The Relationship Between Śabda (Word) And Vākya (Sentence) In Ancient Indian Linguistics

Dr. Subhashree Priyadarsani

Lect. in Sanskrit, Ekamra College, Bbhubaneswar

Abstract- **The study of language has occupied a central position in the Indian intellectual tradition, where linguistic analysis is closely intertwined with logic, epistemology, hermeneutics, and metaphysics. A fundamental issue in this tradition is the relationship between *śabda* (word) and *vākya* (sentence), since theories of meaning depend on whether semantic primacy is assigned to individual words or to the sentence as a whole. This paper examines the major classical Indian perspectives on the word–sentence relationship, drawing on the traditions of *Vyākaraṇa, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā,* and especially in *Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya*. It discusses how Pāṇinian grammar views śabda as a rule-governed linguistic unit and how *Mīmāṃsā* advances a more holistic account through the theory of *anvitābhidhāna.* The study then highlights Bhartṛhari's radical holistic theory, which posits the sentence as the primary unit of meaning and introduces the doctrine of *sphoṭa* to explain the instantaneous apprehension of meaning. By comparing these approaches, the paper demonstrates the richness and philosophical depth of Indian linguistic thought and shows how the debate over śabda and vākya culminates in Bhartṛhari's non-dual vision of language, cognition, and reality.**

Keywords: Śabda, Vākya, Vākyapadīya, Bhartṛhari, Sphoṭa, Śābdabodha, Indian Philosophy of Language, Vyākaraṇa, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Anvitābhidhāna

I. INTRODUCTION

Language study has always been important in the Indian intellectual tradition. In this tradition, the study of words and sentences is closely connected to logic, knowledge theory, interpretation, and metaphysics. The main focus is the relationship between *śabda* (word) and *vākya* (sentence), because meaning depends on how this relationship is explained. A word is usually seen as a meaningful unit, and a sentence as a group of words, but Indian thinkers saw deeper ideas behind these definitions. They asked whether meaning comes from single words or from the whole sentence, whether a sentence is just a collection of words or something with its own independent existence, whether we understand a sentence step by step or all at once, and how Bhartṛhari's idea of *sphoṭa* explains the sudden moment of understanding. These questions show the richness of the Indian linguistic tradition. This article looks at the main classical views on how scholars understood the connection between words and sentences and how they explained sentence meaning.

The Concept of Śabda: Word as a Linguistic and Metaphysical Unit

The term *śabda* in Indian tradition refers not only to the spoken word but also to sound as a metaphysical principle. Its meaning varies across traditions.

- Pāṇinian View of *Śabda*

In Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, a *śabda* is defined structurally—as a form generated through rules. Words (*pada*) are produced by adding affixes to bases (*prakṛti + pratyaya*). Meaning is tied to the derivational process (*prakriyā*).In this system, the word is not viewed metaphysically but functionally, as an entity produced by rule-governed operations. Its relation to a sentence is syntactically determined.

- The *Mīmāṃsā* View of *Śabda*

Mīmāṃsā philosophy has contributed a lot to the study of *śābdabodha,* or verbal cognition. This school accepts the complete authority of the Vedas, which are considered to be Śabda. Therefore, *śabda-pramāṇa* is one of the most important sources of valid knowledge in *Mīmāṃsā.* They consider śabda-pramāṇa mainly in the form of a sentence. *Śabara*, the author of the *Bhāṣya* on the Mīmāṃsā Sūtras, says: "*śāstram śabdavijñānād asannikṛṣṭe 'rthe vijñānam"* [1] He

explains this by saying: *"yaḥ śabdaḥ svaviṣayaka-jñānena mānāntara-prāptābādhita-arthajñānaṃ janayati sa pramāṇam."[2]*

