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PHILOSOPHY AND LANGUAGE IN INDIA:

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

JOHANNES BRONKHORST

INDIAN philosophy has dedicated much thought to questions related to language. It would yet be a mistake to limit one's attention to ideas about language engendered in and by Indian philosophy. Ideas about language were current in India well before there was anything one might be inclined to call philosophy, and philosophy, when it arose, was deeply influenced by those prior ideas.

Concern with language characterized Brahmanism from as far as we can look back. One of the features that distinguished Brahmins as a group from everyone else was their mastery of the Veda. The Veda is, first and foremost, a collection of powerful formulas (called *mantra*) that must be recited at appropriate occasions (primarily rituals) and that will then have effects in this or a future world. Since the respect and the associated privileges that Brahmins received were inseparable from this sacred and to some extent secret knowledge, the efficacy of Vedic formulas was not going to be put into question by Brahmins, not even by philosophically inclined Brahmins.

The idea soon came up that the efficacy of Vedic formulas is due, or at least related to the presumed fact that the connection between the world and the words of the Vedic language is particularly close. One of the consequences of this belief is that we can presumably learn a great deal about the nature of reality by studying the Vedic language, i.e. Sanskrit. This conviction finds expression on an unprecedented scale in the parts of Vedic literature that are not mantra, i.e. in the so-called *Brāhmaṇas* (including most of the early *Upaniṣads*). These texts are full of semantic etymologies, etymologies that do not seek to elucidate the history of words (impossible in a world that does not recognize the reality of linguistic change) but rather aims at discovering the essence of a thing by relating the word that refers to it to other similar words. Similarities between words brought in this way invisible links to light between the things they denoted.

No one would dream of claiming that semantic etymologies have much to do with philosophy. This is no reason to underestimate the importance of semantic etymologies in ancient India. Attempts were made to discover and formulate the rules that supposedly underlie correct etymologizing. They found expression in a text that has survived, Yāska's *Nirukta* (ca. 3rd cent. BCE). In parallel with this activity, and inspired by the same conviction that Sanskrit is close to reality, grammatical analysis arose, culminating in the famous grammar of Pāṇini, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (ca. 4th cent. BCE). In this last case we may be tempted, and justified, to speak of a scientific rather than of a philosophical accomplishment. We will yet see that, in due time, the ideas underlying these developments also came to inspire philosophy.

Systematic philosophy in India involved for an important part of its history not only Brahmanism, but also Buddhism and Jainism. Of these three participants, Brahmanism and Buddhism were predominant, and the interaction between these two is responsible for many of the developments during the first millennium or so. Buddhism, as a matter of fact, developed what might be called systematic philosophy before either of the two others did, and there are good reasons to think that both Brahmanism and Jainism were influenced by the earliest Buddhist attempts at systematic philosophizing.

Buddhism did not share Brahmanism's ideas about language. For early Buddhism there was not one language closer to reality than any other, and indeed, the very notion that language and reality are intimately connected was foreign to early Buddhist thought. Buddhism's earliest attempts at systematic philosophy (from ca. 2nd cent. BCE), however, did bring language into the picture, but quite differently from Brahmanism and without being influenced by the latter.

To understand the role of language in early Buddhist systematic philosophy, some of its main features will have to be introduced, if ever so sketchily. This earliest attempt to systematize the Buddhist tradition and create a coherent ontology took place in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, far away from the Brahmanical heartland, and presumably in a region where there were no Brahmins or at best only very few of them. This attempt – the outcome of which has survived in the scholasticism (Abhidharma) of the Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism – took as point of departure a number of Buddhist doctrinal elements, but reinterpreted them, sometimes almost beyond recognition.

Sarvāstivāda came to accept a list of ultimate elements of existence. As elements of existence it chose the so-called *dharma*s, which they and other Buddhists had been collecting and arranging in lists, on the assumption that they constituted crucial items in the Buddha's teaching. These *dharma*s had originally not been collected for ontological purposes, but this is the role they acquired in Sarvāstivāda thought: everything, it maintained, is constituted of *dharma*s. These *dharma*s, moreover, were now thought of as being momentary.

