

Relevance and Application of the Theories of *Sphoṭa*, *Pratibhā* and *Dhvani* in Communication

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Abstract

What is the nature and function of language? How does a language generate meaning? How does meaningful communication occur among humans? These questions perplexed the mind of grammarians and philosophers in ancient India. They had an interest in language as a means of communication and its effect on listeners and surroundings. Bharthari is among such grammarians/philosophers, who further developed the concept of sphoṭa to address the problems in communication. Sphoṭa has two aspects—linguistic and semantic. He perceives speech as an act which inspires action when uttered. For him, language has a communicative property. It is used for the exchange of emotions and ideas. Besides Bharthari, Ānandavardhana comes up with the theory of dhvani to show the different layers of meaning in a language. This paper examines linguistic/semantic interpretations of sphoṭa theory and discusses views of the Mīmāṃsā School on sphoṭa. Further, an observation is made on the semantic aspects of pratibhā and dhvani theory. The purpose is to understand the role of these Indian theories to overcome the limitation of language in conversation. Thus, language as a tool of communication is analysed from two points of view—the speaker(s) and the listener(s).

Keywords: Sphoṭa, Pratibhā, Dhvani, Linguistic, Semantic, Śabda

Introduction

The problem of language has been a debatable issue among philosophers/linguists both in the West and in India. Patnaik considers two views regarding this: first, there are “Formalists like Frege, early Wittgenstein, and Chomsky,” who “projected language as a rule-governed activity” and the second view belongs to the “Communication-intention theorists like later Wittgenstein, Grice, Austine and others” who “highlighted the functionalistic and communicative dimension of language” (Patnaik 93). Language has evolved along with the human understanding of their surroundings and through it the concept of culture came to being. *Bhasha* is not a natural gift to mankind. It is the product of culturalisation. In the wake of consciousness, mankind started naming things. Therefore, Language is conventional and governed by the rules of syntax. To think how language and meaning collaborate with one’s cognition is very puzzling. Yet, the matter of contention among the scholars is what should be the key basis of

meaning? Patnaik further adds: “For the Formalists linguistic meaning is primary, whereas for the latter, the communicative meaning is primary” (92). In simple words, the first view regarding language studies is based on the structural ground, however, the second view considers language from the perspective of communication and goes beyond its syntactical structure to observe and assess the speaker’s intention while addressing an audience in a particular context during a conversation. There are four conditions required for a successful communication:

1. The speaker expresses his/her ideas in an understandable way
2. The listener is capable to grasp the message
3. They belong to the same linguistic system
4. The context of the conversation is obvious

Roman Jakobson proposes six elements that are required in any successful communication. The process can be understood through the following diagram:

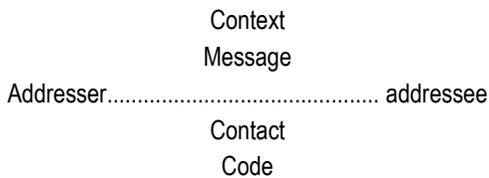


Figure 1 (Source: 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' 353)

A conversation to be effective needs a message (the content of the speech) that the speaker wants to convey to the person who is the object of his address. The process also requires a contact/medium, which may be verbal, non-verbal, visual, electronic, etc., through which the message could be conveyed in a code/language, which includes numbers, sound formations, speech, writing, etc., which is common for both the addresser and the addressee. Communication to be fruitful the context of the conversation should be explicit to the receiver of the message. Thus, the context of

the message is the common ground on which both the speaker and the hearer should have equal footing. If the addressee is unable to understand the addresser's context of the message, communication would fail. Yet, Hawkes observes in *Structuralism and Semiotics* that the 'message' does not and cannot supply all of the 'meaning' of the transaction, and that a good deal of what is communicated derives from the context, the code, and the means of contact. 'Meaning' in short resides in the total act of communication, a situation intensified by the fact that all languages contain grammatical elements which have no precise meaning per se, and which are wholly sensitive in this respect to the context in which they occur. (65)

Communication is a very complicated process. A lot of elements must be considered which have involvement in it. The meaning to get delivered successfully in a communication, the intention of the speaker and the context of the message demand a careful attention. The meaning of conversation may vary depending on the way they are used and where they are used. As a languaging creature, humans' linguistic activities are performed not only in spoken words but at the mental level, the construction of the structure of speech takes place before the speaker is ready to initiate a conversation.

