

THE CONCEPT OF ŚABDABRAHMA: LANGUAGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND NON-DUAL REALITY IN BHARTṚHARI'S VĀKYAPADĪYA

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ABSTRACT

Śabdabrahma, the identification of language (śabda) with the ultimate metaphysical principle (Brahman), is a key concept in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya. It signifies a profound shift in understanding the relationship between language, thought, and reality. This paper critically examines the ontological, linguistic, and philosophical aspects of śabda as the Absolute, viewing it not only as a means of expression but also as the essence of being, cognition, and consciousness. Bhartṛhari challenges the traditional distinction between word and world by presenting śabda as an indivisible, self-manifesting reality from which all phenomena arise. Through analysing the Sphoṭa doctrine, the fourfold expression of vāk - Parā, Paśyantī, Madhyamā, and Vaikharī – and his critique of atomistic and referential linguistic models, the study presents Bhartṛhari's vision of language as both immanent and transcendent. In this perspective, śabda functions as both a pramāṇa (a valid source of knowledge) and a prameya (the object of knowledge), thus blurring the boundaries between epistemology and ontology. Using primary texts, classical commentaries, and comparative analysis with Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Advaita Vedānta, the paper asserts that Bhartṛhari's concept of Śabdabrahma anticipates a non-dualistic semiotic metaphysics where actualising the ultimate truth involves recognising language as the foundation of all existence.

Keywords: Śabdabrahma, Vākyapadīya, Sphoṭa, Advaita, Sabda-tattva, Sabda-vāda, Para, Pasyanti, Madhyama and Vaikharī.

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INTRODUCTION

In the vast and complex landscape of Indian philosophical traditions, śabda - meaning word, speech, and language - emerges as a category of profound epistemological and metaphysical importance. Unlike many Western philosophical models, where language is often viewed as a secondary tool - used to express cognition or represent a reality believed to exist independently of

linguistic mediation - Indian thought grants śabda an autonomous and primary status. It is recognised as an independent *pramāṇa* (means of valid knowledge) alongside *pratyakṣa* (perception) and *anumāna* (inference), especially within the Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta schools. In these systems, śabda is understood as *nitya* (eternal), *svataḥ-pramāṇa* (self-validating), and *apauruṣeya* (non-human and authorless), thus acquiring an ontological significance that goes beyond its semantic or grammatical function. The Vedas, as the quintessential example of such śabda, are regarded as inherently authoritative, not because of any external validation, but because they reveal a cosmic order that is neither created nor limited by time. In this context, language becomes more than just a medium of signification; it is a metaphysical force, an ontological principle intertwined with consciousness, reality, and the perception of the Absolute.

It is within this intellectual and spiritual framework that Bhartṛhari (c. 5th century CE) holds a crucial position. As a philosopher and grammarian within the lineage of Pāṇini and Patañjali, Bhartṛhari develops a vision of language that combines linguistic investigation with metaphysical depth. His important work, the *Vākyapadīya*, presents a broad doctrine, Śabdabrahma, that asserts śabda is not merely a cognitive or communicative tool but is identical with Brahman, the undivided, all-pervading, non-dual reality. For Bhartṛhari, language is not an addition to a pre-existing world; rather, it is the very foundation through which the world is created and understood. In this metaphysical view, the cosmos does not come into existence through language but as language-śabda-in its most original and unmanifest form.

The *Vākyapadīya*, composed of concise *kārikās* (aphorisms) and later expanded upon by commentators such as Helārāja and Punyarāja, is organised into three main sections: the *Brahma Kāṇḍa*, which investigates the ultimate nature of language and reality; the *Vākya Kāṇḍa*, which examines sentence structure and semantics; and the *Prakīrṇa Kāṇḍa*, which deals with various philosophical and linguistic issues. It is within the *Brahma Kāṇḍa* that Bhartṛhari asserts his most radical metaphysical claim: that in its unmanifest, undivided essence, śabda is identical with Brahman. This profound equivalence transforms language from a cognitive tool into a cosmological principle, thereby grounding all knowledge and existence in a fundamentally non-dualistic ontology.

This paper provides a thorough and critical examination of the concept of Śabdabrahma as developed in the *Vākyapadīya*. It investigates how Bhartṛhari perceives language as the ontological basis of reality, the epistemic means of knowledge, and the Absolute itself. By analysing key concepts such as *sphoṭa*, the fourfold expression of *vāk* (*Parā*, *Paśyantī*, *Madhyamā*, *Vaikhārī*), and Bhartṛhari's critique of atomistic and referentialist linguistic models, the study situates his ideas within the wider context of Indian philosophical traditions, including Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Advaita Vedānta. Ultimately, it contends that Bhartṛhari's conception of Śabdabrahma presents a non-dualistic semiotic ontology where language is not merely a signifier of reality but its very ontological foundation.

