

THE SEQUENCELESSNESS OF THE SIGNIFIER IN  
BHARTRHARI'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE\*

Since J. BROUGH's article *Theories of General Linguistics in the Sanskrit Grammarians*, TPS, 1951, pp. 27-46 and K. KUNJUNNI RAJA'S, *Indian Theories of Meaning*, Madras, 1963, it is habitual in the study and interpretation of the concept of *śabda* in Bhartrhari's *Vākyapadīya* (short: VP) or *Trikāṇḍī*<sup>1</sup>, to refer to de Saussure's theory of the sign, or to use a saussurean terminology<sup>2</sup>. But what we still miss is a systematic comparison between the two philosophies of language. In this paper I want to give a small contribution to such a comparison.

A systematic comparison of Bhartrhari with especially de Saussure is useful, because de Saussure expresses by way of the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*) many ideas that still form to a considerable extent the methodological basis of modern linguistics. A western linguist observed: «it can be said that 'we are all Saussureans now'»<sup>3</sup>. If we look at linguistic theories that are developed in a completely different cultural and sociological environment we are apt to look at them at first through 'saussurean' eyes. Two important saussurean

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\* I thank Prof. dr. J. Bronkhorst, Prof. dr. H. Bodewitz and Prof. dr. H. Schultink for suggesting improvements in style and presentation of this paper.

1. Aklujkar, 1969.

2. Ruegg, 1959: 55-56; Joshi, 1967: 49; Aklujkar, 1970; R. Herzberger, 1986: 10, 21, repeats what Brough has said in this context.

3. SPENCE, in *Archivum Linguistica* 9 (1957): 2; repeated by Kaldewaij, 1986: 10.

principles (I'll mention them in a moment) seem to belong to the «hard core» of the «research programme»<sup>4</sup> of modern linguistics. If we look through the eyes of these principles, ideas that do not fit in with them are too easily relegated to «metaphysics», whereas in fact their bearing is more with linguistic matters.

This is not to deny that general philosophical and metaphysical ideas are of considerable importance in Bhartr̥hari's work. But there clearly is an overlap between the subject discussed by Bhartr̥hari and what forms the subject of certain schools of modern linguistics and modern philosophy of language<sup>5</sup>.

Some scholars stressed the importance of a magical view on language which pervades Vedic and Sanskrit texts (Collinder, 1962: 7; Gonda, 1966: 113). This would make any comparison between old Indian views on language with modern theories a hazardous thing. However, in the case of the *Vākyapadīya* this scruple proves to be without foundation: Bhartr̥hari is very well aware of this magical view on language, but states clearly that magically used language is for him not of interest. The kind of language he tries to understand is everyday language, where some person expresses what he has in mind and another person understands it<sup>6</sup>.

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4. Lakatos' terminology, see g. *Philosophical Papers I* (1978): 47f.

5. It is clear that the *Vākyapadīya* is designed and worked out as an organic whole. Nevertheless, I wonder whether it is necessary or even possible to someone who wants to study Bhartr̥hari's linguistic ideas, to connect every aspect of these ideas with his general philosophy. The reason is that Bhartr̥hari himself several times adopts a certain position, not because it arises out of his philosophical and metaphysical ideas, but rather because of reasons of a practical nature, that is because the practice of grammar and grammatical description compel him to do so, even if this implies that he has to make concessions to his philosophical starting points. Grammar and linguistic theory should be, according to Bhartr̥hari, acceptable to all people, irrespective of their world-view. Grammar is *sarvapārṣada*, it belongs to all schools of thought. The commentators Puṅyarāja and Helārāja draw our attention to this. See Iyer, 1969: 72-77; 204f; 219f. Bhartr̥hari himself appears to make a distinction between philosophical, metaphysical, psycho-linguistic reality on the one hand, and notions that are useful or necessary in grammatical description on the other hand. Thus it is very well possible to discuss details of the linguistic ideas of Bhartr̥hari as such, without tearing them completely out of context. The basis on which a dialogue with modern linguistics can take place is the fact that the subject discussed is to a considerable extent similar, and that several premisses are similar. Both these facts are reflected in the similar terminology.

