

**‘Vakyasphota’ and ‘Dialogic Dispersion’: Interlinking
Bhartrhari and Bakhtin**

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Bhartrhari and Bakhtin not only belong to two different philosophical traditions of language but they are also divided by a huge time gap of more than 1300 years. While Bakhtin’s philosophy has been termed as dialogism as it puts forth the significance of “both/and” in meaning construction and identity formation, Bhartrhari is seen as a monist and a universalist advocating *sabda-tattva* as the underlying principle for meaning construction. Bakhtin foregrounds dialogue as the basis of language and human existence and demonstrates how dialogic meaning is unfinalizable as it moves into the realm of the outer and the unknown. Whereas for Bhartrhari, meaning is obtained due to the interplay between *vacaka* and *vacya*, i.e., ‘whatever can be expressed in words and the words which express them’ (Iyer 1969: 147). Bakhtin stays away from metaphysics and explains the phenomenal world by identifying the various speech genres that are used in communication. On the contrary, Bhartrhari emphasizes the inextricable link between the phenomenal and the transcendental. Metaphysics and mysticism are very integral to Bhartrhari’s theoretical formulations.

Despite these and many other differences, it is possible to identify certain parameters of thought that are identical. For instance, both the theorists have identical hypothesis with regard to the notion of word and the process of meaning construction, the relationship between the reader and

the text, multilayeredness of meaning and the interplay of voices etc These parameters of thought lend themselves to comparative analysis and philosophical exploration, and provide us with a theoretical framework about language, cognition, communication and reader-text relationships. The present paper predominantly focuses on Bakhtin's formulations on 'dialogical dispersion' and Bhartrhari's conceptualization on the '*sphota* doctrine' and seeks to examine the different ways in which meaning is cognized. The paper is divided into three parts: in the first part, the chief concern is to compare and analyse Bakhtin's 'dialogic word' with Bhartrhari's 'sabda'; in the second part, an attempt is undertaken to distinguish the process of meaning formation as envisaged by the two theorists; and in the third part, with examples from U R Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* an attempt is undertaken to demonstrate the theoretical ideas of Bakhtin and Bhartrhari.

I

Both Bhartrhari and Bakhtin accept 'word' as the basic linguistic unit for cognition of meaning. For Bhartrhari, *sabda* is a vibrant phenomenon. As he writes, "There is no cognition in the world in which the word does not figure. All knowledge is, as it were, intertwined with the word" (Iyer 1969: 110). He identifies at least three intertwined aspects in a *sabda* that facilitate cognition. Firstly, *sabda* is a group of phonemes which he terms as *dhvani*. Second, every *sabda* carries with it some sense called *artha*. Cognition is possible due to the presence of *dhvani* and *artha*. Third, every *sabda* is governed by an underlying principle called *sabda-tattva*; that is, the common essence or the language-principle that signifies a supreme unity. All words that are uttered are governed by *sabda-tattva*, and the *telos* of *sabda-tattva* is the realization of *Brahman* or the supreme-being. Due to these three different components intertwined in *sabda*, it could be argued that, Bhartrhari views *sabda* as a tension-filled phenomenon explicating multiple layers. Bhartrhari identifies several traces of a *sabda*, in the moment of interaction, denoting its previous usage. As Iyer writes, "[...] he [Bhartrhari] seems to have used *sabda* in the widest possible sense to include even the residual traces of the words used in previous lives" (Iyer 1969: 92). *Sabda* is rearticulated in different temporal and spatial categories, and acquires many more traces in the process of communication.

Let us now shift the focus of our inquiry to Bakhtin's notion of "word". For Bakhtin, 'word' is a "tension-filled environment" – a vibrant phenomenon - as it carries traces of past speakers, the intentions of the present speaker, memory, accents and voices. A word is almost like a living entity encompassing "living dialogic threads". In his view, a 'word' is an utterance that conveys certain sense and initiates a conversation between the speaker and the listener. It acts as a bridge between two speakers, and due to its "internally dialogized" condition, it necessitates a reciprocal relationship between the addresser and the addressee. In Voloshinov's words, "[...] the word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant." (Voloshinov 86). For this reason, any word that is uttered is dialogic. It cannot belong to the speaker alone, nor can it belong to the listener alone. Both the speaker and the listener have what Bakhtin calls an "inalienable right" to the word (Bakhtin 1994b: 121).