BHARTRIHARI'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

Bhartṛhari is a pivotal figure in the Indian philosophical and grammatical tradition, offering a profound and unified perspective on language that seamlessly combines ontology, epistemology, and semiotics. His major work, the *Vākyapadīya*, composed in metrical *kārikās*, extends beyond merely technical grammar to serve as a comprehensive philosophical examination of the nature of linguistic signification, cognitive understanding, and the metaphysical foundations of reality. In Bhartṛhari's view, grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) is not simply a descriptive or normative science but a means to access the fundamental ground of existence itself.

The *Vākyapadīya* is divided into three principal *kāṇḍas*, each exploring a different yet interconnected aspect of language. The first, the *Brahma Kāṇḍa*, articulates Bhartṛhari's most radical metaphysical claim: śabda (language or word) is Brahman, the indivisible, non-dual reality that underlies all phenomena. In this ontological perspective, language is not just a human creation imposed upon a pre-linguistic world; instead, it is the fundamental principle through which existence

is made visible and comprehensible. Śabda is therefore both the essence and the expression of reality, the very fabric through which existence is manifested.

The second division, the Vākya Kāṇḍa, explores the linguistic and semantic structure of meaning, focusing on the sentence (vākya) as the central unit of signification. Moving away from atomistic theories that emphasise individual words or phonemes, Bhartṛhari affirms the holistic nature of meaning (vākya-arthatva), which arises not from the sum of its parts but as a complete semantic entity perceived in a single, unified cognitive act. This focus on syntactical totality reflects his broader philosophical commitment to the unity of thought, language, and reality.

The Prakīrṇa Kāṇḍa, the third and final part, examines a wide range of grammatical, logical, and philosophical topics. It critically engages with other schools of Indian thought, including Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya, and discusses the functional and classificatory aspects of language. Through these debates, Bhartṛhari stresses that linguistic analysis cannot be separated from metaphysical enquiry, and that grammar, rather than being a minor discipline, is an essential form of philosophical reflection.

At the core of Bhartṛhari's philosophy is the concept of sphoṭa, an unmanifested, unchanging linguistic entity through which meaning is immediately understood. Unlike dhvani (sound), which is fleeting and subject to change, sphoṭa is the indivisible semantic essence that transcends phonetic differences. It acts as the mediating principle between sound and meaning, and between language and thought, symbolising the eternal and universal nature of śabda.

Complementing this is Bhartṛhari's doctrine of vāk, or speech, which he theorises as progressing through four levels: Parā (transcendental and unmanifest), Paśyantī (visual or intuitive), Madhyamā (mental or ideational), and Vaikharī (spoken or externalised). These stages trace the descent of language from its subtle origin in pure consciousness to its concrete expression, thereby mapping an ontological continuum from the Absolute to empirical utterance.

For Bhartṛhari, then, language is not just a means of representation or communication but the very foundation of being and knowledge. It is simultaneously epistemic - allowing the understanding of reality - and ontological - forming the reality it uncovers. To know śabda, in his system, is not merely to know about the world, but to experience the world in its most fundamental and unmediated form.

ŚABDABRAHMA: THE METAPHYSICAL GROUND OF LANGUAGE

The term Śabdabrahma, derived from Sanskrit words śabda (meaning "word," "sound," or "language") and Brahma (the Absolute, the all-encompassing, non-dual reality), signifies the identification of language with the ultimate reality. In Bhartṛhari's philosophical system, Śabdabrahma is not a metaphorical or poetic phrase but a profound ontological assertion that transforms the understanding of reality by emphasising the primacy of language. Here, śabda is not regarded as a mere derivative or a simple instrument for thought and cognition but as the fundamental, constitutive principle of existence itself. It functions both as the means through which reality is understood and as the very foundation from which it originates.

Bhartṛhari sees śabda as serving both as nimitta-kāraṇa (instrumental cause) and upādāna-kāraṇa (material cause) of knowledge. As nimitta, śabda supports perception, shapes understanding, and structures discursive cognition. It enables communication, constructs meaning, and sustains the intersubjective realm of experience. However, Bhartṛhari's view on śabda extends beyond its cognitive function; as upādāna, it forms the ontological foundation of all manifestation. The world is not merely named or described by language - it is ontologically brought into existence through it. In this dual role, śabda becomes both the vessel and substance of reality, uniting epistemology with metaphysics in a single, inseparable manner.