Seen in this way, all things we are aware of – primarily the objects of our experience, such as houses and chariots, but also human beings – are successions and collections of large numbers of *dharma*s. The Sarvāstivāda scholiasts added a further requirement: collections and/or successions of *dharma*s do not give rise to new objects. Put differently, only the *dharma*s really exist, and the objects that they seem to constitute don't. Concretely speaking, this means that an object such as a chariot does not really exist.

This particular instance, the chariot, plays a central role in a famous text composed in northwest India, presumably in its core during the last centuries preceding the Common Era. This text is called «The questions of King Milinda» (*Milindapañha*), and relates a discussion that supposedly took place between the Greek king Milinda (known from Greek sources as King Menander; don't forget that since Alexander of Macedonia Greeks ruled off and on over parts of north-western India, until about 150 BCE; Menander was one of the last of these rulers) and a Buddhist monk called Nāgaseṇa. Nāgaseṇa explains to the king that, contrary to the latter's claim, he could not have arrived by chariot, because there is no such thing as a chariot. The question as to how the confusion can be explained is answered in the following manner: there is no chariot, and what we call *chariot* is nothing but a word, an expression.

This passage of the *Milindapañha* is but the most famous expression of an idea that comes to be repeated in numerous other Buddhist texts, and is central to their thinking. According to this idea, the world of our experience is ultimately unreal, and due to the words of language. In other words, there is an intimate connection between the world of our experience and language, this because the world of our experience results from it and is in a certain way created by language.

Notice that at this point Buddhism and Brahmanism share an important position: both are convinced that the world of our experience and language closely correspond to each other. However, there are important differences. Brahmanism identified the world of our experience with the real world, where Buddhism denied that the world of our experience is real. Moreover, Brahmanism accepted this correspondence only for one language, Sanskrit, whereas the Buddhist scholiasts had no such exclusive preference for one particular language.

Let us now recall that the Brahmanical concern with language, unlike that of the Buddhists, was not the outcome of philosophical developments. The belief in the correspondence between Sanskrit and reality is as old as Brahmanism, and was quite independent of any attempts at systematization. It is however easy to understand that, once Brahmanism created an ontology of its own, this old Brahmanical belief had its role to play. This is particularly true of the Brahmanical ontology called Vaiśeṣika.

Vaiśeṣika did more than systematize preconceived Brahmanical notions as to the relationship between words and things. A close inspection of its ontology reveals that it had taken over several notions from Sarvāstivāda ontology, frequently by turning them upside down. Consider the Sarvāstivāda position according to which there are no composite things (such as chariots): only their constituent elements exist. In Vaiśeṣika this position takes the opposite form: composite things *do* exist beside their constituent parts. In other words, a vase and its two halves are three different entities.

There are further examples of the influence of Buddhist scholasticism on Vaiśeṣika, but here we must concentrate on the way in which Vaiśeṣika systematized the belief in the close relationship between words and things. Its basic assumption as to this relationship implied that any fundamental categorization of words was automatically a categorization of the things denoted by those words. For a basic categorization of words the philosophers of this school had to look no further than the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali, a major (and very voluminous) treatise on grammar that was widely studied by grammarians and non-grammarians alike from a time soon after its composition in the middle of the second century BCE. Patañjali distinguishes three kinds of words, which he calls *jātiśabda*, *guṇaśabda* and *kriyāśabda*. These correspond to our nouns, adjectives and verbs, and designate substances (*dravya*), qualities (*guṇa*) and actions (*kriyā*) respectively. Following the Vaiśeṣikas' way of thinking, this indicates that a major part of the 'things' in the world are substances, qualities or actions. Patañjali's observations go somewhat further, for he points out that a *jātiśabda* denotes a substance or a genus (*jāti*). On the common sense level probably intended by Patañjali, this makes good sense: many nouns can refer either to a concrete object, or to that object in general. The word «dog» is used in the following two sentences in altogether different ways: «my dog is black» and «the dog is a domestic animal»; in the former of these two examples Patañjali might say that it refers to a substance, in the latter to a genus. The ontologically inclined Vaiśeṣikas concluded from this that each substance has a universal (*jāti* or

sāmānya) that inheres in it; they extended this observation to qualities and actions. They arrived in this manner at four categories, that were essentially inspired by language: substances, qualities, actions and universals. They added a few more categories to assure the coherence of their system, but it is clear that their system of categories was based on and in an important way an expression of their understanding of language.

