The Concept of Language in Bhartṛhari's 'Vākyapadīya': A Comparative and Historical Perspective

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Abstract—This article deals with the concept of language in Bhartṛhari's 'Vākyapadīya' (VP). It suggests that Bhartṛhari considered language not as a static counterpart to external reality, but as speech, i.e. a dynamic process. This attitude correlates with Bhartṛhari's perspectivist approach, and with the way he deals with ud & kārikās; hara & #326; as. The focus on the dynamic nature of language in VP may be helpful for the interpretation of the kārikās we find such terms partly synonymous with 'articulated word', 'utterance', 'signifier', 'meaningful word', 'articulated sound by uttering of which the meaning is understood' [1, P. 1]. Thus, & #353; abda is defined as an articulated sound by uttering of which the meaning is understood [1, P. 1]. Thus, & #353; abda is defined as a term referring to 'sound', 'phoneme', 'articulated word', 'utterance', 'signifier', 'meaningful word', 'sentence'.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhartṛhari's 'Vākyapadīya' is one of the most influential works in Indian linguistic philosophy. Composed in V CE, this work discusses the nature of language and its relation with cognitive processes and extra-linguistic reality. Bhartṛhari's linguistic philosophy, expressed in VP and in the subsequent commentaries, has been studied extensively by modern scholars. At the same time there is an evident lack for a conceptual study of the concept of language in VP undertaken in a comparative and historical perspective. Although Bhartṛhari certainly deals with language, his work does not provide an explicit consistent concept of it. As a result, undertaking a study of Bhartṛhari's linguistic philosophy one inevitably makes use of some broad Western concept of language, be it de Saussure's opposition of langue and parole or some other explicit or implicit ideas. Moreover, under the influence of the later commentators VP is often interpreted in the light of metaphysical ideas expressed in the first kārikā; rik & #257; s. But this attitude results in neglecting the fact that ontology was not the only subject of Bhartṛhari; his interest. This article presents a brief outline of the possible attitudes to the concept of language in VP. The focus is made not on the doctrines and ideas, expressed explicitly in Bhartṛhari; his work, but mainly on his implicit presuppositions on the nature of language that can be discovered in the course of the analysis of the kārikās; rik & #257; s.

Keywords—Bhartṛhari; Vākyapadīya; kārikās; ya; Indian linguistic philosophy; language; ud & kārikās; hara & #326; a

II. TERMS DESIGNATING LANGUAGE IN THE 'VĀKYAPADĪYA'

Increased attention to language in Indian culture derives from Vedic ritual, being a distinctive feature of Indo-European poetics. Language activity was an intrinsic part of ritual performance; as a result language was considered not as a static counterpart to external reality, but as speech, i.e. a dynamic process. Language in the Vedas is mainly referred to with the word 'vākyapadīya', that denotes speech, not language. The single hymn in RV dedicated to Vāc (X.125) describes it as sustaining the Universe, supporting the gods and all living creatures. Speech is characterized here not by means of static descriptions, but through actions it performs. The attitude towards language as speech, i.e. action, and not as a mere correspondence between words and things, was inherited by subsequent grammatical tradition.

In the VP there is no single term corresponding to the Western broad concept of language. Instead, many different terms are used with respect to different aspects of speech and language. The most important among them are vā & #257; c; & #353; abda, kalpa & #257; ; vikalpa. In some contexts all of them can be translated as 'language', but their primary meaning is different. Vā & #257; c, in grammatical texts is often characterized as vā & #257; gyavah & #257 ; ra 'language behaviour', stressing the dynamic nature of speech. & #353; abda, generally translated as 'word', is the word understood primarily as a semantic unit, not as a morphological word form. For the latter there is a distinct term pada. In Pa & #355; ; & #328; jali's 'Mahāvīra' & #257 ; bh & #257 ; & #351 ; ya (II BCE) & #353 ; abda is defined as an articulated sound by uttering of which the meaning is understood [1, P. 1]. Thus, & #353 ; abda is equally a distinct word as well as an utterance of whatever length. It is in accordance with this definition that the Vedas in total can be designated as & #353 ; abda. Following this ambiguity of the term, Bhartṛhari on different occasions applied the term & #353 ; abda referring to 'sound', 'phoneme', 'articulated word', 'utterance', 'signifier', 'meaningful word', 'sentence'.

At the same time Bhartṛhari had some more definite terms at his disposal. In different kārikās; rik & #257 ; s we find such terms partly synonymous to & #353 ; abda as var & #326 ; a (phoneme), pada.

