



When the Word Becomes the World: Śabdādvaita and the Linguistic Constitution of Reality

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Abstract

Bharṭṛhari's doctrine of Śabdādvaita as explained in the Vākyapadīya is a distinctive linguistic ontological doctrine which states the non-duality of word (śabda), meaning (artha) and consciousness. These three are identified as śabda-brahman in a unitary principle. Bharṭṛhari's ontology does not consider language as representational but rather understands linguistic manifestation as constitutive of reality itself. The paper contends that, even though Śabdādvaita is indeed metaphysically distinct, it is structurally similar to the twentieth-century key developments in the philosophy of language, especially those which challenge representationalism and emphasizes on the world-disclosing function of language. Through a comparative analysis of Bharṭṛhari's sphoṭa theory and the ideas of Heidegger about language as the "house of Being", Wittgenstein's meaning as use, and Derrida's notion of différance, the study outlines similarities and differences between these thinkers around the concepts of meaning, temporality and relationality. While many Western thinkers remain trapped in the hermeneutic or deconstructive model; Bharṭṛhari unfolds a non-dualist metaphysical theory where linguistic cognition and ontological existence are inseparable. The paper also explores how Śabdādvaita conceptually anticipates contemporary discussions in cognitive linguistics, semiotics and the philosophy of mind on language as constructing reality which shapes perception rather than only encoding pre-given realities. This paper shows that by situating Bharṭṛhari within these interdisciplinary conversations without collapsing theoretical distinctions it can be demonstrated that Śabdādvaita offers a philosophically robust model for understanding the co emergence of language, consciousness and the world.

Keywords: Śabdādvaita, Bharṭṛhari, philosophy of language, linguistic ontology, Sphoṭa theory.

Introduction:

The relation between language and reality, an important problem in philosophy, has largely been treated by modern classical philosophical systems, mainstream in the Western tradition of metaphysics

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and philosophy, as the relation between a representation, a tool of mastery, and a reality that has its own independent existence. In this framework, the question of how meaning relates to language and the world is often framed in terms of a representational theory of meaning, but this representational conception has been criticized throughout the twentieth century. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida further challenge the assumption that meaning is mainly representational, insisting instead that use (Wittgenstein §43), disclosure (Heidegger 145), and *différance* (Derrida 61) are the more basic or bedrock phenomena in relation to which meaning must be understood. Yet many contemporary philosophies of language, even if not conceived in terms of representation, still remain bound to some remnants of an intellectual dualism between language and world, meaning and being, cognition and reality: language, in a way or another, is thought to disclose, interpret, destabilize or reconstitute a reality outside of language. It is, therefore, in this context that Bhartṛhari's doctrine of Śabdādvaita, especially as elaborated in the Vākyapadīya, assumes a special philosophical importance. Bhartṛhari endorses a radically non-dual ontology, according to which word (śabda), meaning (artha), and cognition (pratyaya) are not distinct but mutually implicative manifestations of a universal principle (often identified with śabda-brahman); language is not merely a tool that reports its contents, but the very medium through which the world becomes manifest and intelligible. According to Bhartṛhari, cognition is necessarily linguistic. It thus challenges both the representational semantics view of meaning and the purely realistic view of meaning (Bhartṛhari 93). Language does not describe the world but rather constitutes it as meaningful (Lingua: 1985 et al.). Much of it has been in the area of the grammar, semantics, or exegesis of Śabdādvaita, with K. A. Subramania Iyer, Bimal N. Matilal, and Harold Coward discussing the technical details of *sphoṭa*, sentence unity, and linguistic holism respectively in the Vākyapadīya (Iyer 54; Matilal 87; Coward 67). There have also been comparative studies contrasting Bhartṛhari with representationalist opponents in contemporary discussions. This is a problematic comparison, however, in which arguments are made in terms that attempt to fit Śabdādvaita within the Western philosophical tradition and as a predecessor as opposed to a philosopher within a unique metaphysical system.

This article argues that the Śabdādvaita provides an ontologically grounded non-representational linguistic theory which could contribute to overcoming impasses found in contemporary philosophy of language. Of all the theories which reject correspondence theories of truth but do not make metaphysical commitments, Bhartṛhari's theory is unique in grounding linguistic meaning in ontology. His theories of *sphoṭa* and *pratibhā* reveal a conception of meaning as immediate and holistic rather than temporally assembled or indefinitely deferred. We will argue that Śabdādvaita rather sees all reality as fundamentally and linguistically expressing itself, and that difference and temporality belong to the level of manifestation and not to the ultimate level of reality. By keeping Bhartṛhari in constant conversation with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida (and not claiming that the three have somehow a similar solution), we will show that this is not a confusion with a modern perspective, but a

philosophically coherent position at a more basic ontological level. Finally, the paper stresses that Bhartṛhari's thought anticipates a line of modern research in cognitive linguistics and philosophy of mind, which increasingly sees language as a formative factor in our experience and conceptualization of the world.