Further, Bakhtin demonstrates how words that are uttered in speech communication carry with them a phenomenon called "inner dialogism". Since the word is always interindividual, Bakhtin writes that word presents a strange case called "inner dialogism". The word pulsates with the dialogic impulses of the speaker and also with those of the receiver. Hence apart from the "abstract meaning" the word also acquires a "contextual meaning" resulting in a tension-filled condition. Such a word with "inner dialogism" exemplifies "spectral dispersion" and approaches its object in a complex and multidimensional manner. As Bakhtin writes,

If we imagine the intention of such a word, that is, its directionality toward the object, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and the unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray word ... in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgements and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object and makes the facets of the image sparkle (Bakhtin 1994a: 277).

This characteristic feature of the word is identical with the dialogism that pervades the world. In a very interesting manner, Bakhtin relates the “inner dialogism” of the word with the “internal dialogism” of the world. In his view, what is true of the word is true of the world at large. As words/utterances are dialogized from within, human relationships, the duality between the self and the other, and human existence are also internally dialogized. In Michael Holquist’s words, “The mutuality of difference makes dialogue Bakhtin’s master concept, for it is present in exchanges at all levels – between words in language, people in society, organism in eco-systems, and even between processes in the natural world.” (Holquist 1990: 41).

However, the point of departure between the two philosophers lies with the language-principle or *sabda-tattva*. Bakhtin would not agree with the view that there is a universal principle that governs the usage of a word. For Bakhtin, *sabda-tattva* would be a restrictive framework that confines the operative dynamics of a word to a common, universal principle. Bakhtin’s dialogism moves away from the single and the unitary towards the dual and the plural. A word, in Bakhtin’s view, travels from two individuals and moves ahead in an endless “chain of speech communication”.

For Bhartrhari, due to the presence of *sabda-tattva*, a word has certain concrete universal essence. Despite its several traces the word acquires in the process of speech communication, *sabda* cannot escape its *sabda-tattva*. The ultimate purpose of a *sabda* is to help the speaker and the listener to realize the *Brahman*. At the same time, *sabda* is entwined with *advaita* and thus called *sabdadvaita*. The dialectics and the tension present in the *sabda* unify and merge in the supreme-being *Brahman*. In the very first verse of *Vakyapadiya*, Bhartrhari draws our attention to this monistic conception:

The Brahman who is without beginning or end, whose very essence is the Word, who is the cause of the manifested phonemes, who appears as the objects, from whom the creation of the world proceeds (Iyer 1969:1).

It becomes clear that both Bhartrhari and Bakhtin, in their theoretical formulations agree with each other with regard to the “tension-filled condition” in a word. Again, it could be observed that they present identical arguments concerning the relationship between the word and the world. Despite Bhartrhari’s monist universalism and Bakhtin’s dialogic pluralism, we can ascertain an emphasis towards the notion of dialogue for the communication of meaning. However, the questions that arise in this context are – How does one cognize meaning? What answers and theoretical propositions are provided by these philosophers to explain the process of meaning communication? And more importantly, from the point of view of a comparative study of their theoretical principles, is it possible to observe a connectivity or continuation in their views on cognition? In order to arrive at an answer to these questions we should investigate Bhartrhari’s theory of *sphota* and Bakhtin’s conceptualizations on “surplus of seeing” and “outsideness”.

II

For Bhartrhari, meaning is possible not due to the cognition of *śabda*, but due to the cognition of *vakya* or a sentence. From the point of view of elucidation of meaning, *vakya* is indivisible as individual words do not convey a complete sense. In order to explain the cognition of meaning through a *vakya*, Bhartrhari brings in two important concepts viz., *sphota* and *pratibha*. In Bhartrhari’s view, *dhvani* or the word-sound and *artha* or the word-meaning together give rise to what he terms as *sphota*. When a speaker utters a *vakya*, the sound and meaning merge together in the mind of the hearer, and then, the hearer comprehends the *vakya*. The two aspects of *sphota*, the group of phonemes and their referent are integral for the cognition of meaning. As he writes, “Just as, in knowledge, its own form and that of the known are cognized, in the same way, in verbal cognition, the form of the object and that of the word are cognized.” (Iyer 1969: 57). For Bhartrhari, no meaning is conveyed by a word that is also not a form of knowledge.