6. In verse 35 of *VP III*, 3 he mentions the view of some people that even

It's the understanding and expressing of meaning by words in the process of communication which forms a main subject of the VP.

Now if we compare the two systems, we will see that the linguistic sign is according to both an indivisible whole wherein a signifier and a signified can be distinguished. Signifier and signified are purely mental.

The similarity on these points were at the basis of the comparison of de Saussure and Bhartrhari, and of the use of a saussurean terminology in discussing Bhartrhari theories by former scholars.

But, there are important differences too. According to de Saussure there are two principal properties of the sign:

1. The arbitrary nature of the sign; and 2. the linearity of the signifier (Cours: 100-103).

These are the two saussurean principles that, as it seems, belong to the generally accepted and undiscussed «hard core» of the «research programme» of modern linguistics. While the first principle could nevertheless incite some discussion among linguists with an interest in theoretical questions<sup>7</sup>, the second received har-

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meaningless words can have concrete results (like e.g. the cure of cases of poisoning by special mantras): *śabdenārthasya saṃskāro dṛṣṭādrṣṭaprayojanaḥ / kriyate so 'bhisambandham antareṇa katham bhavet?* «An influence (saṃskāra, 'preparation') leading to visible or invisible results is created by the word on the object. How could this be without a relation? In the next verse he dissociates himself from this view: *nāvaśyam abhidheyeṣu saṃskāraḥ sa tathāvidhaḥ / dṛṣyate na ca sambandhas tathābhūto vivakṣitaḥ*, «Such an influence on what is expressed is not invariably seen. Nor is such a relation meant here».

7. See e.g. ENGLER, in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 19 and 21 (1962 and 1964) and de Mauro, 1984, p. 444f. Whether and to what extent this principle plays a rôle in Bhartrhari's ideas will be discussed in a future article «Bhartrhari's *śabda* and Saussure's *signe linguistique*». Suffice it here to say that Bhartrhari has not directly stated anything like it. According to him there is a *yogyatā*, a fitness between the two. This fitness between a word and its meaning is invariable and not made by an individual man. It is only one of the two aspects of the permanent relation between signifier and signified. The other aspect, mentioned by Bhartrhari, is causality: a signifier causes (in the mind of the hearer) a signified, a signified causes (in the mind of the speaker) a signifier. What is important in the VP is the permanency of the relation and this arises from the fairly stable synchronic character of Sanskrit. The permanency that is meant is not an absolute eternity, but a stability closely connected with the people who speak the language. Cp. Helārāja on VP, III, 3, 18: having observed that *na sarvaṃ sarvavācyam*, «not just anything is expressed by anything», he states *prayogadarśanābhyāsāt saṅketād*

dly any criticism by western linguists. This second principle will be discussed in this paper in relation to the VP. It amounts to the following: the purely mental signifier is linear, it has an auditory character and is, like time, measurable in one dimension.

This principle would be, according to de Saussure himself, fundamental and its consequences innumerable. It was not stated before, because, again according to de Saussure, it was too simple (Cours: 103)<sup>8</sup>. It was generally accepted by linguists without much discussion. The only important criticism is that of Roman Jakobson. For him (and other linguists), phonemes consist of several simultaneous features. But the fact that within phonemes «bundles of distinctive features» can be distinguished doesn't clash with the principle of linearity, which starts on a different level, at which we have both a signifier and a signified. This was pointed out by several scholars<sup>9</sup>. The way in which this principle is challenged by the ideas of Bhartrhari is entirely different.

