

Sound, Word and the Limits of Retrospection: The Sphoṭa Passages of Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya Reconsidered

Mr. Narasimha Ganesh Bhat

Research Scholar

Department of Vyākaranam

Central Sanskrit University Shri Rajiv Gandhi Campus, Sringeri

Abstract:

The doctrine of sphoṭa — the indivisible, meaning-bearing linguistic unit revealed rather than produced by articulated sound — is routinely traced to Patañjali's Vyākaraṇa-mahābhāṣya (c. second century BCE). This paper subjects that genealogy to scrutiny. Working from the received Sanskrit text of the Bhāṣya and from the principal philological scholarship of the past six decades, it argues three related points. First, the textual base for attributing a sphoṭa doctrine to Patañjali is remarkably slender: the term occurs in a small cluster of passages, principally in the discussion of Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.1.70 and 8.2.18, and there it is applied to the individual speech sound rather than to the word or the sentence. Second, the problem that sphoṭa was introduced to solve in the Bhāṣya is ontological rather than semantic — it answers the question of how a linguistic unit whose parts never coexist can nevertheless be a single, permanent entity, not the question of how language conveys meaning. Third, the familiar picture of Patañjali as the founder of sphoṭavāda is largely a retrospective construction, produced by Bhartṛhari's fifth-century reworking of the notion and consolidated by the early modern grammarians Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita, Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa and Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa. The paper closes by drawing out the methodological moral for the historiography of the Sanskrit grammatical tradition: commentarial canonisation is a historical event in its own right and should not be mistaken for the evidence of the commented text.

Keywords: Mahābhāṣya; Patañjali; sphoṭa; dhvani; Bhartṛhari; Pāṇinian grammar; Indian philosophy of language.

Introduction

Few concepts in the Indian philosophy of language have proved as durable, or as portable, as sphoṭa. In the standard narrative it names an indivisible linguistic entity — a speech sound, a word or a whole sentence — which is not itself audible, but which is revealed or manifested by the audible noises (dhvani) that a speaker produces. Meaning, on this account, is not assembled from the sequence of phonemes as one assembles a wall from bricks; it bursts upon the hearer in a single cognitive flash once the manifesting sounds have done their work. The narrative almost invariably assigns the theory an ancestry running from a shadowy pre-Pāṇinian grammarian named Sphoṭāyana, through Patañjali's Vyākaraṇa-mahābhāṣya, to its systematic elaboration in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya and its late scholastic defence by Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa. Introductory accounts written for philosophers and for students of Sanskrit alike reproduce this lineage

with very little variation (Coward, 1980; Coward & Kunjunni Raja, 1990; Kunjunni Raja, 1963; Matilal, 1990), and it is reproduced too in the anthologies through which the Sanskrit grammarians have chiefly reached readers outside Indology (Bronkhorst, 2019; Staal, 1972).

The present paper takes the second link in that chain as its object. What, precisely, does the Mahābhāṣya say about *sphoṭa*, and what work is the notion doing there? The question is worth pressing because the answer bears directly on how the history of Indian linguistic thought is periodised. If Patañjali already possessed a theory of the indivisible meaning-bearer, then Bhartṛhari is a systematiser of inherited material and the *sphoṭa* doctrine is as old as the Pāṇinian commentarial tradition itself. If, on the other hand, Patañjali's use of the term is narrower and answers a different question, then Bhartṛhari's contribution is an innovation of the first order, and the tradition's own account of its origins is a piece of retrospective self-fashioning that the historian is obliged to read critically rather than to repeat.

The argument proceeds in seven stages. Section two situates the Mahābhāṣya and describes the exegetical idiom in which its arguments are conducted, since the dialogical form of the text is directly relevant to how its doctrinal commitments should be weighed. Section three examines the alleged prehistory of the concept, and in particular the single mention of *Sphoṭāyana* at Aṣṭādhyāyī 6.1.123. Section four assembles and analyses the Bhāṣya passages themselves. Section five asks what problem *sphoṭa* was invented to solve, and defends an ontological reading against the semantic reading that the later tradition projects backwards. Section six traces Bhartṛhari's transformation of the notion, and section seven the reception and critique that consolidated the standard genealogy. A concluding section draws out the methodological implications.