However, the cognition in the mind of the hearer is not merely due to *sphota* but it is also because of a special perceptive and acquisitive power enjoyed by human-beings called *pratibha*. The concept of *pratibha* was well-known to Indian aestheticians before Bhartrhari. Harold J

Coward writes that, “[P]ratibha in Indian thought is described as a supernormal perception that transcends the ordinary categories of time, space, and causality, and has the capacity to directly “grasp” the real nature of things” (1976: 38). This capacity to directly “grasp” varies from person to person; that is, a person with a higher degree of *pratibha* is capable of comprehending the complete meaning even before the *vakya* is uttered. Bhartrhari writes that *Rsis* were capable of such higher *pratibha*. On the other hand, persons with lower levels of *pratibha* would keep asking “What did you say?” *Pratibha* is a flash-like understanding that is curiously intertwined with reasoning, and judgement. *Sphota*, in itself would not have any meaning without the intuitive *pratibha* of the hearer.

Arguably, Bhartrhari’s conception of *sphota* and *pratibha* find an echo in Bakhtin’s formulations on “spectral dispersion” and “dialogic surplus”. *Sphota* of Bhartrhari where meaning “bursts forth” immediately after the final phoneme is uttered could be compared with Bakhtin’s scientific metaphor of “spectral dispersion” where the word uttered by the speaker enters a social spectrum of alien words, accents, intonations, and ideologies before reaching the hearer who accrues meaning from it. For Bhartrhari, *sabda* has a concrete essence which is realized through *sphota*. The word-sound and word-meaning together lead to the formation of this linguistic unit. Apart from being a linguistic unit, *sphota* is also inextricably linked with the linguistic potency *pratibha* enjoyed by both the speaker and the listener. Thus, meaning is a product of both *sphota* and *pratibha*.

For Bakhtin, meaning is possible due to a phenomenon called “outsideness”. Since the speaker and the listener are two separate individuals, they exist “outside” each other’s territory. The self recognizes the presence of the other due to an ability termed as “surplus of seeing”. The self enjoys a “surplus” over the other as it is able to cognize certain aspects of the other which the other cannot perceive about itself. In Michael Holquist’s words,

By adding the surplus that has been “given” to you to the surplus that has been “given” to me I can build up an image that includes the whole of me [...] including those things I cannot physically see: in other words, I am able to

“conceive” or construct a whole out of the different situations we are in together (Holquist 1990: 36-37).

Thus for Bakhtin, meaning is conceived due to the differential relation that exist between the self and the other. Although words carry traces, markers and accents with them, meaning is not present in the words *per se*. It is only through the “dialogic surplus” and the context that the speaker and the listener “conceive” meaning from the utterances.

III

In order to understand the operative dynamics of the concepts propounded by Bhartrhari and Bakhtin, let us consider an example. U.R Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* provides us with a few instances that could be examined from the point of view of Bhartrhari’s *sphota* theory and Bakhtin’s dialogical principles. The first part of the novel where the Brahmins of the agrahara debate the death rites for Naranappa, exemplifies a tension-filled environment that lends itself to varied interpretations and analysis. Naranappa didn’t have children of his own and had been very critical of the Brahmin customs and practices. He had abandoned his brahmin wife and had been living with a low-born prostitute. His behaviour had invited the anger of the brahimns of the agrahara and his sudden death comes as a thunderbolt. The question of his death rites becomes a debatable issue as no Brahmin related to him wishes to perform them. The following episode shows how Praneshacharya puts forth the problem:

Praneshacharya said to them, almost as if to himself:

‘Naranappa’s death rites have to be done; that’s problem one. He has no children. Someone should do it: that’s problem two.’