Śabdādvaita and Non-Representational Ontology

A central aspect of Bhartṛhari's philosophy is his rejection of representational theories of language at the ontological level. According to these views, there is a divide between language and the world: linguistic signs refer to extralinguistic objects or mental content. By contrast, Bhartṛhari explicitly rejects this interpretation. In the *Vākyapadīya* Bhartṛhari argues that "there is no cognition in the world in which the word does not figure" (*Vākyapadīya* I.131; Bhartṛhari 93), thus placing language at the very heart of cognition. Thus, no reduction of cognition to language is implied, but an insistence on the linguistic structure of cognition.

Bhartṛhari's philosophy rests on the doctrine of śabda-brahman. According to Bhartṛhari, the ultimate reality is not an indeterminate substrate on which linguistic expressions are superimposed. The ultimate reality is itself the intelligible principle which manifests itself in the form of words, meaning and consciousness. For Coward, śabda-brahman is "language not as a symbol of reality, but as reality itself in its intelligible form" (Coward 67): language in this sense is that through which being appears as meaningful and does not function as a means of conveying thought. Accordingly, Bhartṛhari's theory of linguistic meaning differs from the atomism popular in other theories that invoke basic units such as phonemes, words, or morphemes. For Bhartṛhari, the meaning of a sentence (*vākya*) is given first and completely rather than constructed step by step. The *sphoṭa* theory explains how this unity is not disturbed despite the time difference of the separate sounds. The rationale for this is given by Bhartṛhari: "the *sphoṭa* is one, though the sounds are many" since phonetic variety does not disintegrate the unity of a meaning (*Vākyapadīya* I.44; Bhartṛhari 54). The adage is often used to ground the principle of semantic holism. Its implications reach even ontology: the unity of meaning reflects the unity of reality, which is only differentiated as it appears at the level of manifestation. In Matilal's view, Bhartṛhari rejects the dichotomy between the structure of language and the structure of the world: both are expressions of a single intelligible order (Matilal 90). Meaning does not arise from language representing the world but rather from the common ontological source of both language and the world. This perspective sets Śabdādvaita apart from modern non-representational theories that also reject any appeal to correspondence, without espousing any ontological realism, such as Wittgenstein's later theory of meaning as use, which gives no metaphysical explanation. Bhartṛhari finds a systematic ontological basis for the idea of linguistic unity and the reality of language, which is not merely a manifestation of social practice, but is a mode of being by itself, and its meaning is not derived from any convention or practical utility. The epistemological aspect of this ontology is equally fundamental.

For Śabdādvaita, knowing consists in a direct awareness (pratibhā) of a meaning as it appears in linguistic awareness, not in a relation of agreement between a concept and an object. It is not merely subjective or inferential but springs from the common reality of śabda-brahman itself. Bhartṛhari, as Bronkhorst observes, maintains that linguistic cognition is not a 'mirror' of reality but a 'cognitive act' that participates in reality's unfolding' (Bronkhorst 29). Cognition, speech, and being thus form an inseparable triad.

See also Ontological anti-realism and Ontological non-representationalism. By ruling out any representational gap between language and world, Śabdādvaita provides an instance of ontological non-representationalism. Thus, Śabdādvaita avoids naïve realism (where reality is independent of language but has not yet been constituted by language) and radical constructivism (where reality has been reduced to a scheme of concepts). Bhartṛhari reconstructs reality as the meaningful manifestation of a cognitive and ontological linguistic principle, such that language is neither a mere veil for reality nor a tool for structuring our empirical experience, but rather the manifestation of a cosmic principle. Instead, it is the medium in which reality becomes intelligible. This framework severs the linguistic temporality question and will form the ontological basis for Bhartṛhari's reformulation of it as the sphoṭa/pratibhā nexus, which we'll explore closely now. By grounding language in being rather than representation, the position of Śabdādvaita opens up the possibility of viewing consciousness, meaning and the world as co-emergent aspects of a single non-dual process.

Temporality, Sphoṭa, and the Instantaneity of Meaning

One of the most philosophically important consequences of Bhartṛhari's Śabdādvaita is a new treatment of linguistic temporality. In ordinary linguistic usage phonemes follow phonemes, words follow words, and larger expressions amass meaning over time, as opposed to a more static view of language. Representational and inferential theories of language assume that this sequentiality is in the domain of the linguistic sign, that meaning increases gradually with each addition of a discrete element to the sequence. Bhartṛhari disputes this assumption, believing that the sequentiality is in the level of linguistic manifestation and not in the structure of meaning.