This metaphysical elevation of śabda reaches its peak in Bhartṛhari's non-dualistic ontology, where śabda is identified with Brahman - the infinite, undivided, and self-luminous ground of all that exists. This identification challenges traditional representational theories of language, which suggest a

gap between linguistic signs and the realities they depict. In Bhartṛhari's perspective, śabda is not merely a symbolic structure pointing towards reality; it is the Absolute in its most subtle and unmanifest form. All differentiation - names, categories, and forms - arises from the vibrational unfolding of śabda. The phenomenal world is thus not separate from language but is its temporal and spatial expression.

While Bhartṛhari's theory of Śabdabrahma aligns with Vedic and Upaniṣadic insights, it differs considerably from Advaita Vedānta, especially as explained by Śaṅkara. In Advaita, Brahman is nirguṇa (without attributes), nirvikalpa (beyond all distinctions), and ultimately inexpressible by language. Language (śabda) is used solely to negate conceptual ideas, as in the *neti neti* ("not this, not this") method for addressing the ineffable. Śaṅkara emphasises the silence beyond speech. Conversely, Bhartṛhari does not propose a reality that exceeds language but rather finds the Absolute within language itself in its most refined, pre-conceptual, and unmanifested form. His concept of śabda includes not just spoken words but the deepest ontological rhythm of existence.

In this framework, Śabdabrahma serves both as the foundation of existence and the means of understanding. Language is not merely a bridge to reality; it is reality in its most fundamental form. Bhartṛhari therefore presents a radical non-dualistic semiotic ontology in which language and the Absolute are ontologically inseparable.

THE ONTOLOGY OF ŚABDA: VĀK AND SPOTA

At the heart of Bhartṛhari's linguistic metaphysics lies a subtle and deeply ontological understanding of śabda (language), articulated through two interconnected theoretical frameworks: the fourfold expression of vāk (speech) and the doctrine of sphoṭa. These are not merely linguistic or grammatical models but metaphysical paradigms that expose the connection between consciousness, linguistic expression, and the fabric of reality. Together, they underpin Bhartṛhari's argument that śabda is not just a tool for representation or communication but the fundamental ontological basis of existence - *nitya* (eternal), *akhaṇḍa* (indivisible), and *svayamprakāśa* (self-luminous).

Bhartṛhari's theory of vāk conceptualises speech as a four-tiered ontological process that traces the descent of śabda from its origin in undifferentiated consciousness to its final, externalised form. The most subtle and primordial level is *Parā*, which exists in the latent, unmanifest realm of pure awareness, where no distinction exists between the knower, the known, and the means of knowledge. *Parā* is pure potentiality, the undivided ground from which all forms of expression emerge. The second level, *Paśyantī* ("that which sees"), signifies the intuitive stage of ideation, where conceptual differentiation begins to take shape, although the experience remains holistic and non-discursive. The third level, *Madhyamā*, corresponds to the mental or ideational formulation of thought, where language acquires a structured but internal form, still unspoken. Lastly, *Vaikhārī* represents the external, articulated expression of speech, manifesting as audible sound through physical utterance. This gradational model reflects Bhartṛhari's fundamental conviction that language is not imposed upon reality but unfolds from consciousness into the empirical world as a continuous ontological process.

Complementing this theory is Bhartṛhari's seminal doctrine of sphoṭa, which explores the phenomenology of linguistic meaning. Sphoṭa refers to the invariant, indivisible, and eternal essence of a linguistic unit - whether a word (*pada*), sentence (*vākya*), or larger discourse - that is grasped in a singular and instantaneous act of cognition. Unlike *dhvani* (sound), which is temporal, perishable, and subject to change, sphoṭa is universal and unchanging. It represents the moment of revelation through which meaning emerges fully and simultaneously, transcending the linear sequence of phonetic articulation. Bhartṛhari's theory directly challenges atomistic models of meaning - particularly those supported by the Nyāya school - which claim that meaning develops incrementally through the syntactic accumulation of discrete linguistic elements. Instead, he advocates for a holistic approach where the sphoṭa precedes and underpins all phonetic realisation.

Within this framework, śabda is seen as a constant and eternal principle that does not originate anew with each utterance but endures as the metaphysical foundation from which all linguistic and cognitive activity arises. Bhartṛhari's critique of atomistic and reductionist theories is rooted in the recognition that they fail to explain the immediacy, totality, and self-revealing nature of linguistic cognition. In his view, śabda is not a collection of parts but an ontological whole - a self-manifesting reality that underpins both language and the world it discloses.