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(morphological word form), v&#257;ka (sentence, utterance), dhvāni (sound), v&#257;akā (signifier), abhidhāna (designation), samjña (name). In some contexts &#353;abdu is synonymous to sphoţa. But commonly the term &#353;abdu is used in VP even in the contexts, where a more definite term seems more appropriate. It might be supposed, that this terminological inconsistency was intentional, as it accords with Bhartṛhari’s perspectivistic trend to recognize different viewpoints on the same object [2].

Another general term used by different traditions with respect to language was kalpana, in different schools and periods of Indian philosophy was understood differently. The word kalpana derives from the verbal root k&"#316;:p 'to make', thus designating the process of artificial making. In the ‘Yoga-sūtras’ kalpana means cognition devoid of external referent (vāstvā&"#353;&"#363;na). In Buddhist epistemology kalpana&"#257; was defined as a concept connected intrinsically with the word. Thus, generally the terms of kalpana&"#257; and vikalpa could be interpreted as verbal discourse not related directly to external reality.

The absence of a distinct concept of language as well as of the corresponding term in VP may seem surprising. However, we should remember that in Western culture the concept of language also developed considerably late. Most notable is that it developed not in the frame of linguistics, but in logic, psychology, aesthetics, i.e. in the disciplines which did not consider language as the main subject of inquiry. Linguistics, on the other hand, was focused on the study of particular language phenomena, without paying enough attention to the concept of language per se. Thus, we can suppose that Indian and European grammars were similar in this respect.

III. THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND PERSPECTIVIST APPROACH

Grammarians considered language as the basis of all cognitive processes. Grammar was believed to be the universal discipline that embraces different traditions with all their possible disagreements. As a result, Bhartṛhari distinguished different pairs of aspects of the word. The first is the opposition of the integral permanent word and multiple impermanent sounds in which it is manifested (VP 1.44-50). The second is the opposition of the unique word and different aspects of its meanings: external referent (bahyārtha) and the words own form (abdasvar&"#363;pā) (VP 1.51-70). Each member of the oppositions correlates to a different aspect of language activity. E.g. when Bhartṛhari describes the phonetic level of speech, he understands words as consisting of distinct sounds. Describing the semantic level of linguistic activity, he may need to distinguish between bahyārtha and the own form of the word (abdasvar&"#363;pā). At the same time ontologically, the word is integral. Different concepts exposed in the k&"#257;rik&"#257;s derive from different situations, i.e. from the context of different activities. On the other hand the functional realm is much broader than philosophy, so that the same activity can be explained from different attitudes by means of different doctrines, as it is claimed in VP 1.75 [3. P. 212-217]. Thus, there are many different levels of description (i.e. vy&"#257;vāh&"#257;riki levels) that correspond to different facets of phenomenal reality. Each facet is captured by distinct philosophical doctrine. As a result, different doctrines do not appear as mutually contradictory.

IV. UD&"#257;HARĀNAS IN THE ‘VĀ&"#257;KYAPAD&"#298;YA’

Another specific trait in VP that correlates with the view on language as an activity is the specific use of comparisons (ud&"#257;hara&"#326;as). Ud&"#257;hara&"#326;as, as defined in the Nyāya&"#257;ya-s&"#363;tras are based on evident facts (d&"#343;&"#351;&"#355;&"#257;ntas) and thus justify the inference from the view of common sense. Common sense in turn is acquired from ordinary experience, i.e. from everyday activities. Generally the use of ud&"#257;hara&"#326;as is typical for Indian philosophical texts. There are a lot of them in VP, especially in the first k&"#257;&"#326;as, but they are more complicated,
comparing to the typical ud&##257;hara&##326;a: yath&##257; mah&##257;nase ‘like in the kitchen’.

Let us consider the k&##257;rik&##257; s I.49-50 where the problem of the relation between permanent word and impermanent sounds is discussed:

\[ n&##257;dasya kramaj&##257;tattv&##257;n na p&##363; vno na para&##333; ca saH \]

akramaH kramar&##363;pe&##326;a bheda&##257;n iva j&##257;yate || I. 49||

pratibimbham yath&##257;nyatra sthitam toyakriy&##257;va&##353;&##257;\[ \]

tatprav&##343;titim iv&##257;nveti sa dharmah spho&##355;an&##257;dayoH \[[ I. 50] || [4]

Having appeared as a sequence of sounds, the indivisible [word], devoid of beginning and end, is manifested in the form of sequence, as if it were differentiable.