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*avasīyamānasvarūpaḥ . . . sambandho'stu*, «let there be a relation [between word and meaning, signifier and signified], the [specific] own form of which is settled by the regular observation of usage and by agreement». In VP II, 253 *śabda* (word, signifier) is called *sarvaśakti*, «having the power to express everything»: «This word (*śabda*) that has the power to express everything and that has many qualities is described as primary or secondary (with regard to the meaning) according to the difference in currency (of the word in that specific meaning)». The idea that *in principle* a word is *sarvaśakti* (a signifier *could have been* connected with any signified) seems to approach de Saussure's arbitrariness very closely.

8. See on de Saussure's principle of linearity: R. JAKOBSON, *Selected Writings* (SW) I, 420, SW I, 304ff, 636, and 655f; R. GODEL, 1957: 203-7; J. ELLIS, 1961, in *Zeichen und System* I, 47-52; G. LEPSCHY, 1970: 49; A. HENRY, 1970, «La linéarité du signifiant»; P. WUNDERLI, 1981: 93-115; T. DE MAURO, 1984: 447-8.

Modern techniques of analyzing the «deep-structure» of a language may at first sight seem to contain an implicit refutation of the principle of linearity. In fact, however, the hierarchical structure is largely based on the linearity of the signifier (cp. WUNDERLI, 1981: 98-99).

Both de Saussure in his *Cours* and Bhartrhari are primarily interested in day-to-day language (for Bhartrhari see note 6 above). In the extremely special cases of the Anagrams in Indo-european poetry the principle of linearity seems to a certain extent to be abandoned. But even in his Anagram-studies de Saussure speaks of linearity as the «loi fondamentale du mot humain en générale» (WUNDERLI, 1981: 110-113).

9. GODEL, 1957: 203-7; HENRY, 1970: 87-8; WUNDERLI, 1981: 96-97, 100, 104.



Let us now have a look at these ideas as we find them in the VP. An important notion is, in this context, Bhartr̥hari's notion of *śabda*. It is clear that the translation «word» is not a very felicitous one for *śabda*, because it can also refer to an utterance or a sentence (See e.g. VP II,1, where the sentence is defined as *eko 'navaya-  
yavaḥ śabdaḥ*. The specific words used to denote the different units that are distinguished by Bhartr̥hari are *varṇa*, *pada*, *vā-  
kya*<sup>10</sup>). Therefore, it's much better to use a saussurean terminology and translate with «linguistic sign»<sup>11</sup>. Both de Saussure's sign and Bhartr̥hari's *śabda* are basically not defined as to the units that are to be distinguished, whether they be sentences, phrases, words or smaller units<sup>12</sup>.

There seems to be a kind of natural tendency to confound terms for the sign as a whole (uniting a signifier and a signified), and terms for the signifier alone. De Saussure himself has used *signe* (sign) several times in the sense of *signifiant* (signifier)<sup>13</sup>. Bhartr̥hari uses *śabda* also often in such a way, that the meaning-bearer aspect of the sign is stressed<sup>14</sup>. In these cases it is better to translate with «signifier».

Similar things can be said of the term *spṛṣṭa*. In the Vṛtti, where it is rather frequent, it refers most commonly to the sign as

10. Cp. also S. IYER, 1969: 159. Cp. note 14 below.

11. E.g. JOSHI, 1967: 49.

12. While Bhartr̥hari prefers the sentence as the unit in the description of the psycho-linguistic reality of speech, he recognizes the value of smaller units in grammar (Cp. S. IYER, 1969: 159) and distinguishes between a one-phoneme word and a phoneme (Vṛtti of VP 2, 205). De Saussure has not given a definite answer on the question of what forms the basic unit in language. He advised his students to adopt a critical attitude towards the traditionally accepted units (word, sentence). Where the *Cours* seems to choose the word as the basic unit, the manuscript sources are much more reserved (cp. GODEL, 1957: 208f; KOERNER, 1972: 346). De Saussure illustrates his statements often with words or small phrases.