We noted above that Vaiśeṣika drew inspiration from Buddhist scholasticism by turning a number of its ideas upside down. One might say the same about a Brahmanical thinker of the fifth century CE who became known as the philosopher of grammar, but whose ideas went well beyond only grammar. This thinker is Bhartṛhari, and he developed an ontological vision of the world that is best understood in contrast with Sarvāstivāda thought. Recall that these Buddhists maintained that only the ultimate constituents of our world (i.e. the *dharmas*) really exist, and that we owe it to the words of language that we believe that composite objects, too, exist, where in reality they don't. Bhartṛhari put this scheme on its head. According to him, only the whole of all there is has real existence. Its constituent parts, which in this case include the objects of our daily experience, owe their existence to language; more correctly: we owe it to language that we believe that these intermediate objects exist, even though their existence is relative at best.

Bhartṛhari's skill as a grammarian gave him the means to show that the passage from less to more real goes from part to whole, not the other way round. For grammarians analyse words in component parts, such as stems and suffixes, which are, when it comes to it, inventions of those grammarians. Indeed, different grammars propose sometimes different ways to analyse the same word. It follows that the word is more real than its grammatical constituents. In a similar vein it can be argued that a sentence is more real than its constituent words, and so on. «And so on» means, for Bhartṛhari, moving on toward ever more encompassing linguistic units, until the largest linguistic unit there is, the Veda. In parallel with this linguistic ascension, there is the ascension of things toward ever more encompassing entities, the largest one being Brahman. Brahman is, as a matter of fact, the totality of all there is, was, and will be. Ultimately only Brahman is real.

We notice that in Bhartṛhari's scheme of things language does more than just illustrating the higher existential status of wholes with respect to parts. Language does much more. It divides ultimate reality in such a manner as to arrive at the unreal world we live in. Both Bhartṛhari and Buddhist scholasticism agree that the world of our experience is not ultimately real and owes its pseudo-existence to language. Only when talking about what is ultimately real they part ways: where Buddhist scholasticism moves toward the ultimate constituents, Bhartṛhari moves toward the ultimate whole.¹

The Buddhist Sarvāstivāda school also initiated another important development related to language. Recall that these Buddhists had come to the conclusion that words are behind our mistaken view that macroscopic objects like chariots, houses and persons exist. None of the familiar objects of our daily experience exist, and this includes words, too. Put this way, one might be led to think that certain non-existent things (words) are behind our mistaken belief in the existence of other non-existent things (chariots, houses, persons, etc.). This looks circular, and it is possible that the early Sarvāstivādins felt

¹ BRONKHORST 1992.

uncomfortable with it. We have no texts in which they actually say so, but we do notice that the list of *dharmas* that they accepted contains some items that correspond to linguistic units: in the classical enumerations there are three of them, that correspond to words, sentences and individual speech sounds respectively; originally there may have been only two, corresponding to words and single sounds.¹ These *dharmas*, like virtually all other *dharmas*, were of course momentary.

We may assume that the inclusion of these three (or two) items in the list of *dharmas* resolved a difficulty with which the Sarvāstivādins were confronted, presumably the one pointed out above. However, the ontological status of words, sentences and even single sounds is problematic even for those who do not otherwise adhere to Sarvāstivāda ontology. For indeed, words and sentences are, naively speaking, sequences of sounds, and even single sounds extend over time and are therefore sequences of constituent noises. Seen this way, can one ever say that there is a word or other linguistic unit? Since their constituents succeed each other, they never coexist. So does it make sense to say that there ever is such a thing as a word?