The objective of this study is to analyse and understand the theories of *Sphota*, *Pratibhā* and *Dhvani* from the perspective of communication. Regarding *Sphota* and *Pratibhā*, Bhartṛhari's point of view is discussed as he conceives these theories to understand the function of human cognition. *Dhvani* theory is, primarily elaborated and studied from new perspective by Ānandavardhana who explicates the semantic aspects of *Dhvani*. This research paper explains the linguistic and semantic significance of these theories. Also, an attempt is made to understand the problem of generation of meaning in a language.

Linguistic and Semantic significance of *Sphoṭa*, *Pratibhā* and *Dhvani*

Sphota Theory: First propounded by Sphoṭayana, the theory of *sphoṭa* has various interpretations. Patañjali discusses *sphoṭa* in his *Mahābhāṭya*. For him, *śabda* has two aspects—*sphoṭa* and *dhvani*: the *sphoṭa* refers to eternal aspect of *śabda* whereas *dhvani* is an ephemeral element (Hota 4). This division of *śabda* into *sphoṭa* and *dhvani* may be represented diagrammatically as under:

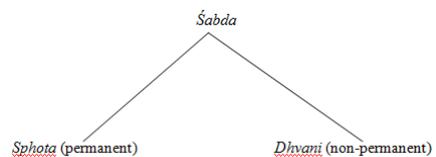


Figure 2

There is no equal term for *sphoṭa* in English to convey the sense. Nevertheless, it is translated vaguely as the "real word", "Logos", "Real Language", "Bearer of meaning," etc. (Patnaik 46). Etymologically, the term *sphoṭa* originates from the root '*sphu*' which means "to burst forth" or which reveals itself when sounds are produced. Sharada Narayan mentions two definitions of *sphoṭa*: first, it denotes "that from which the meaning bursts forth", that is, the word denoting a meaning (*sphoṭati artho yasmāt*). Secondly, it means "an entity manifested by sounds" (*sphoṭyate varnaihyaḥ*) (83).

Bhartṛhari takes on the concept of *sphoṭa* after Patañjali and developed and refined it further. *Sphoṭa* is closely related to *dhvani* (sound). It is through sound that the *sphoṭa* is ultimately manifested. As soon as sound is

uttered the *sphota* is cognised. Thus, *dhvani* is the revealer of *sphota* as Bhartṛhari states in *Vākyapadīya Kanda 1*: “Just as there exists an invariable competence of the revealed and the revealer between a perceiving sense-organ and the thing it perceives, so does it exist between the Word and the speech-sounds” (Pillai 21). Bhartṛhari divides sounds into two types—*prakrit-dhvani* (primary sound) and *vaikrita-dhvani* (secondary sound). Primary sound is characterised by short, long and elongated vowels. While in conversation, it is the primary sound which causes the revelation of *sphota*. In a speech, *sphota* and primary sound are manifested simultaneously, so sometimes both are misunderstood for each other. After the primary sounds are manifested, the production of sounds does not stop in a speech. The production of sounds remains continued and identified as secondary sounds through which *sphota* is revealed. Bhartṛhari, explains this process through the analogy of flame. When a flame burns, it lights another flame and that flame lights another one, thus the process continues. Similarly, a primary sound, which reveals *spho□a*, produces another sound. This process goes on and a series of sounds get manifested during a conversation. The manifestation of the same *sphota* is maintained in each series of sounds (23).

In verse 1.44 of *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari discusses the nature of language and specifies two aspects of language. Any meaningful linguistic expression or speech has two elements. First is the cause of expression where the primary sound is produced. It is called *nada/dhvani* (sound). And the second is the power to convey the meaning when the speech is manifested. It is called *sphota* which is part less, sequence less and indivisible. Bhartṛhari argues: “Grammarians consider that there are two ‘word-entities’ (i.e., two elements) in functional words, one (i.e. the *sphota*) is the cause of the (production) of words and the other (the speech-sound) is used in connection with meanings” (Pillai 9). *Sphota* is recognised as the real language which corresponds to human cognition. Though manifested through sound, it is the linguistic power which makes it possible for the meaning to be conveyed to the hearer or the reader. Regarding two aspects of *śabda*, K.K. Raja opines:

Words have two faces: the external face looks at the sounds (*dhvani*), while the internal face looks at the

meaning (*artha*). The underlying cause of the articulated sounds (*śabdanam nimittam*) is the sound-pattern which underlies instances of the utterance of the word; this abstract sound-pattern with the time-sequence still attached to it is called *prakrit-dhvani* and it is the external aspect of the word. The internal aspect, which is directly attached to the meaning is the *sphota* which is the partless, integral linguistic symbol. (117)