13. Cp. DE MAURO, 1984: 449, n. 155.

14. For example in the compound *śabdārtha(-sambandha)*, and in the discussion of it. See also Aklujkar, 553, n. 22: «In the *Trikāṇḍī*, *śabda* does not mean only 'word'. It has a variety of meanings each of which is to be determined by a careful study of the context. . . . In the present context, *śabda* denotes any linguistic unit with which meaning is associated either in ordinary life or in grammatical analysis».

a whole. In the verses it occurs only in the first book, 9 times altogether, and here it has mostly a more limited sense<sup>15</sup>.

While there is some confusion about the terms for the sign as a whole, and those for the signifier, the opposition between signifier and signified is clearly expressed by several twin-terms, like *vācaka-vācya* (lit.: «expresser-expressed») and *prakāśaka-prakāśya* (lit.: «illuminator-illuminated»).

Now we can say that in the *Vākyapadīya śabda*, both as sign and as signifier, is essentially sequenceless or *akrama*: verse 48 (Rau: 49) of the first book:

*nādasya kramajanmatvān/  
na pūrvo na paraś ca saḥ//  
akramaḥ kramarūpeṇa/  
bhedavān iva jāyate//*

(transl.: Because the audible sound comes forth in a sequence, the sequenceless [*śabda*] which is not before or after, becomes as if having sequential parts.)

Here *na pūrvo na paraś ca saḥ*, *akramaḥ* refers to the sequenceless *śabda*, elsewhere qualified as *niravayavakrama* (Vṛtti VP I, 52), as *nirbhāga* and *apūrvāpara* (Vṛtti VP I, 85), and *avibhaktō... vācakaḥ* (in a verse cited in the Vṛtti of VP I, 454)<sup>16</sup>.

See also S. Iyer, 1969: 152: «When the speaker utters the expressive word, the sounds come out in a sequence and are heard by the hearer also in a sequence (*krama*). The speaker cannot but utter them in a sequence. He cannot utter them simultaneously. But the expressive word which already exists within him before

15. Perhaps Joshi is right, when he suggests that Bhartrhari's *sphoṭa* stands closer to Patañjali's interpretations of the term, than to that of the later grammarians (Joshi, 1967: 13-20; p. 15: «From Patañjali's statements, it seems to me that the term *sphoṭa* refers to the constant element in the auditory image of the varied articulated sounds»; pp. 20-36). But, whether it should be considered as the sign as a whole, as the signifier or as the auditory image, it is always closely connected with the signifier. Because the term *sphoṭa* is so very infrequently used in the verses it is better to speak of Bhartrhari's theory of *śabda*, than of his theory of *sphoṭa*.

16. Strictly speaking *na pūrvo na paraś ca* refers not (like the other words) to the sequencelessness of the elements that in theory could be distinguished within one linguistic unit, but to the sequencelessness of the units among themselves. Of course, here again the question of what constitutes a linguistic unit plays an important rôle.

utterance is without sequence and it is to manifest it that he utters the sounds». Bhartrhari's *śabda* is certainly not identical with the sequential auditory image, as in de Saussure's system. However, it seems to be sequential, it is considered to be sequential, especially in grammar. Thus, in the cited verse it said, *kramarūpeṇa bheda-vān iva jāyate*: «becomes as if having sequential parts». Elsewhere it is said that the sequenceless *śabda* assumes the *prākṛta-dhvani* aspect of the audible sound (whereby it acquires time and sequence). The *prākṛta-dhvani* refers to those phonetic features of the audible sound that are differential in the system of language. The *vaikṛta-dhvani* is not differential in the system of language<sup>17</sup>.

This is expressed in the verses 75-77 (Rau: 76-78) of the first book. In the Vṛtti of 76 it is stated that the superimposition of the time of the *prākṛta-dhvani* on the *sphoṭa* or *śabda* (itself without temporal sequence) takes place *śāstre*, in the old Indian grammatical science; the time of the *prākṛta-dhvani* is metaphorically taken as the time of the *sphoṭa*:

*sa ca prākṛtadhvanikālo vyatirekāgrahaṇād adhyāropyamānaḥ sphoṭe sphoṭakāla ity upacaryate śāstre*<sup>18</sup>. This distinction between what describes actual (psycho-)linguistic reality and what is practical and useful for grammarians, permeates the rest of the VP<sup>19</sup>.