Two constraints should be stated at the outset. First, this is a study of a small body of text, and the conclusions it supports are correspondingly modest: to show that the Bhāṣya does not contain a developed *sphoṭavāda* is not to show that Patañjali would have rejected one. Second, the Mahābhāṣya's transmission is itself a scholarly problem of some delicacy, and passages have on occasion been suspected of interpolation (Bronkhorst, 1987). The discussion below relies on the text as constituted by Kielhorn (1880–1885) in the revision of Abhyankar (1962–1972), which remains the standard point of reference.

The Mahābhāṣya and Its Exegetical Idiom

The Vyākaraṇa-mahābhāṣya, the 'Great Commentary', is conventionally assigned to the middle of the second century BCE and forms the third of the three works — after Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī and Kātyāyana's vārttikas — that the tradition designates the munitraya, the 'three sages' of grammar. It is not a running gloss. Patañjali comments selectively, taking up roughly a quarter of Pāṇini's rules, and his treatment is organised around Kātyāyana's critical remarks rather than around the sūtra text as such. Where Kātyāyana had proposed an emendation, an addition or a restriction, Patañjali characteristically asks whether the intervention is necessary, and very often concludes that Pāṇini's formulation, properly understood, already secures the desired result (Cardona, 1988, 1976).

The idiom in which this is done is dialogical. Objections are introduced by particles and formulae — *nanu*, *atha*, *evaṃ tarhi*, *naitad asti* — and are answered, qualified, abandoned, or revived under a fresh construal. A position advanced in the course of the discussion may be a *pūrvapakṣa*, a provisional view stated in order to be refuted; it may be a *siddhānta*, the settled conclusion; or it may be neither, a workable expedient adopted to see what follows from it. Nothing in the surface grammar of the text marks these apart reliably, and the later commentators — Kaiyaṭa's Pradīpa and Nāgeśa's Uddyota above all — expend considerable ingenuity on deciding which is which. The point matters here because attributions of doctrine to Patañjali

are always attributions of a voice within a conversation to the author of the conversation, and that inference is defeasible.

Two general commitments do, however, run through the work and shape its handling of sound and word. The first is the eternality of language. Kātyāyana's opening vārttika on the introductory chapter takes as given that the relation between word and meaning is established rather than made — *siddhe śabdārthasambandhe* — and Patañjali's extended discussion in the Paspasāhnikā defends the thesis that words are nitya, permanent, against the view that they are produced artefacts (Joshi & Roodbergen, 1986). The second is a functional conception of what a word is. Asked at the very opening of the work what the word in 'cow' is, the Bhāṣya answers that it is that which, when uttered, brings about the cognition of creatures possessing dewlap, tail, hump, hooves and horns. A word is identified by what its utterance does, not by an inventory of its acoustic constituents. Both commitments generate a difficulty that sphoṭa will be summoned to resolve.

The Alleged Prehistory: Sphoṭāyana and the Silence of the Sūtra

Pāṇini names some ten predecessors in the Aṣṭādhyāyī, among them Śākaṭāyana, Śākalya, Gārgya and Āpiśali. At 6.1.123 (*avañ sphoṭāyanasya*) he records, as optional in the view of one Sphoṭāyana, a particular substitution before a following vowel. The mention is the whole of the evidence. Pāṇini does not report Sphoṭāyana's views on anything other than this point of sandhi, and nothing in the rule bears on the nature of linguistic units.

Medieval commentators nonetheless made a great deal of it. Haradatta, glossing the Kāśikā, and later Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa took the name as transparently derived from sphoṭa and inferred that its bearer was the founder of the doctrine. The inference is philologically weak on two counts. Sphoṭāyana is a patronymic in form, and personal names of this shape in the grammatical literature are not otherwise doctrinal labels; and even if the etymology were accepted, it would establish at most that someone called 'descendant of Sphoṭa' had held views about sphoṭa, which is not an argument but a restatement. As has been observed, the citation 'neither sufficiently indicates that Pāṇini knew anything similar to the sphoṭa theory, nor does it point out that this doctrine originally belonged to the sage Sphoṭāyana' (Dash, 2004, para. 6).

