

# The *Sphoṭa* theory: For and Against

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## Abstract

*Sphoṭa* theory is a significant concept to the vital problem of common linguistics and as well as linguistic philosophy. This theory holds that a word or a sentence is not just an arrangement made up of different sound units arranged in a particular order, but a single whole, a single symbol which bears a meaning. The idea of *sphoṭa* was variously formulated by different philosophers in different form. *Sphoṭa* is a simple meaning-bearing unit, which may be a kind of word or sentence. The derivative meaning of the term '*Sphoṭa*' is that form which the meaning bursts forth, i.e. is revealed (Nāgēśabhaṭṭa, 1956). Mādhava in his *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* has explained the etymology of the term 'bursts', which means 'is made explicit'. So, *sphoṭa* means what is made explicit (*vyaj*) by letters on the hand, and what, being made explicit, makes the meaning explicit on the other hand. The concept *sphoṭa* was not originally offered by Bhartrhari. He used it as the fundamental concept for the study of language. Later grammarians developed the theory further.

**Key Words:** *Sphoṭa*, *śabdabrahman*, *dhvani*, *Śabda bhāvanā*, Grammar,

## The Metaphysical Basic of Language

Bhartrhari maintains that the power which creates and regulates this universe rests on words. It is through the eye of the word that the diversity of understanding is perceived. The word Absolute is ultimately one and undivided, through in our empirical experience it appears as divided into sentence, words and phenomena.

According to Bhartrhari grammar is doorway to the ultimate salvation. All the misrepresentation and mistakes of speech can be corrected with the help of the grammar. It is the cleaner or purifier of all the knowledge. All the branches of knowledge find their obscurities spelled out with the help of it alone and it is the root of all things. Grammar is the first and foremost step which let towards the final salvation. Grammar is the place of the word-form (*padas*). It is the simplest and surest way, leading towards that end. By the help of it we can see the real nature of the Mantras, which exist behind their physical appearance. After got through the challenging path of Grammar, we realize that the Real light is hidden behind the external form. That light of Grammar is the actual and best form of the language. The Brahman is realized and obtained after knowing this grammar only.

The great seers have invariably remarked that the relationships between the words and the meaning are eternal, as well as constant. The other Grammarians and commentators also accept this fact. The Grammarian upholds the eternality of words on the ground that they are universes. Bhartrhari, however, maintains that whether words are admitted to be eternal or not, their beginning has to be admitted as unknown. According to him words have two distinct powers. They have the power of revealing (*grahakatva*) and that of being revealed (*grahyatva*).

### **Bhartrhari's Theory of Śabdabrahman**

In Indian philosophy '*Brahman*' means which exists beyond limit of birth and death it is endless and eternal. But Bhartrhari maintains that *Brahma* is nothing but the *śabdatattva* or speech- element itself. It is this element which never lose anything anyway, and which this becomes '*Aksara*'. With the help of this element only world is capable to carry on its very existence and social behaviour. And all that becomes possible through its meaning factor only; that being its 'modus operandi' (*Vākyapadiya* verse. no1) *śabda Brahma* is one and indivisible. Through, we divided it for our practical purposes. *Veda* is a means to attain the same *śabdabrahman* which is one and inseparable. Though the seers have divided it into so many separate branches, and each of them seems to be leading into a different direction. Grammar is intimately related with the *śabdabrahman*. One has to make difficult efforts to acquire that Brahman. But, the first and foremost amongst those efforts is the Grammar. Thus, Grammar becomes the shortest at surest way leading towards the *śabdabrahman*.

The sphaṭa is ultimately said to be one is every sentient being. Sphaṭa is essentially intertwined with consciousness and it is the linguistic capability of man. In fact, language is the 'vibration' of consciousness and it is accepted that the ultimate speech-principle and the ultimate principle of consciousness are interchangeable. The ultimate reality for Bhartrhari is the Absolute Consciousness which is identical with śabda-Brahman, the eternal verbal.

According to Bhartrhari there are two kinds of meaning: Epistemologically or Grammatically derived ones, and fixed ones, i.e. based on roots etc. there are two kinds of words as well : those which derived their meanings from Grammar or Etymology, and those which have fixed meanings.

Word is thoughts of one's mind. Then it is applied in a particular reference. Only after this arrangement, the speech- producing organs give it a phonemic appearance. Thus, 'mental relation' becomes an important factor in deciding the basic unity of a word, which may otherwise be used at different circumstances and in different cases. Sounds or the final expressions are not so important things.