Bhartṛhari's doctrine of the sphoṭa has been developed in order to resolve this problem by explaining how meaning is understood although sounds are heard one after another. Conventional speech (vaikharī) exists within time. On the other hand, pratibhā, the intuitive perception of meaning is instantaneous and non-inferential. However, as Bhartṛhari puts it: "the sphoṭa is one, though the sounds are many"; the diversity of sounds does not affect the unity of meaning (Vākyapadīya I.44; Bhartṛhari 54). What occurs is that the succession of sounds forms a vehicle for manifestation, rather than a basis for meaning. Bhartṛhari's theory of the three stages of language use (vaikharī, madhyamā, paśyantī) may be further clarified: speech as articulated (vaikharī), speech which is unarticulated (madhyamā), and speech as undifferentiated linguistic awareness (paśyantī). Language as spoken in the articulation stage is temporalized language, but linguistic consciousness in the undifferentiated stage is non-

temporal. This means that temporality is a limitation on expression rather than an intrinsic part of meaning itself, and as Iyer notes, these levels are not separate entities, but modes of manifestation of a single linguistic reality (Iyer 54).

Bhartṛhari posits that *pratibhā* is the means by which importance is cognized, appearing not as a result of the deliberate analysis of phonemes and their connections, but rather as an immediate perception. Such an intuition is not subjective, as if acquired through a personal act of cognition. Instead, the intuition forms part of the objective structure of linguistic consciousness. Bronkhorst sees *pratibhā* as a bridge between epistemology and ontology, stressing that the meaning of a sentence is an immediate manifestation of reality, rather than a construction (Bronkhorst 34). Understanding thus reflects the non-dual structure of being. Unlike other twentieth-century theories of meaning, which reject representationalism while maintaining a linear view of time, Heidegger locates the revealing of Being in language, which takes place in history, and which unfolds as a perpetual play of revealing and concealing (Heidegger 145). This marks a break with instrumental theories of language while also preserving a structure of delay in which Being remains always absent. Derrida radicalizes the structure of deferral and differentiation through his concept of *différance* (Derrida 61), but temporality is constitutive of meaning in both cases. In Bhartṛhari's Śabdādvaita, therefore, temporality is not the negativity, absence, deficiency, or deferment of reality. It is the phenomenal manifestation. The meaning is complete at the level of *paśyantī*. This whole is grasped at once through *pratibhā*. The differences and sequences do not destroy the ontological unity. For Coward, therefore, Bhartṛhari's thought does not mean to negate the wholeness of Brahman, but instead, to signify non-duality through multiplicity, where difference and temporality are derived concepts (Coward 119). This reconciles two extremes of philosophy, metaphysics which denies change, and metaphysics which espouses an infinite deferral of meaning. However, Bhartṛhari's view of time is neither static nor does it lack some completeness. Rather, he presents time as a dynamic unity. Language is not a pointer to a meaning that will arrive later, nor to a meaning that is elsewhere. *Sphoṭa* is more than a semantic hypothesis. It is a metaphysical force that coordinates language, consciousness, and reality.

This non-linear account of meaning provides the context for a comparison of Bhartṛhari's philosophy with contemporary critiques of representationalism. In Śabdādvaita, unity precedes sequence and presence precedes deferral. This effectively creates a radical view of language: rather than being a tool that builds a temporal bridge to meaning, it is the manifestation of meaning itself.

Language, Meaning, and Being: A Comparative Dialogue with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida

The same rejection of representational theories of language is common in Bhartṛhari and other major twentieth-century theorists, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida, who oppose the idea of language as merely mirroring a pre-existing world. Despite these similarities, however, there are substantial ontological, temporal, and meaning-related differences between western

non-representational philosophies and Śabdādvaita. This theory argues that western non-representational theories end up being structurally incomplete attempts to account for language since they suspend ontology or destabilize it, whereas for us language is grounded in a non-dual metaphysical framework.

In the later phase of his work, Wittgenstein rejects representational semantics and develops an account of meaning as use. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he states, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language", thus stressing the primacy of practice over reference (Wittgenstein §43). The meaning of sentences is said to arise from their participation in socially regulated language-games, rather than from the fit between reference and the sentence or from mental representations. This is similar to Bhartṛhari's rejection of semantic atomism, in the sense that words have no independent meaning outside their sentential and contextual-cum-situation-specified usages.

