

BHARTṚHARI'S THEORY OF SPHOṬA

The theory of *sphoṭa* is one of the important contributions of Indian grammarians to the problem of Semantics in General Linguistics. Its first mention has been traced as early as *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali (2nd Cent. B.C.), though the word *sphoṭa* has been referred to by earlier grammarians like Pāṇini in his pioneer work *Aṣṭādhyāyī*¹. But it is the *Vākyapadīya* of the great grammarian Bhartṛhari (5th Cent. A.D.) where we get a fully developed and systematized description of the *sphoṭa*-doctrine.

What is sphoṭa?

Sphoṭa is that by which meaning is expressed². Prof. J. Brough says: « The *sphoṭa* is simply the linguistic sign in its aspect of meaning bearer »³. Old Sanskrit grammarians treated *sphoṭa* as an essential element of speech but they had different views regarding its

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1. *Avan sphoṭāyanasya, Aṣṭādhyāyī* VI, 1, 123.
 2. (a) *Sphuṭati prakāśate'rtho'smāditi sphoṭaḥ vācaka iti yāvat, Sphoṭavāda* p. 5.
(b) *Sphuṭyate vyajyate varṇairiti sphoṭo varṇābhivyāṅgyaḥ, sphuṭati sphuṭībhavatyasmādartha iti sphoṭo'rthapratyāyakaḥ. Sarvaadarśanasamgraha* p. 300.
 3. *Theories of General Linguistics in the Sanskrit Grammarians*, London, TPS, 1951, p. 33.

exact nature. Bhartṛhari has mentioned those views in his *Vākyapadīya*. According to one view, *sphoṭa* is the original sound produced by various vocal organs with the contact of various places of articulation⁴. These produced sounds vanish as soon as they are articulated but at once these produce other sounds (echoes) which spread in different directions like the reflections of the original ones. The later sounds produced by the *sphoṭa* are *dhvani* which spreads like a wave⁵ and becomes weak as it goes far from the *sphoṭa* gradually. This view has been explained in the commentary of *Vākyapadīya* with the example of the sound of *bherī* (a kind of drum)⁶. As the sound of *bherī* goes farther and farther it becomes weaker and weaker.

Bhartṛhari has mentioned another theory regarding *sphoṭa* and *dhvani* which is slightly different from the previous one. According to this theory, the *sphoṭa* and the *dhvani* are produced simultaneously (whereas the previous view believes that the *sphoṭa* is produced first and the *dhvani* thereafter). This theory believes that there is no gap at all in the production of both. The *sphoṭa* is the central sound and may be compared to the flame of fire. The *dhvani* is like the light of the flame which spreads in different directions. Sometimes we see the light without seeing the flame. Similarly we listen *dhvani* without knowing the *sphoṭa*⁷. As the flame and the light are produced simultaneously, so is the production of the *sphoṭa* and the *dhvani*.

Both these views accept that the *sphoṭa* is produced by the vocal organs and treat it as ephemeræ. Bhartṛhari has mentioned a third view according to which the *sphoṭa* is the class (*jāti*) revealed by various individual instances and the *dhvani* its member

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4. *Yaḥ saṃyogavibhāgābhyaṃ karaṇair upajanyate /
sa sphoṭaḥ śabdajāḥ śabdā dhvanayo'nyair
Vākyapadīya* 1.103.
 5. *Vicīśantānavacca śrotraṃ daśādigavasthitānām upagacchanti.
Vākyapadīyaṭīkā*, 1.103.
 6. *Yathā bheridaṇḍābhighātajasya kāryaparamparā dūramānupatati.
Vākyapadīyaṭīkā*, 1.104.
 7. *Dūrat Prabheva dīpasya dhvanimātram tu lakṣyate.
Vākyapadīya*, 1.105.