Both Raja and Iyer express a similar view regarding the dichotomy of *śabda*. However, Iyer refers to phonetic expression by ‘sound’ while Raja sees it as ‘sound pattern’. But both consider *sphota* to be the meaningful aspect of the word. Differing from them, S.D. Joshi believes that the sound pattern is not similar to the phonemic pattern of the sound. The latter remains unaltered in a different mode of linguistic expression which is identical to *sphota*. Here *nada* or the sound expressed is the source of the semantic aspect of the language. Without *nada sphota* cannot be manifested. The process can be understood through following diagram:

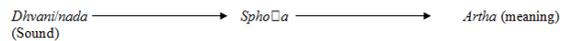


Figure 3

When a speaker utters a speech, the sounds are heard in sequence syllable by syllable which causes the cognition of meaning in the hearer. Language is discernible only when it is expressed in an audible sound pattern. At the mental stage, it remains abstract and non-sequential. This abstract and non-sequential language becomes applicable when it is used under proper grammatical rules and syntactical structure for meaningful expression.

According to Bhartṛhari, *sphota* is like a two-sided coin which consists of both the sound aspect and meaningful aspect in itself. The following diagram makes it clearer:

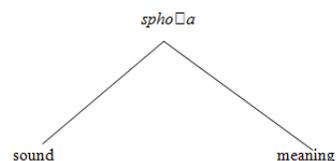


Figure 4

When a word is used, it causes the manifestation of two things simultaneously—it reveals itself as well as the object it refers. Bhartṛhari, in *Vākyapadīya* I.46, compares the manifestation of word with fire: “just as the light which is in the fire-stick acts as the cause for further lights, similarly the Word which is in the mind is the cause of speech sounds” (Pillai 10).

Contrary to Bhartṛhari, the *Mīmāṃsākas* do not accept the theory of *sphoṭa* postulated by grammarians. They interpret *sphoṭa* as a mystical meaning conveying entity. Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa refutes the concept of *sphoṭa* in his *Sloka varttika*. According to the *Mīmāṃsākas*, the word is the meaning conveying unit not the *sphoṭa*. Another *Mīmāṃsāka*, Parthasarathi believes that the grammarians' proposition that *sphoṭa* is manifested by *dhvani*, is ambiguous. Vacaspati Misra also does not accept *sphoṭa* as a meaning-bearing unit. He posits in his *Tattvabindu* that the word and the sentence are one unit because they cause the cognition of a single idea. Among the *Mīmāṃsākas* the only exception is Mandana Misra who disagrees with the views of Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa regarding *sphoṭa* in his work *Sphoṭasiddhi*. He accepts grammarians' view regarding *sphoṭa*. He believes that the *Mīmāṃsākas* misunderstood the concept of *sphoṭa*.

Concept of *Pratibhā*: How is the sense of a sentence conveyed in communication? How is the hearer able to understand the content of a speech? To address the problem of linguistic communication, Bhartṛhari introduces the concept of *pratibhā* in his *Vākyapadīya*. *Pratibhā* suggests the “intuitive linguistic disposition” in humans (Patnaik 61). In this regard, Bhartṛhari says that one understands the content of a speech spontaneously. The hearer does not consider a speech in its parts but grasps the meaning of the sentence in its whole. Meaning is manifested to the mind of the hearer in a ‘flash of understanding’ which Bhartṛhari calls *pratibhā*. Bhartṛhari discusses the concept of *pratibhā* in his *Vākyapadīya* in relation to conversation.

Bhartṛhari divides speech act into three stages—*vaikhari*, *madhyama* and *pashyanti*. From the listener's point of view, *vaikhari* is the first stage in which manifested sound is heard by the hearer. It is the actual sound which is uttered during the conversation. *Madhyama* comes after that. It is the stage between *vaikhari* and *pashyanti*. It

resides in the mind which must be considered the cause of the conversation. The last is *pasyanti* which is the abstract stage of the speech. It is sequenceless and formless. In this stage, the hearer comes to an understanding. The process is reversed from the speaker's point of view. He first forms the *pasyanti* stage where language resides in abstract form but idea/thought is clear. In the *Madhyama* stage, the speech seems to have a sequence. And at the *vaikhari* stage, the language is manifested in concrete form. *Pasyanti* is sometimes used synonymously with *pratibhā* where meaning is revealed to the listener. However, *pratibhā* is a means to gain the *pasyanti* stage of speech. H. G. Coward explains the process as follows:

Bhartṛhari's philosophy of language may seem to operate on at least two levels. On one level there is *pratibhā* or the intuitive flashlike understanding of the meaning of the sentence, book or poem as a whole. On the other level there are the uttered sounds which go together to make up the sentence, book or poem. Bhartṛhari calls the latter *vaikhari vak* or outer speech, while the former is aptly designated as *pasyanti vak* or inner speech that directly sees or perceives reality. Between these two levels, says Bhartṛhari there is a middle or *madhyama vak*. This middle level is the level of thought. (15)

Pratibhā is the instinctive power of the cognition. It is hard to express it in concrete form, Bhartṛhari admits in *Vākyapadīya* III. 146: “This *pratibhā* cannot be in any way explained to others in terms of “it is this,” its existence can be ratified only in the individual's experience of it, and the experience himself cannot describe it” (qtd. in Patnaik 61). It can only be experienced only in human cognition. It is the very root on which the human understanding of linguistic communication operates.