- *Śabda* according to Patanjali

According to Patañjali in the *Mahābhāṣya*, it is said that Śabda in ordinary usage is also called *sound*, as in the line: *"athavā prātipadikārtho loke śabdaḥ dhvanir iti ucyate, tasmāt dhvaniḥ śabdaḥ."* But Patañjali also explains that before speaking, a person first forms an idea in the mind, and this idea is also treated as Śabda by Sanskrit grammarians. We find this in the *Mahābhāṣya* when Patañjali defines śabda as: *"yenoccāritena śaśna-kakuda-khura-viṣāṇināṃ sampratyayaḥ bhavati saḥ śabdaḥ [3]."* Here, *sampratyaya* means the idea that appears in the listener's mind, and this idea is called śabda. Without such inner ideas, speech would not be possible. At this stage, language takes on a philosophical meaning. Therefore, we can study śabda or language from two sides: the practical side of communication and the deeper side of philosophy. Both these views have attracted scholars and linguists.

- Bhartṛharian view of *Śabda*

Bhartṛhari, an Indian philosopher and grammarian, gives a special view of *Śabda* in his work *Vākyapadīya*. His ideas are different from earlier grammarians like *Patañjali*. He introduces *sphoṭa*, which is an indivisible, sudden flash of meaning that happens in the listener's mind when a word or sentence is heard. According to him, meaning does not come from individual sounds or words; it is understood all at once in a single act of cognition.

Bhartṛhari also sees *Śabda* in a philosophical way. He believes it is closely connected to thought and reality. Language is not just a human tool; it reflects the true nature of reality, or Brahman.

The Concept of *Vākya*: The Sentence as the Unit of Meaning

Indian linguistic philosophy, a *vākya* (sentence) is seen not just as a sequence of words but as a meaningful whole that conveys a complete idea, called *ekārthībhāva*. Words carry partial meanings, but only together in a sentence do they express a full thought. For example, "The cow is grazing" conveys a single idea that cannot be understood by looking at each word separately. Philosophers like Bhartṛhari explain that sentence meaning is grasped all at once in the mind, highlighting the close link between language, thought, and cognition. Thus, a sentence is studied not only grammatically but also semantically and philosophically.

- Sentence according to the schools of vyakarana

In the science of Grammar the early Preceptors *pāṇini, kātyāyana and patañjali* also known as *Trimuni* stated some aspect of sentences in their works. Pāṇini pointed out his views on sentence in two occasions in *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. He refers to the term *Vākya* in the Aphorism *"vākyasya ṭeḥ pluta udāttaḥ"[4]*. The whole Idea of Panini about sentence can be traced in the Aphorism *'samarthaḥ padavidhiḥ"[5]* Patanjali states that the word *Samarthya* denotes *vyapekṣā* or connection pertaining to the meaning *"pṛthagarthānām ekārthibhavaḥ sāmarthyam"*. Pāṇini intends to say that the words are capable of forming either a sentence or a compound. When words posse *"ekārthibhavaḥ sāmarthyam"* or the capability of giving a unified sense, they could make compound words, losing their individual meanings and acquire a special signification. kātyāyana was also known as *Vakyakara*). Who defines sentence in two perspectives as *"ekatinvakyam"* and *"ākhyātam sāvyayakārakaviśeṣaṇam vākyam"*.

- *Mīmāṃsā* Theory of *Vākya*

Mīmāṃsā is the oldest system among the Indian Schools of thought, that tries to define a sentence. As stated, an early simple definition is seen in *bṛhaddevatā* , one of the ancient works in *Mīmāṃsā (*2.117). It is in the *Mīmāṃsā sūtra* of *Jaimini* that we first come across the real definition of a sentence. He states that *"arthaikatvād ekam vākyam sākānkṣam cedvibhāge syāt"[6]* which can be explained as, a groupof words serving a single purpose forms a sentence, if on analysis, the separate words are found to have *ākāṅkṣā* or mutual expectancy.