The problem came to intrigue Brahmanical thinkers, too, and some of them proposed a solution that is in all essentials identical to that of the Sarvāstivādins. Beside the sequence of sounds (or vibrations, or whatever) that accompany and reveal a word, they postulated the existence of a word that is different from those sounds (or vibrations, etc.). The expression often used to designate this entity is *sphoṭa*, it being understood that the *sphoṭa* is the real word. This *sphoṭa*, then, is an ontologically distinct entity, and one that is revealed by transient sounds, but which is itself eternal. The same notion could, of course, be extended to other linguistic units, notably sounds and sentences. Bhartṛhari was one among those who accepted the *sphoṭa*, but others, too, accepted the unitary and indivisible nature of the word; among these we may count Maṇḍana Miśra (7th cent. CE; author of a treatise called *Sphoṭasiddhi* «Proof of *sphoṭa*») and the author of the *Yogaśāstra* (ca. 400 CE; under sūtra 3.17).²

The *sphoṭa* makes a reappearance in some far more recent grammatical authors. We will see below that this more recent *sphoṭa* differed in some essential respects from its predecessors.

Recall that Brahmanical and Buddhist thinkers agreed, in spite of their numerous differences, on one issue: The world of our common sense experience corresponds closely to the words of language. For the Buddhists this meant that the objects of our everyday experience – such as chariots, houses, and persons – have no real existence; we are tricked by words into believing that they exist. For the Brahmins there was no question of doubting the reality of the world of our experience; the objects of our experience and the words of Sanskrit correspond to each other quite simply because the Sanskrit language is close to reality.

The limited agreement between Buddhists and Brahmins was enough to plunge both of them into a problem that was going to have a determining effect on the future shape of Indian philosophy. Both accepted the close correspondence between the world of

¹ See BRONKHORST 1987, part III. The *dharmas* concerned are called *nāmakāya*, *padakāya* and *vyañjanakāya*; the first two of these three terms may originally have been synonyms.

² See DASGUPTA 1924, 179 ff. («Appendix»). Note that the author of the *Yogabhāṣya*, whatever his real name (Patañjali or Vindhyavāsin, or something else), was certainly not called Vyāsa; BRONKHORST 1984; MAAS 2006, xii ff.

our everyday experience and the words of language. Both agreed that, in a certain way, the world of our ordinary experience had been created by the words of language (even though the Brahmins thought that this world of ordinary experience was ultimately real, whereas the Buddhists maintained that it was not). Both ran into difficulties when they tried to extend this correspondence to statements.

These difficulties resulted from a presupposition that all thinkers concerned took for granted, a presupposition that is indeed closely associated with the shared belief in a close correspondence between words and things. A true affirmative statement, these thinkers assumed, must describe a situation that is constituted of elements that correspond to the words of that statement; we will call this the «correspondence principle». The statement «the cow eats grass» describes a situation in which we find a cow, grass, and the activity of eating. At first sight this seems unproblematic, even though different interpreters may assign a different ontological status to the constituent elements (cow, grass, eating). All interpreters however, quite independently of their ontological preferences, are confronted with a problem in the case of statements that refer to things that come into being. Take «The potter makes a pot». The shared presupposition claims that this statement describes a situation in which there is a pot. But clearly, if there is already a pot in this situation, the potter does not need to make it.

Judging by the many different solutions that were proposed to this difficulty, it is clear that there were virtually no philosophers in India during the first half of the first millennium who were willing to question the presupposition, i.e. the correspondence principle presented above. They all felt that there had to be a pot, or at the very least something corresponding to this word, in the situation described by «The potter makes a pot».

It seems likely that the problems associated with the correspondence principle were first pointed out, and exploited to their advantage, by Buddhist thinkers. They were indeed the ones who had most to gain, for they maintained that the world of our ordinary experience does not really exist. The new problems, as interpreted by them, merely confirmed their position. Since there is no pot in the situation described by «The potter makes a pot», clearly the potter can make no pot. What is more, production in all its forms is self-contradictory, and therefore impossible. Nāgārjuna (2nd cent. CE?), the first thinker to make systematic use of these difficulties, concluded that the world of our experience is 'empty' (*śūnya*), i.e. non-existent. It is true that the same arguments could be used against the ontology developed by the Sarvāstivādins (see above), but this did not deter Nāgārjuna. His philosophy (if this is the term to use for a vision of the universe that is so utterly negative) came to be known by the names *Madhyamaka* «Middle [path]» and *Śūnyavāda* «Doctrine [according to which all is] empty».