‘Bhartrihari distinguishes the word-universal (*śabdākṛiti*) from the universal ‘wordness’ (*śabdatva*). He distinguishes the former also from the individual words.’ Wordness’ subsists in all word irrespective of their mutual differences, but word-universal, such as ‘tree-wordness’ etc; subsists only in their respective instances. The word universals, which subsist in the individual words, are also called words, because, due to ambiguity, they are identified with the individual words manifesting them.

### **Bhartrihari’s Sphoṭa**

Bhartrihari has used the term *Sphoṭa* and *dhvani* to elucidate the concept of language. According to him *Sphoṭa* is the cause of the real word while the other one i.e. *dhvani* is used to convey the meaning. *Sphoṭa* and *dhvani* though they are totally different, are really identical. The apparent difference is seen to result from the various external manifestation of single internal *Sphoṭa*. At first the word exists in the mind of the speaker as a unity or *Sphoṭa*. He produces a sequence of different sounds, when he utters it, so that it appears to have differentiation. The listener, though first hears a series of sounds ultimately perceives the utterance as a unity, the same *Sphoṭa* with which the speaker began and then the meaning is conveyed.

The term *Sphoṭa* occurs nine times in the first *kānda* of *Vākyapadiya*. The use of the term *śabda* in different senses namely *pada*, *vākyasphoṭa*, *dhvani*, *nāda*, *prākṛtadhvani* and *vaikṛtadhvani* create certain difficulties to determine the actual nature of *Sphoṭa*. According to Bhartrihari, *Sphoṭa* is indivisible. He maintains that the isolated words do not occur as meaningless units in ordinary language. Sentence is universally accepted as the unit in ordinary language. Sentence is universally accepted as the unit of expression and the division of sentence into words and the words into phonemes does not exist. The meaning bearing units viz. *pada* and *vākya*, cannot be divided into smaller significant units. Like Patañjali, Bhartrihari also maintains that the meaning is neither cognized through the phonemes k, s, and y, in *kōpa*, *sōpa* and *yōpa*, not it is expressed by the identical part *ōpa*. Bhartrihari holds that the word as a whole is unrelated with the isolated phonemes. Bhartrihari maintains *akhanda-vākya Sphoṭa* theory that when one hears or speaks a sentence in an ordinary conversation a sentence is not taken into account in terms of series of meaning of a sentence he may analyse it into words, syllables and phonemes. He accepts the *Sphoṭa* is the universal sounds. *Sphoṭa* is perceived in the time series-pattern and at the same time indivisible like in *Sphoṭa*-entity gau. Each sound reveals the phonemes *Sphoṭa* and the listener may perceive each phoneme but he can perceive the word as a whole. He accepts that the sentence meaning is the instantaneous flash of insight (*pratibhā*) which is indivisible into word-meanings. Thus a sentence is a single unitary whole denotative of a single undivided meaning.

## Patañjali Sphoṭa

The *Sphoṭa* theory was established by Patañjali, the great commentator of the *Pāṇini-Sutras*, and elaborately discussed and developed by later grammarians. According to this theory, the syllable of a word do not directly present the meaning of the word, whether separately or jointly, as this process has been found to be inexplicable. In really, however, corresponding to every word perceived, there is an unperceived, in really, however, corresponding to every word perceived, there is an unperceived, partless (*niravayava*) symbol, which directly presents the meaning. This symbol is called *Sphoṭa* (or Sabda-the word). The different syllables of a word only provide to disclose this symbol to the mind. The first syllables rouses this latent symbol in the mind only vaguely, and the succeeding syllables, as they are gradually heard, draw it more and more towards the focus of consciousness till finally the last syllable, being heard reveals the symbol to consciousness. Patañjali at one place maintains that that *Sphoṭa* is the speech or language (*sabda*) while noise or sound (*dhvani*) is a quality (a feature) of the speech (language). It is explained that the noisy element in language, the audible part, can be soft or loud or long or short but the *Sphoṭa* is what remains constant or the same, unaffected by the peculiarities of individual speakers. For Patañjali, a single letter or 'sound' (*varna*) such as k,p, or a fixed sound-series, can be a Sphoṭa. It's a kind of unit of sound, a single letter or a letter-series. A sound-series can be analysed as a succession of sound-units, and therefore it has a constant 'size' or a fixed temporal dimension determined by the number of units. This notion is different from the opinion of later grammarian, for whom *Sphoṭa* is a partless (whole) entity and hence unanalysable. To explain the distinction between *Sphoṭa* and sound (noise), Patanjali has given an example i.e. when a drum is being struck, one drum-beat may travel twenty feet, another thirty, another forty, but the *Sphoṭa* has a definite 'size' intensity. Its increase in length or intensity is caused by the actualized noise. He says here that the letters have a fixed nature (*avasthita*) but the style of delivering them through speech-organs depends upon the speaker.

