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The Concept of Language in Bhartṛhari's 'Vākyapadīya'

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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. dynamic process. This attitude correlates with Bhartṛhari's perspectivist approach, and with the way he deals with udāharaṇas. The focus on the dynamic nature of language in VP may be helpful for the interpretation of the kārikās, as well as for the formulation of the basic principles of Indian linguistic philosophy.**

Keywords—Bhartṛhari; Vākyapadīya; Indian linguistic philosophy; language; udāharaṇa

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhartṛhari's 'Vākyapadīya' (VP) 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 kārikās. But this attitude results in neglecting the fact that ontology was not the only subject of Bhartṛhari's 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's 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.

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. dynamic process. Language in the Vedas is mainly referred to with the word 'vāc', 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 *vāc*, *śabda*, *kalpanā*, *vikalpa*. In some contexts all of them can be translated as 'language', but their primary meaning is different. Vāc, in grammatical texts is often characterized as *vāgvyavahāra* 'language behaviour', stressing the dynamic nature of speech. *śabda*, 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 Patañjali's 'Mahābhāṣya' (II BCE) *śabda* is defined as an articulated sound by uttering of which the meaning is understood [1. P. 1]. Thus, *śabda* 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 *śabda*. Following this ambiguity of the term, Bhartṛhari on different occasions applied the term *śabda* 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 we find such terms partly synonymous to *śabda* as *varṇa* (phoneme), *pada*

(morphological word form), *vākya* (sentence, utterance), *dhvani* (sound), *vācaka* (signifier), *abhidhāna* (designation), *samjňā* (name). In some contexts *šabda* is synonymous to *sphoţa*. But commonly the term *šabda* 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 Bhartŗhari's perspectivistic trend to recognize different viewpoints on the same object [2].

Another general term used by different traditions with respect to language was *kalpanā*. This term, as well as its synonym *vikalpa,* in different schools and periods of Indian philosophy was understood differently. The word *kalpanā* derives from the verbal root *kļp* 'to make', thus designating the process of artificial making. In the 'Yoga-sūtras' *kalpanā* means cognition devoid of external referent *(vastušūnya)*. In Buddhist epistemology *kalpanā* was defined as a concept connected intrinsically with the word. Thus, generally the terms of *kalpanā* 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, Bhartŗhari never strived to find the one true solution to a question, but enumerated and justified different – often mutually exclusive – opinions without making a final decision. His main intention was not to find the only true solution, but to justify every opinion he mentioned and to demonstrate that it can be valid in a certain context, i.e. in a context of a certain activity.

Still, his approach, usually designated as perspectivism, was not purely encyclopedic. It can be suggested that Bhartŗhari did not impartially collect the views of different schools without expressing his own opinion, but possessed his own opinion, embracing and systematizing the different views of rival schools. In this case it seems possible that the doctrines enumerated in VP can be of different importance. The sequence of the kārikās in the first kāṇda of VP seems a bit of irregular. Scholars usually tend to change it, in order to represent Bhartŗhari's ideas on some problem, and rearrange the order of the kārikās according to their own stream of thought. This approach can be relevant. At the same time it seems quite plausible, that the mentioned above narrative irregularities in VP were not occasional. Metaphorically, Bhartŗhari's way of narration can be characterized by means of the following comparison. It seems as if Bhartŗhari goes round the object, observes it from different angles, and after having made a step forward, in order to emphasize some interesting detail, steps back, trying not to lose the entire perspective. So, in order to reconstruct Bhartŗhari's way of reasoning one should emphasize not only the meaning of the kārikās, but also the order in which they are introduced. This helps to demonstrate, that the variety of the doctrines exposed in VP are usually organized in the form of antonymic oppositions. As an example let us turn to the passage VP I.44-70.

In general this passage deals with the antinomy of the integral vs. composite nature of the word. Actually Bhartŗhari 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 I.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 *(šabdasvarūpa)* (VP I.51-70). Each member of the oppositions correlates to a different aspect of language activity. E.g. when Bhartŗhari 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 *(šabdasvarūpa)*. At the same time ontologically, the word is integral. Different concepts exposed in the kārikās 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 I.75 [3. P. 212-217]. Thus, there are many different levels of description (i.e. *vyāvahārika* 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 contradictive.

IV. UDĀHARAṆAS IN THE 'VĀKYAPADĪYA'

Another specific trait in VP that correlates with the view on language as an activity is the specific use of comparisons *(udāharaņas)*. *Udāharaņas*, as defined in the Nyā ya-sūtras are based on evident facts *(dŗşţāntas)* and thus justify the inference from the view of common sense. Common sense is in turn is acquired from ordinary experience, i.e. from everyday activities. Generally the use of *udāharaņas* is typical for Indian philosophical texts. There are a lot of them in VP, especially in the first kāṇda, but they are more complicated,

comparing to the typical *udāharaņa: yathā mahānase* 'like in the kitchen'.

Let us consider the kārikās I.49-50 where the problem of the relation between permanent word and impermanent sounds is discussed:

nādasya kramajātatvān na pūrvo na paraš ca saH |

akramaH kramarūpeņa bhedavān iva jāyate || I. 49||

pratibimbam yathānyatra sthitam toyakriyāvašāt |

tatpravŗttim ivānveti sa dharmaH sphoţanādayoH //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 sphoţa and sounds.

This udāharaņa differs evidently from the simple udāharaņa of a paňcāvayava 'sillogism', 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 udāharaņa 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 manifestation, have the same character as the changes, which the reflection of an object undergoes because of the movement of the water. The difference between the situations compared is more substantial, than the difference between the smoke on the mountain and the smoke in the kitchen. This udāharaņa can be hardly considered as a part of the proof. Though the idea of reflection moving with the water is quite clear, its analogy with the word is not so obvious.

Thus, it is not the ability of different objects to possess similar attributes, that Bhartŗhari demonstrates. Most likely his aim was to demonstrate the structural similarity of different situations. There is a number of similar udāharaņas 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 udāharaņa of this type is a model that imitates the structure of the situation considered. Comparisons in Bhartŗhari's udāharaņas 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 vaišeşika's idea of relation between quality (red colour) and its substratum (gum of the certain tree).

Bhartŗhari's udāharaņas do not provide proofs, they just bring to understanding. As a result, in different parts of VP we find mutually contradictive udāharaņas. E.g. VP III.3.29 claims, that word is similar with indriyas (sence organs), whereas VP I.57-58 on the contrary underlines the difference between words and indriyas:

vişayatvam anāpannaiH šabdair nārthaH prakāšyate |

na sattayaiva te 'rthānām agŗhītāH prakāšakāH || 1.57 ||

ato 'nirjňātarūpatvāt kim āhety abhidhīyate |

nendriyāņām prakāšye 'rthe svarūpam gŗhyate tathā || 1.58 || [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.

indriyānām svavişayeşv anādir yogyatā yathā |

anādir arthaiH šabdānām sambandho yogyatā tathā || 3.3.29|| [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 Bhartŗhari enumerated them following his perspectivist trend. Still in the general context of VP it seems, that in both cases Bhartŗhari was mainly focused on šabda and not on *indriyas*. He mentioned *indriyas*, in order to clarify some of his ideas of language philosophy. So, these *udāharaņas* must not be understood in the sense that *indriyas* are identical or not identical with *šabda*. Viewing language as a process, Bhartŗhari 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, Bhartŗhari's use of *udāharaņas* 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 kā rikā s and the commentaries, it seems quite promising to reconstruct Bhartŗ hari's implicit presuppositions concerning language. This paper suggests, that Bhartŗhari 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.

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