(*vyakti*)⁸. Some scholars like Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita have treated this third view as of Bhartṛhari⁹, but this view was not accepted by the later grammarians like Nageśabhaṭṭa¹⁰, due to the fact that Bhartṛhari's *sphoṭa* is the word or the sentence taken as a single meaningful unit¹¹. Bhartṛhari accepts the class as *sphoṭa*, its members are themselves *sphoṭas*. To accept the class of *dhvani* as *sphoṭa* without mentioning its meaning-bearing aspect is against Bhartṛhari's concept of *sphoṭa*. Therefore, the above view is just the third view mentioned by Bhartṛhari in his *Vākyapadīya*.

Bertrand Russel a modern scholar has expressed his view regarding this aspect of language phenomenon which is analogous to the third view mentioned by Bhartṛhari.

The spoken word « dog » is not a single entity; it is a class of similar movements of the tongue, throat and larynx. Just as jumping is one class of bodily movements and walking another, so the uttered word « dog » is a third class of bodily movements. The word « dog » is universal, just as dog is universal. After discussing the different views regarding *sphoṭa*, Bhartṛhari explains his view regarding the nature of *sphoṭa* in his *Vākyapadīya*. He says that a word or sentence is studied by the linguists under two aspects -

1. Sound pattern - 2. Meaning bearing symbol:

dvāvupādānaśabdeṣu śabdau śabdavidō viduḥ /
*eko nimittaṃ śabdānām aparō 'rthe prayujyate //*¹²

Linguists accept two entities in the words of a language: one is the underlying cause of the articulated sounds and the other is related to meaning. Both may be called words. The first one i.e. sound pattern is the external facet of the language and the second one i.e. meaning bearing aspect or *sphoṭa* is internal facet of it.

8. *anekavyaktyabhivyaṅgyā jātiḥ sphoṭa iti smṛtā /*
kaiścid vyaktaya evāsyā dhvanitvena prakalpitāḥ //
Vākyapadīya, 1.94.

9. *Yadyapīha aṣṭau pakṣāḥ uktāḥ tathāpi vākyasphoṭapakṣe*
tātparyam granthakṛtām, tatrāpi jātisphoṭa ityavadheyam.
Śabdakaustubha, p. II.

10. *Sphoṭavāda*, p. 99.

11. *An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth*, p. 124.

12. *Vākyapadīya*, 1.44.

Any word when it is uttered expresses two things. At first, it reveals its own form and later on it expresses the thing (or meaning) for which it is meant. For example when the word *agni* is pronounced, it expresses at first the sounds with which it is formed - a. g n i. Then it denotes the meaning of the word i.e. fire. Bhartṛhari has explained this double capacity of the word with the example of knowledge and light in the following verse -

*ātmarūpaṃ yathā jñāne
jñeyarūpaṃ ca drśyate /
artharūpaṃ tathā śabde
svarūpaṃ ca prakāśate //*¹³

As knowledge expresses its own form and also the things denoted by it, so is the case of word which reveals its own form as well as meaning -

*grāhyatvaṃ grāhakatvaṃ ca
dve śaktī tejaso yathā /
tathaiva sarvaśabdānām
ete pṛthagiva sthite //*¹⁴

As light reveals its own existence and other things also, similar is the case of words.

Indian grammarians have analysed speech situations and classified these into four categories namely *parā*, *paśyantī*, *madhyamā* and *vaikharī* -

*parā vāñ mūlacakrasthā
paśyantī nābhisamsthitā /
hṛdisthā madhyamā jñeyā
vaikharī kaṇṭhadeśagā //*¹⁵

Parā is the most subtle form of speech and is realized only by yogins and that too in the *nirvikalpaka samādhi* only. This is not to be realized by ordinary people. Hence Bhartṛhari mentions three

13. *Vākyapadīya*, 1,50.

14. *Vākyapadīya*, 1,55.

15. *Mañjūṣa*, p. 70.

forms of speech only in his language analysis i.e. *vaikharī*, *madhyamā* and *paśyantī* -

vaikharyā madhyamāyāśca
paśyantiyāścaitatadbhutam /
anekatīrthabhedāyās
*trayyā vācaḥ param padam //*¹⁶

In grammatical analysis, these three only are relevant -

1. *Vaikharī* (*The Individual Instance of the Utterance in purely phonetic terms*)

These are the actual sounds spoken by the speaker and heard by the listener. These contain various differences in intonation, tempo, pitch etc. depending on the individual speaker.