A second candidate ancestor is Audumbarāyaṇa, whose opinion is reported by Yāska in the Nirukta to the effect that speech is a unitary given in which the traditional parts of speech are not separately real. The report is terse and its reconstruction depends heavily on what one already believes about the later theory; neither Yāska nor Audumbarāyaṇa uses the word sphoṭa. A third, Vyāḍi, author of the lost Saṃgraha, is credited in the Vākyapadīya with a distinction between two kinds of dhvani, but the attribution reaches us only through Bhartṛhari and his commentators and cannot be independently checked.

The prehistory, in short, is a construction resting on one patronymic, one paraphrase and one lost book. It is not worthless — traditions do preserve genuine memory — but it cannot carry the weight of the claim that a developed sphoṭa doctrine was in circulation before Patañjali. Bronkhorst (2005) has argued, on the contrary, that the earliest attested conception of a word as an entity distinct from the sounds that express it belongs not to the grammarians at all but to the scholastic speculations of the Buddhist Sarvāstivādins, whose theory of the nāmakāya, padakāya and vyañjanakāya posits precisely such discrete linguistic entities as members of a separate ontological category. If that is right, the grammarians' engagement with the problem is a response to a debate under way elsewhere rather than the unfolding of something implicit in Pāṇini.

The Bhāṣya Passages

The principal locus is the discussion of Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.1.70, *taparas tatkālasya*, the metarule specifying that a sound followed by the marker *t* denotes only those homogeneous sounds that share its duration. The rule obliges Patañjali to consider how duration can be a property of a phoneme at all, and it is in the course of that discussion that the vocabulary of *sphoṭa* and *dhvani* appears (Kielhorn, 1880–1885, Vol. 1, p. 181). Three moves in the passage deserve attention.

The first is the statement of the distinction itself: *evaṃ tarhi sphoṭaḥ śabda dhvaniḥ śabdaguṇaḥ*, 'in that case, the *sphoṭa* is the word, and the sound is a quality of the word'. The formulation is compressed and its force depends on its position in the argument. It is offered, as the particles *evaṃ tarhi* indicate, as a way out of a difficulty just raised, and the difficulty is about the attribution of temporal properties. If duration belongs to the word, then a word drawn out in slow recitation is a different word from the same word spoken rapidly, which is absurd; if duration belongs to nothing, the rule under discussion has no application. Separating a permanent word from a variable quality of that word dissolves the dilemma.

The second is the verse quoted immediately in support: *dhvaniḥ sphoṭaś ca śabdānāṃ dhvanis tu khalu lakṣyate | alpo mahāṃś ca keṣāñcid ubhayaṃ tat svabhāvataḥ*. Words have both *dhvani* and *sphoṭa*; it is the *dhvani* that is perceived, and it is the *dhvani* that is small or large according to the speaker. The verse is introduced as a citation, which suggests that Patañjali is drawing on an existing formulation rather than coining one.

The third is the analogy of the drum-stroke (*bheryāghāta*). As a single blow on a drum sends out waves of sound that travel to varying distances without the blow itself being multiplied or altered, so the successive vibrations produced in articulation manifest a linguistic unit that is not itself modified by their number or extent. The analogy does two things at once: it explains how a unitary cause can have a temporally extended perceptual effect, and it locates the variability of speech firmly on the side of the effect.

Around these three moves the passage assembles a consistent picture. The phonemes are *avasthitāḥ*, 'fixed' or 'stable'; what varies across the three recognised tempos of recitation — *drut*, *madhyama* and *vilambita* — is the *vṛtti*, the manner of delivery, which is a property of the speaker's activity and not of the sound as a linguistic item. The same set of predicates recurs elsewhere in the Bhāṣya's defence of the permanence of language: the word is *kūṭastha*, immovable, *avicālin*, *avikārin*, without modification, and so on. A second, briefer treatment appears in the discussion of Aṣṭādhyāyī 8.2.18 (*kṛpo ro laḥ*), where the substitution of *l* for *r* in forms of the root *kṛp* raises a parallel question about the identity of the unit undergoing substitution.