- Bhartṛhari's Holistic Theory of vakya

Bharttṛhari analyses language in three levels viz. absolute level, communicative level and analytic level. which is beyond shape, time and qualities. Word is representative of ultimate truth. According to *Bharttṛhari –*

anādinidhanaṃ brahma śabdatattvaṃ yadakṣaram ǀ

vivartate'rthabhāvena prakriyā jagato yataḥ ǁ [7]

Language is the medium of communicating Ideas. When we communicate,we convey whole thoughts, not scattered fragments.Therefore Language must have a complete unit capable of expressing full idea. In Analytic level *Bharttṛhari* accepts the sentence as the unit of language. He mentions that language can be analysed into its various parts, for the purpose of studying grammar. After *Trimuni* of Sanskrit Grammar, *Bharttṛhari* was the great grammarian and philosopher who discovered the depth and breadth of Sanskrit Grammar, In the First two verses of *Vākyakānda* of *vākyapadīya Bharttṛhari* enumerates eight different views about sentence held by ancient thinkers.

ākhyātaṃ śabdasaṃghāto jātiḥ saṃghātavartinī ǀ

eko'navayavaḥ śabdaḥ kramo buddhyanusaṃhṛtiḥ ǁ [8]

padaṃ ādyaṃ pṛthaksarvaṃ padaṃ sāpekṣaṃ ityapi ǀ

vākyaṃ prati matirbhinnā bahudhā nyāyadarśinām ǁ. [9]

Sentence may be defined as the Verb, the collection of words, the one indivisible word, the sequence of words, the unification of the mind, the first word and each word requiring the others. *Saṃghāta* means collection of something or it means a group of words. Sentence is *Saṃghāta*or group of words. *Kramaḥ Vākyam means* sentence is nothing but the 'sequence' of words. Bh gives a clear picture of this definition in this verse:

santa eva viśeṣā ye padārtheṣvavibhāvitāḥ ǀ

te kramādanugamyante na vākyaṃ abhidhāyakam ǁ. [10]

Bharttṛhari puts forth the view that *ākhyāto śabdaḥ* or the verb can be called a sentence. He explains this in the verse:

vākyaṃ tadapi manyante yatpadaṃ caritakriyam ǀ

antareṇa kriyāśabdaṃ vākyāderdvitvadarśanāt ǁ [11]

According to Bharttṛhari the word *ākhyāto* signifies not verb but an idea of action should be present there. A word does not convey its individual meaning in the sentence, though it seems to be the same as in another expression. It conveys a meaning as connected with the other words in the expression. Thus*Padamādyaṃ Vākyaṃ* means the first word in a sentence can also be treated as a sentence. Bharttṛhari introduces that a sentence is not formed by the mere aggregation of words. A sentence is an indivisible unit of language. It is for the sake of convenience as well as for facilitating our learning and understanding of a language, that we split the indivisible sentence into smaller parts called words and phonemes.

The Word–Sentence Debate in Classical Indian Thought

Nyāya explains sentence meaning through a compositional theory, according to which the meanings of individual words combine step by step to generate sentence meaning by means of denotation (abhidhā), secondary meaning (lakṣaṇā), and implication (vyañjanā), with syntactic relations playing a crucial role. In contrast, *Mīmāṃsā,* particularly through the doctrine of *anvitābhidhāna,* adopts a more holistic stance, holding that words do not convey isolated meanings but acquire significance only in their connected use within a sentence; thus, a word like *"go"* in the injunction "Bring the cow" has no independent semantic value apart from the sentence as a whole. Bhartṛhari's theory in the *Vākyapadīya* is the most radical form of holism, asserting that sentence meaning is primary, that words are merely unreal analytical divisions of an indivisible linguistic whole, and that meaning arises instantaneously as sphoṭa. He further distinguishes between varṇa-sphoṭa (phoneme-level), pada-sphoṭa (word-level), and *vākya*-sphoṭa (sentence-level), with vākya-sphoṭa being the highest and most complete manifestation of meaning.