Like reflection situated in different place [than the reflected object] under the influence of water as though adopts its motion, similar is the relation between smoke and fire on the mountain. This ud&##257;hara&##326;a differs evidently from the simple ud&##257;hara&##326;a: of a pa&##328;e&##257;vayavaya ‘silligism’, where the comparison is used to demonstrate, that the cause and effect relationship on which the inference is based takes place in different context and has different substrate. Thus, the evident relation between fire and smoke in the kitchen confirms the inferred relation between smoke and fire on the mountain. The ud&##257;hara&##326;a in VP I.50 is evidently of different structure. Reflection in the water is compared with the word: modifications, which the mental word undergoes in the course of audible sound. Having appeared as a sequence of sounds, the indivisible [word], devoid of beginning and end, is manifested in the form of sequence, as if it were differentiable.

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Thus, it is not the ability of different objects to possess similar attributes, that Bhartṛhari&##343;hari demonstrates. Most likely his aim was to demonstrate the structural similarity of different situations. There is a number of similar ud&##257;hara&##326;as in VP (e.g. VP I.51, 52, 53; I.56; II.8-9; II.20-21; III.1.7-8; III.1.93-94; III.2.3, 4, 5; III.3.23, 24). The ud&##257;hara&##326;a of this type is a model that imitates the structure of the situation considered. Comparisons in Bhartṛhari&##343;hari’s ud&##257;hara&##326;as derive either from everyday life or from well-known philosophical doctrines, like in VP III.1.7-8, where relations between the word, its referent and universal are illustrated by vai&##253;e&##351;ika’s idea of relation between quality (red colour) and its substratum (gun of the certain tree).

Bhartṛhari&##343;hari’s ud&##257;hara&##326;as do not provide proofs, they just bring to understanding. As a result, in different parts of VP we find mutually contradictory ud&##257;hara&##326;as. E.g. VP III.3.29 claims, that word is similar with indriyas (sense organs), whereas VP I.57-58 on the contrary underlines the difference between words and indriyas:

\[ vi&##351;ayatvam an&##257;pannaH \&##353;abdair \]

na sattayaiva te `rth&##257;n&##257;m ag&##343;h&##298;t&##257;H prak&##257;&##353;ak&##257;H \[ I.57||

ato `nirj&##328;\&##257;tar&##363;patv&##257;t kim \&##257;hetu abhi&##298;yate \[ I.58 || [4]

The word, which was not apprehended, does not manifest its meaning. Un-apprehended words do not express meaning by the very fact of their existence.

Thus, having not understood the form of the uttered word we ask: ‘What did you say?’ [Word functions] differently than the indriyas, whose own form is not apprehended, when their object is manifested.

\[ indriy&##257;n&##257;m svavi&##351;aye&##351;v&##343;an&##257;dir yogyat&##257; yath&##257; \]

\[ an&##257;dir arthah \&##353;abd&##257;n&##257;m sambandho yogyat&##257; tath&##257;\[ III.3.29][5]

As there is a beginningless correlation between indriyas and their objects, the same beginningless correlation is the semantic relation between words and objects.

One may assume, that these different ideas on similarity of word and indriyas belonged to different schools and Bhartṛhari&##343;hari enumerated them following his perspectivist trend. Still in the general context of VP it seems, that in both cases Bhartṛhari&##343;hari was mainly focused on &##353;abda and not on indriyas. He mentioned indriyas, in order to clarify some of his ideas of language philosophy. So, these ud&##257;hara&##326;as must not be understood in the sense that indriyas are identical or not identical with &##353;abda. Viewing language as a process, Bhartṛhari&##343;hari wanted to underline, that in some aspect the language behavior is similar to some other cognitive processes, though they differ in some other aspects. Thus, Bhartṛhari&##343;hari’s use of ud&##257;hara&##326;as seems more comprehensible given the assumption, that he understood language as a process.

V. CONCLUSION

So, besides the obvious study of philosophical ideas expressed in the k&##257;rik&##257; s and the commentaries, it seems quite promising to reconstruct Bhartṛhari&##343;hari’s implicit presuppositions concerning language. This paper suggests, that Bhartṛhari&##343;hari considered language not as a
static counterpart to external reality, but as speech, i.e. dynamic process. This interpretation may shed light on some ambiguous places in VP and help to formulate the basic principles of Indian linguistic philosophy.

REFERENCES