According to Bhartṛhari and other later grammarians, *vaikharī dhvani* is not really capable of expressing the meaning of an utterance. It merely expresses the *madhyamā* form of speech which conveys the meaning.

2. *Madhyamā* (*The phonological Structure, the Sound Pattern of the norm*)

It is also called *prakṛta dhvani*. This is actually the normal phonological pattern of a language which is in the minds of the speakers and listeners of a language. This is indicated by the *vaikharī dhvani*. All the non-linguistic personal variations are eliminated at this stage. Time sequence is also present here. This is the form of speech which really expresses meaning, though it is neither spoken nor listened. It has been accepted as expressive of *sphoṭa* (the meaning-bearing linguistic symbol -

vaikharyā hi kṛto nādaḥ paraśravaṇagocaraḥ /
madhyamayā kṛto nādaḥ sphoṭavyañjaka ucyate //

Vaikharī and *madhyamā* sounds of speech are produced almost simultaneously. The *vaikharī* sound indicates the *madhyamā* and the *madhyamā* sound expresses *sphoṭa* which is integral and meaning-bearing aspect of the language. Bhartṛhari has accepted

16. *Vākyapadīya* 1, 143.

this form of speech as most important and mentioned it as *śabda-brahma* in his opening verse of *Vākyapadīya* -

*anādinidhanam brahma
śabdatattvam yadaśaram /
vivartate 'rthabhāvena
prakriyā jagato yataḥ // 17*

This *madhyamā* form of speech is to be realized by all the speakers of a language. Though the *sphoṭa* is regarded as one and indivisible but it is classified on the basis of expressive sounds as *vākyasphoṭa*, *padasphoṭa* etc.¹⁸. This *madhyamā vāk* is sometimes expressed even without *vaikhari dhvani* e.g. when somebody is reading silently there is no active use of *vaikhari* speech but with the help of script, *madhyamā vāk* is revealed which expresses the meaning bearing *sphoṭa*.

3. *Paśyantī*

It is the form of speech which is realized by yogins. It is subtle and situated in *nābhi*. As yogins realize this in the process of Yoga so it is called *paśyantī*. This is not to be realized by ordinary people. It is also expressive of *sphoṭa* which gives meaning.

In the language analysis of Bhartṛhari, we find that the different forms of speech indicate the *sphoṭa* out of which we get meaning.

Bhartṛhari's concept of *sphoṭa* can be compared with the linguistic sign of De Saussure, which has two facets -

1. The signifiant (that which means)
2. The signified (that which is meant)

In Indian philosophical thought these have been termed as *śabda* and *artha*. The linguistic sign of modern linguists is based on the relationship between signifiant and the signified (the *śabda*

17. *Vākyapadīya* 1,1.

18. *Pade na varṇā vidyante
varṇeṣvayavā na ca /
vakyātpadānāmatyantam
praviveko na kaścana //*
Vākyapadīya 1,73.

and the *artha*) but Bhartṛhari's *sphoṭa* is an independent entity which conveys the sense. While explaining the theory of *sphoṭa*, Bhartṛhari lays stress on the fact that words are psychical entities which reveal themselves through articulated sounds:

śabdo'pi buddhisthaḥ śrutīnāṃ karaṇam pṛthak ¹⁹.

His predecessor Indian thinkers have also expressed the similar view ²⁰. Modern linguist A. H. Gardiner has also expressed the similar view on the psychical aspect of words ²¹.

19. *Vākyapadīya* 1.46.

20. *Paḍaṃ punarnādānusamhārabuddhinirgrāhyam*, *Yogasūtrabhāṣya*, under *sūtra* III.17.

21. A. H. GARDINER, *Speech and Language*, p. 70.

'As words exist in the possession of every individual (of a linguistic community), they are psychical entities, comprising on the one hand an area of meaning, and on the other hand the image of a particular sound susceptible of being physically reproduced whenever wanted'.