What is striking, once these passages are read together rather than through the later tradition, is how narrow the application of the term is. In every instance *sphoṭa* is set against *dhvani* in a context concerned with individual speech sounds and their duration. Patañjali does not say that the *sphoṭa* is the bearer of meaning; he does not apply the term to the *pada* or to the *vākya*; and he does not say that meaning is apprehended in a single indivisible cognition. Bronkhorst (2005) states the point flatly: in the *Mahābhāṣya*, the term is employed 'in connection with individual speech sounds', and the celebrated question about the word in 'cow' with which the work opens is answered without recourse to it at all.

What Problem Was *Sphoṭa* Invented to Solve?

If *sphoṭa* in the Bhāṣya is not a semantic device, what is it? The answer proposed here, following Bronkhorst (2005), is that it answers an ontological question: given that the constituent parts of any linguistic unit succeed one another in time and never coexist, in what sense does the unit itself exist?

The problem is a real one and it was felt across the schools. A word of three syllables is never present all at once. At the moment the third syllable is heard the first has ceased; at no instant is there an object in the world answering to the description 'the word'. One may therefore deny that words exist, treating them as convenient fictions superimposed on a succession of momentary sounds — a line congenial to Buddhist momentariness. Or one may posit an additional entity, a unitary something manifested by the succession but distinct from it. The grammarians, committed by the nityatva thesis to the permanence of language, could not take the first route. The sphoṭa is the second.

Read this way, the structure of Patañjali's argument becomes transparent. The metarule at 1.1.70 requires that duration be predicable of phonemes. Duration, however, is exactly the sort of property that varies from utterance to utterance, and if it is predicated of the phoneme itself then phonemes become as ephemeral and as numerous as utterances are. The solution is to distinguish two things that ordinary talk of 'sound' conflates: the linguistic item, permanent and unchanging, and the acoustic event, variable and perishable. The first is sphoṭa; the second is dhvani. Duration belongs to the second and is attributed to the first only derivatively, as the rule requires.

This reading has three advantages over the semantic reading. It explains why the term appears where it does — in phonological contexts concerned with duration and substitution, rather than in the Paspasāhnikā's discussion of meaning, where a theory of the indivisible meaning-bearer would have been far more at home. It explains the choice of analogy: the drum-stroke illustrates the relation of a unitary cause to a diffuse perceptual effect, which is an ontological relation, and says nothing whatever about signification. And it makes sense of the company the term keeps, since the epithets applied to śabda in these passages — kūṭastha, avikārin, anutpanna — are the standard vocabulary of permanence, not of meaning.

The reading is not uncontested. Joshi (1967), in the introduction to his edition of Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa's Sphoṭanirṇaya, takes Patañjali's description to be already a recognisable statement of the doctrine, and the tradition of scholarship represented by Coward (1980) and Kunjunni Raja (1963) treats the Bhāṣya passages as the doctrine's first explicit formulation. The disagreement is partly terminological. If 'the sphoṭa doctrine' means no more than the claim that a linguistic unit is distinct from the sounds that manifest it, then Patañjali certainly holds it. If it means the fuller thesis — that the sentence is a partless whole, that its meaning is grasped in a single flash (pratibhā), and that the sequence of phonemes is a mere occasion for that grasp — then he does not state it, and the passages on which the attribution rests will not support it.

There is a further consideration of method. Patañjali's remark is introduced as a response to an objection, within a discussion whose aim is to vindicate a metarule of Pāṇini's. It is, in the terms set out in section two, a move in an argument. Whether it represents Patañjali's settled ontology of language or a device adopted for the local purpose of saving the rule is not something the text settles. Cardona (1988) is accordingly cautious in describing the Bhāṣya's position, and that caution is warranted.