According to Bhartṛhari, a sentence as a meaningful unit cannot be broken into words and letters. The division of sentences may seem practical for linguistic purposes but semantically sentence is the primary unit of meaning. For he believes, communication is performed in sentences, not in words or letters. The meaning of a sentence is the aggregate of its parts. Meaning is cognised as a flash when a sentence is uttered. It is the flash of understanding (*pratibhā*) which makes communication possible.

Dhvani Theory of Ānandavardhana: The concept of *dhvani* formulated by Ānandavardhana is different from that of grammarians'. He defines *dhvani* on the semantic level. It does not only operate on the linguistic level but it is the very source of the various levels of meaning used particularly in literary communication. Grammarians view *dhvani* as the sound produced by the speaker. For them, *dhvani* is the source from which the *sphota* is manifested. They see no semantic value in *dhvani*.

Ānandavardhana develops the concept of *dhvani* at an entirely different level. He goes beyond ordinary communication to define the theory of *dhvani*. He attributes poetic relevance to *dhvani*. Although he took the hint for his *dhvani* theory from the grammarians, he does not restrict or limit its applicability only to sound manifestation. The function of speech is to link the speaker and the hearer or to link the writer and the reader. The interaction between the speaker and the listener consummates in the cognition of the expressed ideas. Ānandavardhana divides speech into two parts—'denotative', that is, *vacya* and 'suggestive', that is, *pratiyama*. For him, both are required for poetic speech. The suggestive meaning is more important in poetry, though it does not function independently. Suggestive meaning is only manifested through denotative factors.

The ancient Indian philosophy of language recognises that four kinds of meaning can be manifested by a speech which is denotative, indicative, suggestive and purport. When the audience hear a speech, they get the surficial meaning of an expression. The meaning expressed, denotes the relation between words and the object referred to. Hota notes that "dhvani language is a special type of poetic speech which is marked by the existence of suggestion. It has a very wide field. The phonemes, roots, prefixes, suffixes, words, parts of words, sentences, essays and complete works are the varied fields of *dhvani* language" (131).

Ānandavardhana states in *Dhvanīyāloka* that dhvani is the soul of poetry: "The word learned men has (*have*) the sense of those who know the truth about poetry. Through an unbroken tradition these have taught that the soul of poetry has been named Suggestion, although it is felt so by cultured critics in their minds (even to-day) others affirmed its non-existence" (Krishnamoorthy 3).

Ānandavardhan's philosophy can be understood on two levels. The first level involves words and meaning. The structure of words is bound by the grammatical rules. These words, at grammatical levels, only express the denotative meaning. On the second level, meaning has variations. It does not depend on grammatical knowledge. The suggestive meaning is only comprehended by the person who has a taste in literary language. There are three elements in the definition of *dhvani*:

1. There is suggestive element in a language.
2. The suggestive factor of language must be foregrounded.
3. It should be comprehended in the same manner.

Conclusion

The discussion of the theories of *sphora*, *pratibhā* and *dhvani* leads the researcher to the understanding of the process of the communication in three stages:

1. In any type of communication whether it is oral or written, the addresser and the addressee encounter each other through the medium of speech. The discussion of *sphora* theory reveals that the speech sound is comprehended by the hearer in the form of *sphora*. *Sphora*, as a meaning conveying unit or as a symbol of sound-image, unfolds the message of the speech.
2. In the second stage, the hearer decodes the meaning of the speech. The comprehension of the meaning is only possible because of *pratibhā* which manifests the meaning in a flash.
3. The third stage goes beyond the understanding of word/sentence meaning. It is the stage where the comprehension of the literary meaning becomes possible. Here, the meaning gets divided into two categories—denotative meaning and suggestive meaning. Ānandavardhana considers suggestive meaning as a supreme kind of meaning that is found only in the highly poetic language.

The key feature of Bhartrhari's philosophy of language is that he explicates the function of language as it is used in *lok-vyavahara* (daily conversation). Language as explained by his predecessors seemed to him very impractical from the communication point of view. For him, a speech may completely be understood only when its

context is taken into consideration. His observations on language make it more applicable in a conversation.

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