Nonetheless, the comparison is limited because Wittgenstein avoided giving a metaphysical explanation of language, and described his philosophical project as therapeutic rather than theoretical. Unlike Wittgenstein, who did not give an explanation of the holistic nature of language or its relation to ontology, Bhartṛhari explicitly gives an ontological explanation of the unity of language. For him, such a total character of meaning reflects the non-duality of śabda-brahman, rather than a mere convention of usage. While Wittgenstein brackets ontology, on the other hand, śabdādvaita places it at the foundation of any linguistic theory. Heidegger's philosophy of language is similar to that of Bhartṛhari in that for each philosopher, language precedes the being which it names. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, as quoted above, he says that language is the "house of Being", i.e., that through which being is disclosed rather than apart from it (Heidegger 145). In this respect, it firmly rejects any instrumentalist view of language and stresses the world-disclosing power of language, as did Bhartṛhari, who also rejected the view that language is simply a naming of an independent reality. Despite this convergence, Heidegger continues to differentiate between Being (Sein) and its articulation: Being itself is characterized by concealment as much as by articulation, which opens up a clearing (Lichtung) in which beings (Seiendes) appear. Being itself remains withdrawn. Such a distinction preserves an ontological distinction between language and what it discloses. Bhartṛhari's approach in the Śabdādvaita, however, knows no such ontological distinction between language and what it discloses. By identifying the ultimate reality as śabda-brahman, Bhartṛhari insists that there is no being that stands outside or prior to linguistic manifestation, and that language does not reveal an otherwise hidden reality. Language is the form in which reality exists as intelligible.

Derrida's critique of metaphysical presence is probably the most radical attack on representationalism in Western tradition. For Derrida, something never quite comes to fully presence, but is always constituted through a play of differences and temporal deferrals (Derrida 61). One modern analogy to this argument, exposing the metaphysical presuppositions of logocentrism and the claim of self-identity of meaning, is Bhattarai's critique of semantic atomism in Favor of the priority of relationality

and non-fixity. By contrast, Derrida's understanding of absence is that there can be no presence without absence, and therefore meaning is always deferred. In contrast, Bhattarai grounds all meaning in Pratibha, the immediately apprehended, holistic, and non-analytic intuition of a single meaning whole. Speech is processed as a sequence of time, but the meaning expressed is holistic - without infinite semiosis. As Coward observes, Bhattarai sees difference not as lack but as manifestation in the sense that it is the manifestation of non-dual unity (Coward 119).

The contrast between these approaches is asymmetric: Western non-representational theories succeed against naïve correspondence views but fail themselves to say what ontological view might replace them. Wittgenstein suspends ontology, Heidegger maintains a withdrawal, and Derrida radicalizes deferral. Only Bhattarai offers a full-fledged account of the ontological intertwining of language, meaning, and being. Thus, retreating from both the reduction of existence to the play of words, and the play of words to the dissolution of meaning, Advaita presents reality as an articulatory process of the arising of differentiation and temporality without categorical dissolution. The juxtaposition with Bhattarai allows the position of Advaita with respect to contemporary philosophy of language to be seen, not as a precursor, but as a different kind of theory. It is not to be interpreted as anticipating Western theories of language and the problems they locate, but rather as investigating ontological issues that have no strict counterpart in language-centered methodology.

Conclusion

This paper argues that Bhattarai provides a theoretically satisfying modification of classical representational theories of language and modern anti-realism. Bhattarai overcomes the problem of ontological indeterminacy facing contemporary non-representational theories by identifying word (sabara), meaning (Artha), and cognition (pratyahara) as non-dual manifestations of absolute being, sabara-brahman, thereby overcoming the distinction between language and reality that contemporary non-representational theories take to be inevitable. So, language is not the instrument of representation through which the world is given at all, but rather the means through which it is rendered world. It concludes that Advaita is a type of ontological non-representationalism in which meaning is not constructed from discrete units of language nor from a temporal sequence, but given as a whole in shoran and Pratibha. Temporality and differentiation belong to the level of manifestation. These realizations help Bhattarai to reconcile dynamism with the absence of multiplicity and fragmentation. Though Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida subverted representationalism in the sense of suspending ontology, preserving withdrawal, and radicalizing deferral, respectively, the Advaita understanding of language is formally different since it is based on a non-dual metaphysics and so does not suspend meaning through epistemic withdrawal or defer its meaning due to ontological difference. Thus, Bhattarai not only explains how language works, but why it can function as world-constituting at all. Finally, this paper has shown that Advaita is also relevant to contemporary debates. The Śabdādvaitic approach provides a metaphysical framework for the widely shared intuition in cognitive linguistics

and the philosophy of mind that language structures perception and cognition without assuming naïve realism or radical constructivism. This opens the door to a revaluation of reality as a self-articulating process in which language, consciousness and world unfold together.

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