It is not completely clear what is the relation, according to

17. We cannot say that the *vaikṛta-dhvani* represents «the individual instance, noted in purely phonetic terms» (BROUGH, 1951). The verses only use this term and the other, *prākṛta-dhvani*, without defining it. Therefore, for an interpretation of these terms we have to rely on the ancient commentaries. There we do not find any support for Brough's interpretation (followed by others). At the moment the best exposition of these notions is in A. AKLUJKAR's unpublished Harvard thesis *The Philosophy of Bhartrhari's Trikāṇḍī*, 1970, pp. 11-14.

18. Cp. the Vṛtti of 77: *tasmād upalakṣitavyatirekeṇa vaikṛtena dhvaninā saṁsṛjyamāno'pi sphoṭātmā tādrūpyasyānadhyaṅropāt śāstre hrasvādivat kālabhedavyavahāraṃ nāvatarati*: «therefore, though associated with the secondary sound (*vaikṛta-dhvani*), the difference of which is clearly perceived, no identity is superimposed on the *sphoṭa* and consequently, in grammar, the *sphoṭa* is not dealt with in terms of differences of time (caused by the secondary sound) as is the case with the (differential) short, long and prolated vowels (of the primary sound)».

19. The second book of the VP explores the borderline between the indivisible sentence as the linguistic unit *par excellence* and the recognition of abstracted words and word-meanings. The third book takes up the discussion of those linguistic notions that, according to the preceding books, have only a very relative value; cp. S. IYER, 1969: 62, 219.

Bharṭṛhari, between the sequenceless *śabda* and the *prākṛta-dhvani* with its definite and specific sequence. The comparison with the egg (VP I, 51) and with the painting of a picture (VP I, 52; II, 8-9) imply that in the sequenceless *śabda* the definite and specific sequence of the *prākṛta-dhvani* is somehow present in seed-form. The comparison with a reflection in water (VP I, 49) on the other hand implies a deeper, more fundamental difference between the sequenceless and the sequential.

However this may be, Bharṭṛhari realized that the purely mental, sequenceless signifier assumes sequence or seems to have sequence and that in grammar it can only be dealt with as a sequential entity.

In passing mention can now be made of the conception of language in still another system of thought: that of the old Greek and Roman Stoics. They distinguish a σημαῖνον (corresponding approximately to signifier) and a σημαίνόμενον (corresponding approximately to signified). They seem to identify the signifier with the audible sound of the word. There is, as far as I could discover, no reference to a mental auditory image as the signifier, and still less to a sequenceless signifier<sup>20</sup>. Aristoteles also seems not to have made a clear distinction between a *mental* auditory image and the audible sound<sup>21</sup>.

We see therefore that in both de Saussure's and Bharṭṛhari's system a purely mental signifier plays an important rôle (while e.g. the σημαῖνον of the Stoics is not purely mental but material). In de Saussure's system the signifier has a linear nature. But in Bharṭṛhari's system it only *seems* to be linear and sequential, and has to be taken as such in grammar.

If now we ask ourselves which of the two descriptions gives the best representation of linguistic reality, we go beyond a strict

20. KARL BARWICK, *Probleme der Stoischen Sprachlehre und Rhetorik*, Abh. der Sächsischen Ak. der Wiss. zu Leipzig, Philol.-hist. Klasse, 1957: Band 49, Heft 3, p. 7.