Śabda and *Vākya* in the *Vākyapadīya*

In Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya*, the relationship between *Śabda* and *Vākya* is explained through the doctrine of Sphoṭa, according to which the sentence is the primary unit of meaning. Bhartṛhari holds that meaning is not produced by individual words taken separately but is apprehended as an indivisible whole at the level of the sentence (vākya-sphoṭa). Words (śabda) do not possess independent meaning; they are mentally abstracted from the sentence for purposes of

grammatical and logical analysis. The comprehension of meaning occurs through pratibhā, an intuitive flash in which the complete sentence-meaning is revealed at once. Ultimately, Bhartṛhari maintains the non-duality of śabda, vākya, and artha, all of which are manifestations of the single Śabda-tattva. Thus, in the *Vākyapadīya*, śabda is dependent on *Vākya*, and the sentence alone is the true bearer of meaning.

II. CONCLUSION

The relationship between śabda (word) and vākya (sentence) occupies a central place in classical Indian linguistic and philosophical thought. Different schools approached this relationship from distinct perspectives, shaped by their broader concerns with logic, epistemology, ritual interpretation, and metaphysics. While early grammatical traditions such as *Pāṇini's Vyākaraṇa* treated words as rule-generated units whose meaning emerges through syntactic and derivational processes, *Mīmāṃsā,* especially through the doctrine of *anvitābhidhāna,* moved toward a holistic view by emphasizing that words acquire meaning only within the sentential context and that verbal cognition primarily arises from the sentence. The most comprehensive and philosophically radical account, however, is offered by *Bhartṛhari* in the *Vākyapadīya*. According to him, the sentence is not a mere aggregation of words but an indivisible linguistic whole, and meaning is grasped instantaneously through sphoṭa by an act of *pratibhā*.

REFERENCE

[1] *Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini*. (2016). Ed. Gopal Dutt Pandey. Varanasi:Chaukhamba Surabharati Prakashan.

[2] *Jaiminipraṇitam Mīmāsā dar śanam.* (1972). with the *Bhāṣya* of śabara.Poona: Anandasram Sanskrit Series.

[3] *Vākyapadīya of* Bhartṛhari (1965). Ed. K V Abhyankar, V P Limaye.Poona: Univesrity of Poona Sanskrit and Prakrit Series.

[4] *Vākyapadīya*m Part II,*Vākyakāṇdam* (1980). with the comm.*Ambkākrtrī* by Raghunātha Sarmā. Varanasi: SampurnanandSanskrit University.

[5] *Vākyapadīya*m *of* Bhartṛhari (*Brahmakāṇdam*). (2007). with the comm.*Pratibha* by Vamdev Acharya. Ed. Satyanarayan Shastri Khanduri.Varanasi: Chowkhamba Krishnadas Academy.

[6] Jha, Dhanurdhara. (2002). *Vākyārthavivecanam*. Delhi: Nag Publishers

[7] Kieth, A B. (1928). *A History of Sanskrit Literature*. Oxford: Oxford university Press.

[8] Mīmāṃsaka, Yudhiṣṭhira. (1973). *Saṃskṛta Vyākaraṇa śastra kā itihāsa* Sonepat: Ram Lal Kapur Trust.

[9] Rath, Gayatri. (2000). *Linguistic Philosophy in Vākyapadīya*. Delhi:Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan.

[10] *Vākyapadīya of* Bhartṛhari (*kāṇda* II). (1983). containing the *Tīkā* ofPuṇyarāja and the Ancient Vṛtti. Ed. K A Subramania Iyer. Delhi:Motilal Banarsidass.

---

[1] Jaimini 1.1.5

[2] *Mīmāṃsā sūtra 1.1.5*

[3] *Mahābhāṣya* paspasahnika

[4] P.8.2.2

[5] P.2.1.1

[6] *Mīmāṃsā sūtra 2.146*

[7] V.P.1.1

[8] V.P.2.1

[9] V..P.2.2

[10] V.P.2.49

[11] V.P.2.325