instances are members" (Brough 410).
- Vaikṛta-dhvani: an individual utterance by the speaker. It is the expressed speech which carries the features of variation in speed in the articulation such as tempo, intonation, pitch, and etcetera.
- The sphaṭa: an internal linguistic symbol. It is not as concrete as sound. It is something abstract conceived by grammarians manifesting with prākṛita-dhvani. Kunjunni Raja thinks, "it is the prākṛta-dhvani considered as an integral, meaning-bearing, linguistic sign" (120).

Sign Theory

Anything that alludes to anything other than itself is a sign. A sign could be words or another type of symbol. Linguistic signs, sometimes known as words, are signs. A sign is not placed there to indicate its shape or feature; rather, it serves a purpose or serves a designation. For instance, our brains work harder than just hearing or comprehending a word; they also work harder to understand what it means and convey a concept. A word has more meaning than just revealing itself when it is spoken. At a traffic signal, red

lights serve as a warning not to advance. It's a symbol that signals to make a stop.

According to Saussure, the speech act is carried out in the speech circuit and includes at least two people. For illustration, suppose Kiran and Riya are the two parties having the conversation. Kiran's brain initiates the speech circuit when she speaks. The concept connected to the language system, which can be communicated by linguistic cues or auditory patterns, is stored in the brain. Put differently, the language sign serves as the expressive medium and mixes with the information stored in the mind. Because this procedure is carried out at the mental level, it is entirely psychological. Kiran uses her vocal organs to produce the sound because she feels the need or want to communicate. The auditory organs of Riya receive the sound waves emitted during this vocalisation. Everything about this process is physical (from lips to ears). The brain would be the next organ to receive and process sound after it leaves the ears.

Therefore, psychological (from brain to mouth and from ears to brain) and physical (mouth to ear) processes are involved in communication, according to Saussure. Because language is a psychological construct that exists within consciousness, "the successive elements of linguistic sign are not physical but mental" (Harris, Reading 58).

According to Saussure, A concept and a sound-image are united by the linguistic sign, not an object and a name (Baskin 66). According to Saussure, the sound-image refers to the psychological impression that a sound leaves on our senses rather than the actual, material sound. Sound pattern is different from the other element that is concept in the linguistic sign which is more abstract in nature. Linguistic sign acts at the mental ground, it is clear from the fact that when an individual is talking to himself, s/he does not need to vocalise. Here, Saussure is talking about the thought process. Saussure believes that works at the psychological plane. This thought is similar to that of Bhartrhari who believes *sphoṭa* to be the subject of mind.

A sign is bipartite term consisting of concept and sound-image. These two elements of sign are intertwined. Saussure uses the term *signifié* (signified) for concept and the term *signifiant* (signifier) for sound-image. Signifier and signified are the two sides of the same coin. Similar to

sphoṭa, a sign is also an indivisible unit. The term signifier refers to the expression in the form of articulated sound and the signified designate to the idea that the mind cognise.

When a sign is expressed, for instance arbor, it refers not the physical sound but the impression of the sound (signifier) conveying the concept—the image of the tree (signified).

There are two principles of the linguistic sign—arbitrariness and linearity.

Arbitrariness: It is the first principle of sign. This principle proposes that signifier and signified are not connected naturally, but this relation is arbitrary and random. Therefore, linguistic sign is arbitrary and has been assigned meaning not based on any set of rules. This is one of the core viewpoints of Saussure's language and linguistic approach. Saussure says that although the idea of the arbitrary character of signs is universally acknowledged, it is frequently simpler to find a truth than to provide it the right context. All languages are dominated by Principle I, which has countless consequences. It is true that not all of them are immediately apparent; one must take numerous diversions before discovering them and the principle's fundamental significance (Baskin 68).

Here, a question should be raised. What does Saussure imply when he calls linguistic sign as arbitrary? It simply means that there is no intrinsic relation between signifier and signified. Signifiers were created on a whim (or maybe there would have been some reason behind it) to designate a particular thing. It must be like that let's call it a 'tree', and that a 'dog'. The word tree refers, when heard, the image or shape of the actual "tree" conceptualised in mind. And the word 'dog' designates the image of actual 'dog', a kind of animal which barks. Since there is no natural connection between the signifier and the signified, the 'dog' could have been called 'bark' or 'god'. There is no logical reason behind calling "the dog" "a dog". Similarly, a tree is called a tree not because it corresponds to the qualities or features of the tree. A tree is called tree for no reason. Any sequence of phonemes can designate a particular thing if it is accepted as signifier by the members of that speech community. According to Gordon,