This is not the place to present a complete survey of the many ways in which different philosophical schools tried to solve the problems associated with statements like «The potter makes a pot». We saw that Buddhist thinkers were less threatened by these problems than Brahmanical philosophers, but this does not mean that all Buddhists agreed with Nāgārjuna. The Brahmanical philosophers of that time were not willing to abandon their belief in the reality of the world of our experience, so they were faced with the challenge to come up with an altogether different interpretation of statements of that kind that would leave the common sense world intact.

Their main two answers are known by the names *satkārya-vāda* and *asatkārya-vāda*. *Satkārya-vāda* is the doctrine according to which the effect (*kārya*) exists (*sat*) in its cause.

In the situation described by «The potter makes a pot», the potter works on clay. Clay is the cause, the pot is the effect. According to the *satkārya-vāda*, the effect exists in its cause, the pot is present in the clay out of which it will be formed. Whatever the intuitive appeal of this position, it is the one adopted by several Brahmanical philosophical schools (initially Sāṃkhya, later also Advaita-Vedānta), and it is with the help of this position they solved the problems associated with the correspondence principle.

Our analysis so far has shown that these problems resulted from a belief concerning the relationship between language and reality, a belief in what we have called the correspondence principle. Thinkers who followed or sympathized with Vaiśeṣika ontology, aware of the role of language in these problems, looked for a solution in the relationship between words and things. They knew that a noun can refer either to a concrete object, or to that object in general, and had indeed postulated that beside individual objects there are universals. Since nouns refer to both, the word 'pot' in «The potter makes a pot» also refers to the universal that inheres in all pots. Well, universals were believed to be eternal and omnipresent. Conclusion: there is something in the situation described by «The potter makes a pot» that the word 'pot' refers to. The thinkers who adopted this solution rejected the *satkārya-vāda*; their position is therefore referred to as *asatkārya-vāda* «the doctrine according to which the effect (*kārya*) does not exist (*sat*) in its cause».

As stated earlier, many other solutions to the problems connected with the correspondence principle were proposed; it would take us too far to review them all. They are referred to by different names. We have discussed *śūnya-vāda*, *satkārya-vāda*, *asatkārya-vāda*; we can add *sarvāsti-vāda*,¹ *anekānta-vāda*, *ajāti-vāda* and *apoha-vāda*, but even this longer list does not contain an exhaustive enumeration of all the solutions proposed.² From among these additional solutions, only the *apoha-vāda* can here briefly be discussed.

The word *apoha* means exclusion, and the *apoha-vāda* is the doctrine according to which words denote by exclusion. The originator of this doctrine is the Buddhist Dignāga (ca. 500 CE), but he was only the first one in a long line of Buddhist thinkers who adhered to it. Very briefly put, this doctrine maintains that a word, say «pot», does not denote an object, in this case a pot, but rather excludes everything that is not a pot. Since it does away with the notion that there must be a correspondence between words and things, the correspondence principle and the accompanying problems disappear with it.

The *apoha-vāda* was however more than only a semantic theory. It was inseparable from the two-tier view of reality that had characterized Buddhist ontology since the days of early Sarvāstivāda, and whose main characteristic was that language operates in a world that is not ultimately real. Dignāga maintained that the real world (called *sva-lakṣaṇa* «having its own characteristics») consists only of particulars and is only accessible to the senses. Language, on the other hand, operates in an ultimately unreal world that is characterized by the general (*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*). This is also the world of concepts and the world in which inferences have their place.

¹ This word, which became the name of a philosophical school discussed earlier, literally refers to the position according to which everything (*sarva*), including past and future things, exists (*asti*). This was one of the doctrines of the Sarvāstivāda school, and it provided an answer to the problems that was not altogether dissimilar to the one provided by the *satkārya-vāda*.

² See BRONKHORST 1999.