21. E. COSERIU, *L'arbitraire du signe, zur Spätgeschichte eines aristotelischen Begriffes*, Arch. f.d. Studium der neueren Sprachen und Lit., 204, 119. Jahrg. p. 88: «Das Verhältnis, von dem Aristoteles spricht, ist also an erster Stelle das Verhältnis zwischen dem *materiellen* Zeichen und dem Bewußtseinsinhalt, zwischen φωνή und πᾶθημα» (my italics, JH).

comparison of the two systems and enter on a critical evaluation of them on this point. I will pay some attention to it in a few words. Both de Saussure and Bhartr̥hari are aware of psycho-linguistic aspects. Bhartr̥hari's representation in terms of sequencelessness and partlessness of the signifier can easily account for certain common, subjective experiences in the process of communication. De Saussure's sequential signifier, completely identical with the sequential auditory image, will not be able to deal with them. The experiences I mean are referred to by Bhartr̥hari in the analogy with the painting of a picture (VP I, 52 and II, 8-9): when the form of e.g. a man is first perceived in a sequential way as having parts, it results in a single image in the mind. This image is put on canvas again in a sequence. Likewise, the *śabda*, the linguistic sign or signifier, can be perceived only through a succession of sounds, but when it is cognized it is a unity without parts or sequence (*niravayavakrama*). It can be expressed again only by a succession of sounds. Nāgeśa refers to these experiences when he defends the use of the notion of *sphoṭa*, which for him is the sequenceless and partless sign or signifier: *idam ekam padam ekam vākyaṃ iti pratyayaḥ sphoṭasattve tadekatve ca pramāṇam* «The justification for the existence of the *sphoṭa* and for its unity is the realization 'This is *one* word, *one* sentence'»<sup>22</sup>. Perhaps the same thing is experienced by someone writing a story or a discourse, who gets in one flash an idea of a whole paragraph. Assume, it is a very good idea and he need not much think about it. Then, writing down that complete idea, point-like though it was at the beginning, may take a fairly long time<sup>23</sup>.

I conclude that Bhartr̥hari's ideas may add some important

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22. Translation by BROUGH (1951) of Nāgeśa's *Mahābhāṣya-pradīpodyota* (ed. Bibl. Indica), vol. I, p. 11.

23. A distinction should be made between the moment an idea or thought is perceived, and the mental pronunciation of it for oneself. According to VP II, 19cd (*akramas tu vitatyeva buddhir yatrāvatiṣṭhate*, «that on which the mind dwells, extending it as it were, is (actually) sequenceless») the linguistic item gets sequence when the mind dwells on it. It should be pointed out in this context that in Bhartr̥hari's system, nor in de Saussure's system there is neither any place for a signified (idea, concept, thought, whether rather vague or completely clear) without the immediate existence of a corresponding expressive element (signifier). So if one «gets an idea» this idea is already connected with a signifier.

refinements (based on subtle psycho-linguistic observations) to de Saussure's system, but that as far as the practice of grammatical description is concerned, both amount on this point to the same<sup>24</sup>.

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24. If we follow HENRY (1970, 89-90), Bhartṛhari's ideas of the sequencelessness of the signifier are even more saussurean than de Saussure's strict linearity. In stating this principle he would have slipped down from the conception of a purely mental auditory image (*Cours*: 98), to «la réalisation de l'image, intérieure dans le discours». «Mais je ne vois pas», Henry says a little further, «qu'on puisse parler d'une linéarité de nature chronologique, quand il s'agit d'une image, qui est une 'aperception en bloc'. C'est quand nous actualisons que nous entrons dans le temps». «M. Yv. Lebrun», he adds, «m'apprend que certaines aphasies motrices se caractérisent précisément par une difficulté à passer de la simultanéité des éléments de l'empreinte à la linéarité de la réalisation de ces mêmes éléments». However, the auditory image can assume sequence while remaining purely mental (cp. VP II, 19cd, see preceding note). This sequential mental image was apparently the only auditory image recognized by (he uses the example of the mental recitation of a verse (*Cours*: 98)). Thus, the strict linearity of de Saussure's auditory image and, by consequence, of his signifier, is not completely irreconcilable with their mental character. But Bhartṛhari's fundamental sequencelessness is more comprehensive. It can give a better account of all the aspects of the mental signifier and is therefore indeed to be preferred even from a saussurean point of view.

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