Bhartṛhari's Transformation

Whatever its status in the Bhāṣya, sphoṭa becomes something else entirely in the hands of Bhartṛhari, writing in perhaps the fifth century CE. The Vākyapadīya opens by distinguishing two śabdās known to those who know language: one that is the cause of articulated sounds and one that is employed to convey meaning (*dvāv upādānaśabdeṣu śabdau śabdavidō viduḥ | eko nimittaṃ śabdānām aparō 'rthe prayujyate*, 1.44). The distinction is recognisably continuous with Patañjali's, but the second term has been

redescribed. What was a permanent linguistic item is now explicitly a meaning-bearer, and the question it answers has shifted from 'what exists?' to 'how does language signify?'

Three further innovations follow. First, Bhartṛhari extends the notion upwards. The primary linguistic unit is not the phoneme but the sentence, an indivisible whole — *eko 'navayavaḥ śabdah* — of which words and phonemes are analytical abstractions produced by grammatical method rather than constituents discovered in speech. Padas and varṇas are real enough for the purposes of the grammarian's apoddhāra, his procedure of extraction, but they are not the units in which language is actually given (Houben, 1995; Iyer, 1969).

Second, he supplies an account of apprehension. The hearer does not compute the meaning of the whole from the meanings of the parts; the successive sounds progressively refine an initially indistinct cognition until the sentence-meaning is revealed at once, as an intuitive flash. The theory of pratibhā that carries this account has no counterpart in the Mahābhāṣya.

Third, he articulates the relation between sphaṭa and its manifesting sounds with a precision the earlier text lacks, distinguishing the primary sounds that manifest the unit from the secondary ones responsible for variations of tempo and individual voice. It is here that the material attributed to Vyāḍi is invoked.

The combined effect is to convert a local expedient in phonological argument into the centre of a metaphysics of language, one in which śabda is ultimately identified with brahman and grammar becomes a path to liberation. Bronkhorst (1991) has examined how the resulting notion interacts with Bhartṛhari's treatment of universals; Herzberger (1986) has traced its entanglement with contemporary Buddhist epistemology; Patnaik (1994) offers a synoptic account of the resulting philosophy of śabda; and the studies collected in Bronkhorst and Bhate (1997) survey the wider system. For present purposes the salient point is simply that the transformation is a transformation. Bhartṛhari does not merely expound Patañjali; he redeploys Patañjali's distinction in the service of a question Patañjali did not ask.

Reception, Critique and Retrospective Canonisation

The subsequent history of the concept is largely a history of attacks upon it, and those attacks are instructive because they show which version of the doctrine was under discussion. The Mīmāṃsakas, committed to the eternality of the Veda and hence to some account of linguistic permanence of their own, could not simply dismiss it. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa devoted a section of the Ślokaṁvārttika to refuting sphaṭavāda, arguing that what is alleged to be indivisible at the level of word and sentence is manifestly composed of smaller units, while nonetheless accepting indivisible phonemes — that is, conceding precisely the narrow thesis that the Mahābhāṣya states and rejecting the extension that Bhartṛhari added. Maṇḍana Miśra's Sphaṭasiddhi, unusually, defends the doctrine from within a broadly Mīmāṃsaka framework, arguing that individual sounds cannot convey meaning singly because they do not coexist (Bronkhorst, 2005).

The Naiyāyikas were less accommodating. Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, in the ninth century, rejected both the grammarians' sphaṭa and the Mīmāṃsakas' eternal phonemes, holding that sounds are produced, that they differ from utterance to utterance, and that the relation of word to meaning is conventional. Śaṅkara's discussion under Brahmasūtra 1.3.28 likewise criticises the doctrine while retaining elements of it. Across these debates the object of criticism is consistently the developed, Bhartṛharian sphaṭa; no one argues against Patañjali.