Dignāga was as a matter of fact inspired by inferences when formulating his *apoha-vāda*. He had noticed that inferences work in two directions that are logically equivalent: saying «if there is smoke on the mountain, then there is fire» is logically equivalent to «if there is no fire on the mountain, then there is no smoke»; if B follows from A, then not-A follows from not-B, and *vice versa*. Applying the same idea to the process of referring gives: saying that all pots and only those are referred to by the word “pot” is equivalent to saying that all things that are *not* pots are *not* referred to by this word. The *apoha* doctrine was adopted and refined by numerous later Buddhist thinkers.

At this point a few words must be said about the Brahmanical school of thought called Mīmāṃsā. This was essentially a hermeneutical rather than a philosophical school. Its stated aim was to interpret the Vedic text corpus. However, interpreting a text, and a Vedic text in particular, raises a number of fundamental questions, and Mīmāṃsā in its classical shape (i.e., the shape we find in Śabara’s extensive *Mīmāṃsā-bhāṣya*, a text belonging to the middle of the first millennium CE) proposed answers to them.

Consider, to begin with, a situation of ordinary verbal communication, in which one person informs another one about a state of affairs (e.g., «It rains outside»). The person who receives this communication, can he or she assume that it contains reliable information? This, obviously, depends on the trustworthiness of the speaker. If the speaker is not himself properly informed, or if he wishes to misinform his interlocutor, then obviously his communication does not transmit reliable information. Much depends therefore on the reliability of the speaker (or writer, or originator of the verbal communication). The interpretation of every text has to begin with an interrogation as to the trustworthiness of its author. What is more, if a text is not reliable, this is due to the fact that its author is not reliable.

The question of unreliability does not arise in the case of Vedic texts. These texts, according to a fundamental tenet of Mīmāṃsā, have no author: they were always there. Being texts without author, the suspicion of untrustworthiness does not arise, and they have to be considered reliable, even infallible.

This does not yet solve all the problems. Even a reliable verbal communication may be misunderstood, this because sentences can be variously interpreted. The correct interpretation is the most direct interpretation, the one that least deviates from the exact wording of the text. This interpretation may not be difficult to find as long as one deals with short sentences, it becomes much more difficult when the text to be interpreted is the vast Vedic corpus, in which sentences from different parts may at first sight seem to contradict each other. Mīmāṃsā developed a number of principles meant to deal with these complications.

An application of the considerations mentioned so far soon reveals that not all Vedic sentences can be taken at face value. Some will have to be read metaphorically, in the light of other sentences. This is especially true of Vedic sentences describing historical facts: since the Veda was always there, it cannot record historical facts, for the simple reason that the Veda was already in existence before those historical facts took place.

A similar reasoning applies to all statements of fact in the Veda. Since we have other means to be informed about facts – among them perception, and inference – statements of fact in the Veda run the risk of being in conflict with information based on other sources of knowledge. Mīmāṃsā concluded from this that all Vedic statements of fact have to be understood metaphorically, in the light of other sentences.

But which are the Vedic sentences that can be taken literally? According to Mīmāṃsā, only injunctions can not possibly come in conflict with other sources of information. No perception, no inference will ever tell us anything about what we must do (or must abstain from doing). The Vedic injunctions stand therefore unchallenged, and their literal interpretation is possible and even necessary.

This introduction to some of the fundamentals of Mīmāṃsā thought is necessary to understand some developments in linguistic philosophy that began in Mīmāṃsā but subsequently touched other schools of thought. For Mīmāṃsā did not confine itself to identifying injunctions and arguing that they had to figure centrally in a most direct understanding of the Veda, it also analyzed the way in which individual injunctions are understood. It did so by identifying the expressive unit in the sentence which conveys the sense of injunction (the verbal ending) and by showing that the meanings of all the remaining expressive units are subordinate to it. In the course of time they extended this analysis so that it came to include non-injunctive sentences, and arrived at a general theory of the way verbal communication is understood (*śābdabodha*). This cognition can be described in terms of a hierarchical organization of the meanings of all the grammatical elements that are used in the sentence concerned. For the Mīmāṃsā the meaning of the verb ending was and remained central, and the sense they attributed to it was *bhāvanā* «bringing into being».