ŚABDABRAHMA AND THE REALISATION OF MEANING

Within Bhartṛhari's philosophical framework, śabda is not merely a functional instrument of cognition or a tool for interpersonal communication. Instead, it is the foundational matrix through which consciousness is constituted and liberation (mokṣa) becomes attainable. His conception of śabda goes beyond utilitarian or representational paradigms to establish it as a metaphysical and soteriological principle. Language is not external to the processes of knowing and being; it is inseparable from them. Through śabda, the finite self-navigates the world of multiplicity and, in doing so, gradually attunes itself to the realisation of its non-dual identity with the Absolute.

Bhartṛhari places language at the heart of both empirical knowledge and spiritual insight. On one level, śabda structures perception, organises conceptual thought, and supports discursive understanding. On a deeper level, it functions as the medium through which the substratum of reality - the indivisible ground of being - is revealed. In this dual role, language is not simply the vehicle of consciousness but its very foundation. The transition from differentiated awareness (as expressed in *vaikharī vāk*) to the undivided, pre-linguistic realisation (linked with *parā vāk*) reflects Bhartṛhari's view of liberation as a transformative journey. Herein lies the yogic function of śabda: śābdabodha (verbal cognition) is not an end in itself, but a disciplined method for transcending discursivity and attaining direct, non-conceptual awareness of the Absolute.

This spiritual journey is further clarified through Bhartṛhari's understanding of śabda as both *pramāṇa* (means of valid knowledge) and *prameya* (object of knowledge). As *pramāṇa*, śabda takes epistemological precedence, especially concerning metaphysical and spiritual truths. The Vedic śabda, described as *apauruṣeya* (non-human and eternal), is regarded as free from subjective fallibility or historical limitations, making it an authoritative and infallible source of knowledge. Language, in this context, does not merely denote objects or transmit propositions; it unveils the fundamental principles that underpin reality itself. Through śābdabodha, the aspirant perceives not only the multiplicity of the world but also the indivisible essence that sustains and transcends it. Simultaneously, śabda is also *prameya* - that which must be known and ultimately realised. In Bhartṛhari's ontology, perceiving śabda in its most subtle, unmanifest form entails understanding Brahman itself. The journey towards this realisation involves a contemplative withdrawal from the outward, articulated forms of speech (*vaikharī*) towards the inner, formless source of all expression (*parā*). This inward progression is not solely epistemological; it is ontological — a reabsorption into the fundamental unity from which both language and existence originate.

Thus, in Bhartṛhari's thought, Śabdabrahma is not merely a theoretical idea but a lived and personal reality. Language acts as both the route and the reflection, and ultimately, the illumination through which the self-recognises its true nature and merges into the non-dual fullness of the Absolute.

THE COMPARATIVE AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Bhartṛhari's doctrine of Śabdabrahma has inspired lasting and wide-ranging engagement across classical Indian philosophical systems as well as contemporary scholarly research. His daring identification of śabda (language) with Brahman (the Absolute)—a claim that ascribes both ontological and epistemological importance to language—has prompted reactions such as rejection, revision, assimilation, and reinterpretation. These responses come not only from primary classical schools like *Mīmāṃsā* and *Nyāya* but also from influential post-classical thinkers including

Abhinavagupta and Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa, as well as from modern scholars working at the crossroads of Indian and Western linguistic and philosophical traditions.

In the Mīmāṃsā school, śabda is also recognised as nitya (eternal) and apauruṣeya (non-human in origin), especially in relation to the Vedas. Nevertheless, the Mīmāṃsakas mainly interpret language through its ritualistic and prescriptive roles. For them, śabda chiefly functions as codanā—a performative directive embedded in Vedic injunctions, intended to guide actions and uphold dharma. While they agree with Bhartṛhari on the self-validating nature of language (svataḥ-prāmāṇya), they do not accept his metaphysical assertion that śabda forms the very foundation of being. Their emphasis remains on epistemic and pragmatic aspects rather than on ontological or speculative ones.

The Nyāya school presents a contrasting, atomistic perspective of language and meaning. Nyāya philosophers argue that linguistic understanding results from the sequential combination of discrete units - *padārthas* (word-meanings) - linked by syntactic and semantic rules. They explicitly oppose Bhartṛhari's sphoṭa theory, which asserts that meaning is grasped instantaneously and holistically through an indivisible linguistic unit. For Nyāya, meaning is constructed step-by-step through linear analysis. Bhartṛhari criticises this compositional model as inadequate, claiming that it fails to account for the immediacy and unity characteristic of real linguistic cognition. In his view, sphoṭa is the indivisible, timeless, and cognitively apprehended core of language that transcends its phonetic vehicle.