When the first language came into existence, when the first word (SIGN) came into existence, any sound or

sequence of sounds (SIGNIFIER) could have been chosen to express any concept (SIGNIFIED). The proof of arbitrariness is that when different languages came into existence they developed different signs, different links between Signifiers and Signifieds. If the Linguistic Sign were not arbitrary, there would be only one language in the world. (25)

The Linear Character of the Signifier: We are told in Course in General Linguistics that this principle is equally important. As an auditory element, the signifier is temporal in nature and it shows two characteristics: (i) it stands for duration, and (ii) the duration can be measured in one dimension that is linear. Written or spoken, both kinds of signifiers are equally linear as whenever there is more than one sound it is expressed in temporal sequence.

Although, linearity of signifier is apparent, the linguists always have ignored to express it for being too basic. Nevertheless, for Saussure, It is an essential idea with immeasurable ramifications. It is just as important as the first law. It is essential to the entire mechanism of language structure (Harris, Course 81). He considers the principle of linearity basic to the function of language; yet, he does not bother to give much details of it.

Bhartrhari's Sphoṭa and Saussure' Sign

In Indian Theories of Meaning, Kunjuni Raja relates the concept of the sphoṭa to the concept of sign postulated by Saussure. Sign is bipolar entity consisting of the signifier and the signified (121). The signifier denotes to the sound image or word form and the signified denotes to the concept or mental image. The equivalents of these two in Indian system of philosophy are called śabda and artha respectively.

Bhartrhari's sphoṭa is considered to the linguistic and semantic term which is manifested by the primary sound of the speech. In the modern linguistics, the linguistic sign is a functional term founded on the mutual relationship of signifier and signified or, the śabda and artha. And, this linguistic sign is sphoṭa through which the meaning is conveyed. Raja says that modern linguists also acknowledge the distinction between the speech sounds that are actually produced at each instance of speech and the engrams that they leave behind in the language, such

as the phonematic pattern or the acoustic images (images acoustiques).

Bhartrhari specifies words as an internal units or psychical entities (śabda buddhistah) that are actualised through physical sounds. He says in verse I. 46 that "the Word which is in the mind is the cause of speech-sounds" (Pillai 10).

Indian scholars of language take śabda or word as something more than just an articulated sound. Śabda is the base of whole thinking process of human mind according to Bhartrhari. Mīmāṃsāka, even though believing that words are the cumulative of independent phonemes in a specific order which are permanent in nature, accepts words to be more than the audible sound. Raja refers to Vyasa, the author of *Yogasutrabhasya*, who also believes that words are the entities to be comprehended by the mind; however, they have to be concretised or visible in the form of physical sounds (123). Raja opines that Saussure also emphasises the fact that both the aspects of the sign—the signifier and the signified—are mental. Signifier is the sound-image or the psychical entity which belongs to langue, and the latter is the concept or the idea. The Indian grammarians too maintain the subjectivity of both the word and the meaning (123). Raja mentions that Nagesabhatta in the *Laghumanjusa*, proposes that in truth the meaning and word are subjective. Raja further adds:

The concept of sphoṭa is something more than what is generally implied by the term linguistic sign. The relationship between the word and the meaning is an essential factor for the sphoṭa concept as for the sign. There is no sphoṭa without meaning; it is the meaning-bearing nature of an expression that makes it a sphoṭa (when considered as a whole apart from its parts which are irrelevant). In fact the sphoṭa is the signifiant taken as a timeless and indivisible symbol denoting a meaning. The time-order of the signifiant is merely a means for revealing the timeless and partless sphoṭa. (123-24)

Thus, the analysis shows that in theory, sphoṭa and sign theory are more closure to each other than it seems. The researcher thinks that they might be read as the two different version of the same core idea influenced by scholar's individual analytical methods.

Conclusion

The first glimpse of Bharṭṛhari's concept of language shows metaphysical connotation, but in truth, his analysis of language is as scientific as that of Saussure's. Bharṭṛhari based his linguistic study on the legacies of Panini and Patañjali; however, he developed a theory of general linguistics. Because of his contribution in the field of general linguistics, his study shows some affinity with Saussure's linguistics. Saussure's linguistic study was a revolt against the established method of study. Since Saussure gained some knowledge in Sanskrit linguistics, his study shows the influence. The both concepts *śpoṭa* and *sign* are the psychological entity and do not have a concrete form. The above observation shows that both scholars in spite of being from different tradition, come closer to each other. The study successfully foregrounds this affinity in their linguistic notion.

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