The notion that verbal cognition can be described in terms of the hierarchical organization of the meanings of the grammatical elements that make up the sentence was taken over, some centuries later, by representatives of the Nyāya school of philosophy, first Udayana (ca. 1000 CE) then Gaṅgeśa (14th cent. CE) and others. This school had incorporated the Vaiśeṣika ontology discussed above, and was therefore committed to the view that external reality consists of a limited number of ‘things’, among which substances, qualities and actions are central. Among these three, substances are fundamental in a most literal sense, because other existing ‘things’, including qualities and actions, depend on substances and inhere in them. No doubt under the influence of this ontological commitment, the thinkers of the Nyāya school were inclined to analyze verbal cognition in a parallel fashion: in their hierarchical organization of meanings the substance (expressed by the subject of the sentence) is central, everything else, including the action expressed by the verb, subordinate to it.

In the discussions within and between the schools of Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya, a central question concerned the main qualificand in a sentence: for the former it was the «bringing into being» (*bhāvanā*) expressed by the verbal ending, for the latter it was the subject, i.e. the word with nominative case ending. Both made extensive use of the grammatical analysis of the Sanskrit language provided by Pāṇini. That is to say, they used the expressive units identified by that grammarian, but did not always accept the semantic function that he had given to those units. This was unacceptable to a number of grammarians of the Pāṇinian tradition. They joined the debate, be it at a late date (around 1600 CE), and defended what they considered the main qualificand of a sentence according to Pāṇini, viz., the action. Representatives of these three schools were henceforth engaged in an intense and often highly technical debate, a debate from which no ultimate victor emerged.¹

¹ An excellent historical presentation of verbal cognition in Indian philosophy is provided by Diaconescu (2010).

All the participants in this debate had to face the same question: how do sentences express more than the mere accumulation of the meanings of their constituent parts?¹ They proposed different answers: some had recourse to the secondary denotation of words in sentences, others invoked the intention of the speaker. The grammarians were in this respect luckier than their opponents, for they could draw on the notion of *sphoṭa* that had been introduced many centuries before them. The old *sphoṭa* had been an ontologically distinct entity, that owed its existence to ontological reflections. The new grammarians had a new role for it, emphasizing its semantic role: the *sphoṭa*, for them, is a single meaning bearer. Since there are word and sentence *sphoṭas*, which are different from each other, it follows that the sentence is an altogether different expressive unit, that does not need to justify its meaning on the basis of its constituent words. If, therefore, the sentence meaning turned out to be more than, or at any rate different from, the accumulated word meanings, this did not need to disturb the new grammarians. These same new grammarians were in no hurry to admit that they had assigned a new role to the *sphoṭa*, an omission which has been responsible for some puzzlement among modern researchers.²

The Nyāya view of verbal cognition was more than a mere reflection of the ontological categories accepted in that school. Recall that the Buddhists, and Dignāga and his successors in particular, had distinguished between the reality accessible to our senses on one hand, and the ultimately unreal world of concepts, words and inferences on the other. This meant that they accepted two kinds of perceptual cognition, the one correct but inexpressible in language, the other expressible but incorrect. Few Brahmanical thinkers were ready to join the Buddhists in refusing ultimate reality to the world of concepts, words and inferences. Quite on the contrary, a Brahmanical thinker like Bhartṛhari stated in a famous stanza that all knowledge is as it were pierced by words.³ However, philosophers of the Nyāya school and certain others borrowed some essential features from the Buddhist distinction. They ended up with a two-tiered understanding of perceptual cognition: nonconceptual (*avikalpaka*) and conceptual (*savikalpaka*), both correct. Inevitably, their conceptual perception was coloured by words, and was therefore very similar to cognition derived from words, i.e., verbal cognition. Indeed, the author of the Nyāya *Siddhāntamuktāvalī* (16th century) states in so many words that – were it not for the memory that it is words that produce verbal cognition – perception might give rise to verbal cognition. Language is in this way believed to play a role even in perception.

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¹ Only one philosophical current, the sub-school of Mīmāṃsā linked to the name of Prabhākara, denied that a sentence expresses more than the sum of the meanings of its constituent parts, holding on to the so-called *anvitābhīdhanavāda*.

² See BRONKHORST 2008.

³ *Vākyapadīya* (ed. Rau) 1.131.

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