Post-classical thinkers such as Abhinavagupta and Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa engaged more deeply with Bhartṛhari's linguistic metaphysics. Abhinavagupta, blending Bhartṛhari's ideas with the non-dualistic Kashmir Śaivism framework, introduces the concept of śabda as a revealing force that uncovers both the self and the Absolute, particularly through aesthetic and poetic experiences. Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa, a prominent figure in Navya-Nyāya and grammatical traditions, values the internal consistency of the sphoṭa theory but avoids endorsing Bhartṛhari's ontological monism, choosing to interpret it within more epistemically limited terms.

In the modern era, Bhartṛhari's ideas have garnered significant attention from scholars such as B.K. Matilal, who locates his thoughts within the global philosophy of language, draws comparisons with holistic trends in Western analytic and continental traditions, while also acknowledging internal tensions. Daniel Ingalls underscores Bhartṛhari's originality in unifying language and cognition into a single, coherent process. Kunjunni Raja and Kapil Kapoor have further positioned Bhartṛhari's work within the Indian intellectual tradition, with Kapoor in particular emphasising the vital role of śabda in Indian epistemology and semiotics.

Therefore, Bhartṛhari's concept of Śabdabrahma continues to inspire critical discussion across disciplinary, historical, and cultural lines. By proposing a non-dualistic ontology of language in which linguistic, cognitive, and metaphysical aspects are deeply interconnected, Bhartṛhari offers a radical and enduring alternative to both atomistic and dualistic views of meaning and reality.

CONCLUSION

Bhartṛhari's concept of Śabdabrahma presents a radical redefinition of the connection between language, cognition, and reality. His philosophical framework does not treat language (śabda), thought (citta), and being (sattā) as separate ontological entities but as interwoven expressions of a single, non-dual principle. Through his detailed explanation of the sphoṭa theory, the four levels of vāk, and the metaphysical elevation of śabda as both the foundation and the objective of all experience, Bhartṛhari constructs a conceptual model where language is not merely a tool but an ontological reality - it is the medium through which the universe unveils itself and through which consciousness recognises its primordial unity with the Absolute. Śabdabrahma, within this framework, is not metaphorical but metaphysical: eternal (nitya), indivisible (akhaṇḍa), and self-luminous (svayamprakāśa) - the Ekam eva advitīyam, or "One without a second."

This study aims to explore the multidimensional richness of Bhartṛhari's linguistic metaphysics, especially his idea of śabda as both *pramāṇa* (a valid means of knowing) and *prameya* (the object of ultimate realisation). His non-dualistic framework rejects the atomism of the Nyāya tradition and the ritual-functionalism of Mīmāṃsā, instead proposing a hermeneutic and ontological unity where language is not added onto the world but constitutes its very fabric. The shift from *vaikharī* (gross, articulated speech) to *parā* (pure, unmanifest speech) symbolises the inward journey of consciousness towards its unconditioned foundation—a journey that is both epistemological and salvific. To attain Śabdabrahma is not merely to understand language, but to dissolve into the formless foundation of being that language itself reveals.

Bhartṛhari's thought, therefore, extends beyond simple grammatical theory and actively engages in ongoing dialogue with semiotics, metaphysics, and spiritual practice. His *sphoṭa* theory, conceived as a holistic, instant flash of meaning, anticipates specific trends in cognitive science and phenomenology that challenge reductionist and compositional views of linguistic understanding. In this context, Bhartṛhari offers not just a classical Indian perspective but also a philosophically rigorous alternative to dominant Western models of language and mind. Furthermore, the conceptual depth of Śabdabrahma presents promising opportunities for future research in literary theory, aesthetics, and performance. Bhartṛhari's insights provide a fresh perspective on poetics and aesthetic experience, spanning from symbolic representation to ontological revelation. In *rasa*, in poetic utterance, and the embodied moment of performance, śabda is not merely used, it is enacted as the very unfolding of the Absolute. Hence, Bhartṛhari's doctrine of Śabdabrahma calls for a fundamental rethinking of the conditions of meaning, subjectivity, and the world. It affirms a metaphysics of unity amid apparent multiplicity. It points towards the silence at the core of all expression, a silence not of negation but of fullness, where language is ultimately understood as the Absolute itself.

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