## Others Sphoṭa

Many single treatises on *Sphoṭa* have been written since Maṇḍana Miśra. Bharata Miśra, Nāgeśa and Śeṣakṛṣṇa among the authors of such treatises. Nāgeśa in his *Sphoṭavada* has mentioned a classification of Sphoṭa into eight different types: 1) letter, 2) word, 3) sentence, 4) indivisible word, 5) indivisible sentence, 6) letter-universal, 7)word-universal and 8) sentence-universal. He explained *Sphoṭa* etymologically as 'that from which the meaning bursts forth'-the meaning-bearer. Nāgeśa explains that the *Sphoṭa* as the 'meaning-bearer' (*vacaka*) can be applied to the letters, the words and the sentence.

## Arguments against Sphoṭa

Kumārila the Mimāṃsaka and Jayanta the Naiyayika were possibly the two most remarkable critics of the *Sphoṭa* theory. For the Mimāṃsakas there is no separate entity called *Sphoṭa* apart from the externally existent sound-units or ‘phonemes’. The sound-units, in the Mimāṃsa theory are substantial entities-not properties of other substances. This means that at any given time an aggregation of these permanently present entities would be possible, and this aggregate would constitute a word to convey a meaning. Kumārila says, among other things, that the word ‘cow’ is taken by the *Sphoṭa* theorists to be a simple, unitary entity (the *Sphoṭa*), but indeed the word (or the sentence) is a composite fact having different letters (and words) as its components. The word (or the so called *Sphoṭa*) cannot be different from the constituent letters. If it were different, it would be felt or perceived to be a distinct entity without any reference to the letters as its constituents. Kumārila accets that the word ‘cow’ is taken by the *Sphoṭa* theorists to be a simple, unitary entity (the *Sphoṭa*), but indeed the word (or sentence) is a composite fact having different letters (and words) as its components. The word (or the so-called *Sphoṭa*) cannot be different from the constituent letters. If it were different, it would be felt or perceived to be a distinct entity without any reference to the letters as its constituents. But what everybody perceives and universally feels is nothing but the group of letters; nobody perceives anything else that is distinct from these letters. The only difference is that when we hear an utterance each cognition grasps a single letter or sound unit and the final cognition may take note of all them together. but this cannot justify the assumption that the so called word or (the sentence) is a *Sphoṭa* that is something numerically and qualitatively different from the group of letters. No cognition of the word is possible without, and independently of the cognition of letters . This only shows that the word (or the sentence) is a multiple or composite entity not a simple unity . It is only our cognition of this composite entity which is a single act . The cognitive act is one but its content is not so . That is, what we grasp by such a single cognitive act may have many components. Hence we may talk about an illusion or misperception here from a different point of view. The unity of the word-*Sphoṭa* or sentence-*Sphoṭa* is only an appearance a mere appearance a mere appearance. The multiple entity appears to be a unity (a case of cognizing something as what it is not a case of misperception) and the singularity of the cognition itself is responsible for the illusion of unity of the content. What is grasped as a word (or a sentence) is felt to be unity or indivisible entity because we have finally one indivisible cognitive episode to apprehend it. Hence it is case of transference of a characteristic of the cognition to its contents, i.e. what is cognized.

## Concluding Remarks

Bhartrhari maintained language (*Śabda*) from two perspectives, viz. 1) Metaphysical (*Sphoṭa*), and 2) Cognitive (*Nāda*)/(*dhvani*). In his philosophy, *sphoṭa* is an *a priori* meaning, it is whole and fully exists in

the mind of the speaker before he speaks and is latent in the minds of all hearers. The uttered sounds serve only to manifest to the hearer *sphoṭa*, which is already latent in his consciousness and is identical with the speaker's initial *sphoṭa*. There are two types of words - one is the cause of sound and the other is associated with meaning

Bhartrhari holds that the meaning-bearing unit *Sphoṭa* is a partless, indivisible whole. When the speaker and the hearer share the common *sphoṭa*, meaning is communicated. *Sphoṭa* is connected with inherent linguistic potency (*Śabda bīja* or *Śabda bhāvanā*) present within all conscious human beings. *Sphoṭa*, is *śabdabhāvanā* (linguistic potency); it remains latent in speaker's and hearer's minds alike. *Sphoṭa* is the sense of an expression; the speaker can meaningfully express it by an utterance and the listener can grasp it for its presence in his mind. He describes 'word' or *sphoṭa* as having a self-luminous identity because it can reveal itself as well as the object that comes into contact with it. It is not possible to obtain the vision of *sphoṭa* without sounds (*dhvani* or *nāda*).

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