The canonisation of Patañjali as the doctrine's source belongs to the early modern period. After a very long interval in which the philosophy of grammar was little cultivated, Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita in the seventeenth century revived it, and he and his successors Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa and Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa produced the systematic

treatments — the Vaiyākaraṇabhūṣaṇa, the Sphoṭanirṇaya, the Sphoṭavāda — that have shaped subsequent understanding, including that of modern scholarship (Bronkhorst, 2005; Joshi, 1967; Sastri, 1981). The semantic theory in which these treatments are embedded is itself a late medieval construction, drawing on Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā resources unavailable to Patañjali (Deshpande, 1992). It is in these works that sphoṭa is definitively defined as the bearer of meaning and organised into the familiar eightfold scheme of varṇa-, pada- and vākya-sphoṭa, each in jāti and vyakti aspects. It is also in these works, and in the commentarial apparatus surrounding them, that the lineage from Sphoṭāyana through Patañjali is asserted as settled fact. The result is a textbook genealogy that runs in the wrong direction. Modern surveys, drawing on the early modern systematisers, read the Bhāṣya through Nāgeśa; and because Nāgeśa read the Bhāṣya through Bhartṛhari, the doctrine appears to have been there all along. Deshpande (2020) is careful to register Patañjali's contribution in the narrow terms the text supports — fixed sounds as against uttered sounds — and the distinction is worth preserving.

Methodological Implications

Three general lessons follow, and they extend well beyond the case at hand.

The first concerns the evidential status of commentarial attribution. The Sanskrit commentarial tradition is a magnificent instrument of preservation, but it is not a neutral one. A commentator's task is to display the coherence and the authority of the commented text, and the natural way to discharge it is to find in that text whatever the commentator already holds to be true. Attributions of doctrine running backwards along a commentarial chain are therefore evidence of what the later author believed, and only weak evidence of what the earlier author wrote.

The second concerns technical vocabulary. Terms migrate between problems. Sphoṭa in the Bhāṣya does duty in an argument about phonemic duration; in the Vākya-padīya it does duty in an argument about how sentences mean; in Nāgeśa it is a defined term in a scholastic taxonomy. Treating these as three stages in the exposition of one concept, rather than as three related but distinct uses, flattens a history worth having. The corrective is philological: establish where a term occurs, what question it answers there, and what it is contrasted with, before asking what it means (Ogawa, 2005; Scharf, 1996). The same discipline has proved necessary for other terms of the tradition, notably jāti and ākṛti, where a comparable drift between phonological, semantic and metaphysical employments can be documented (Staal, 1988).

The third concerns the dialogical form of the Bhāṣya itself. Because the work argues rather than asserts, the recovery of Patañjali's own commitments from it is always an inference, and the strength of that inference varies with the passage. A remark introduced by evaṃ tarhi to resolve a local objection is weaker evidence of settled doctrine than a position defended at length against articulated opposition. Distinguishing the two is not scepticism but ordinary philological care, and it is precisely the care that the standard genealogy of sphoṭa has not received.

Conclusion

The Mahābhāṣya's contribution to the Indian philosophy of language is real, substantial and somewhat different from the one usually credited to it. Patañjali distinguishes, with clarity and with a memorable analogy, between the linguistic unit and the acoustic event that manifests it; he defends the permanence of the former against the variability of the latter; and he does so in order to make sense of a metarule about phonemic duration. That distinction is the durable achievement, and it is the seed from which everything later grows.

What he does not do is identify that unit as the bearer of meaning, extend it to the word or the sentence, or offer an account of how meaning is apprehended. Those moves belong to Bhartṛhari, three or four centuries later, and their systematic elaboration belongs to Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita and his school more than a millennium after that. The familiar lineage from Sphoṭāyana through Patañjali to Bhartṛhari is not so much false as anachronistic in its emphasis: it presents as a single unfolding what was in fact a series of appropriations, each answering a question its predecessor had not posed.

Recognising this does not diminish the Mahābhāṣya. It restores to Patañjali an argument of his own, conducted for reasons of his own, rather than casting him as an incomplete Bhartṛhari. It also restores to Bhartṛhari the originality that the traditional genealogy quietly takes from him. For the historian of Indian thought, the episode is a reminder that a tradition's account of its own continuity is itself a historical artefact — one of the most interesting it produces, and one that must be studied rather than simply believed.

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