Chandri, standing against the pillar in the yard, waited anxiously for the brahmin’s verdict. The brahmin wives had come in through the backdoor into the middle hall, unable to contain the curiosity, afraid their husbands might do something rash.

Fondling his fat back naked arms, Garudacharya said as usual:

‘Yes. Ye.....es. Yees’.

‘No one can eat anything until the body is cremated’ said Dasacharya, one of the poorer brahmins, thin, bony, as a sick cow.

‘True...true...quite true’, said Lakshmanacharya rubbing his belly-jerking his face forwards and backwards, batting his eyelids rapidly.

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No one had a direct suggestion. Praneshacharya said:

‘So the problem before us is—who should perform the rites? The Books say, any relative can. Failing that, any Brahmin can offer to do them’ (2004: 4-5).

The example quoted above demonstrates a conversation between Praneshacharya and the brahmins of agrahara. From Bhartrahari’s perspective, it is possible to decipher *vakya*sphota and *pratibha* as the speaker and the hearer(s) engage themselves in an exchange of various *sabda*. The *vakya* of Praneshacharya that informs the brahmins about the problem that confronts them is a fundamental cognitive unit which could be termed *sphota*. The words of Praneshacharya do not refer to anything by themselves unless they are put together into a *vakya*. Hence, it becomes clear that it is *vakya* that has the power of *sphota* and not *sabda*. There cannot be anything called *sabdasphota* unless a particular *sabda*, in essence, takes on the form of a complete *vakya*. Thus, meaning bursts forth, or there is *sphota* that due to its force and intensity invites from the hearer a response.

The operative dynamics of *sphota* is directly dependent on the hearer’s *pratibha*. The flash-like understanding the three hearer(s) have (viz., Garudacharya, Dasacharya, and Lakhmanacharya) are relative; they differ in intensity and cognitive capacity. All the three hearers cognize the *sphota* in three different ways. While Garudacharya’s *pratibha* allows him to agree with Praneshacharya’s *vakya*, he is unable to provide a solution to the dilemma. As his utterance “Yes. Ye.....es. Yees” exemplifies, he is still unable to comprehend the complete *sphota*. There is a gradual revelation in the mind of Garudacharya that precludes the possibility of him

being the ideal hearer. He is an erroneous cognizer whom Bhartrhari would place under the category of people who ask “What did you say?” Again, Dasacharya and Lakshmanacharya also cognize the *sphota* erroneously. While Dasacharya interprets the implications of the problem before the brahmins by relating it to their condition, Lakshmanacharya agrees with him. The *pratibha* of Dasacharya and Lakhmanacharya is dictated by their social and economic condition, hence, the revelation of the *sabda-tattva* is hampered and *sphota* is erroneously cognized. As no one comprehends the essence of the problem Praneshacharya explicates the situation that allows for further deliberations.

However, the reader of the text is able to comprehend the seriousness of the problem that confronts the brahmins of Durvasapura. The *pratibha* of the reader is not only an alert cognizer but it is also a balanced, intelligent self that is capable of comprehending the abstractness of the context. The brahmins enjoy a capacity which Bhartrhari would term as *pratyaksha*; that is, a perceptive power inferior to the concept of *pratibha*. Whereas, the reader enjoys *pratibha* that enables her/him to understand the wholeness of the *sphota*.

The question that arises now is how does the reader enjoy such a *pratibha*? What characteristic features elevate the position of the reader from an erroneous cognizer to that of an addressee with the higher *pratibha*? What is the location of operation that provides the reader with such proportions of intelligence? Bhartrhari does not provide us with an answer to this question. He is more concerned with the operative dynamics of *sphota* than with the processes and contexts of meaning recognition and cognition.

For Bakhtin, meaning is possible due to three important concepts viz., “outsideness”, “dialogic surplus” and “ratios of otherness”. Let us make an attempt to understand the example quoted above from Bakhtin’s standpoint. Praneshacharya’s utterance undergoes a “spectral dispersion” as it were before it reaches its addressees. In the process, the utterance manifests itself in varied and different directions that results in altered interpretations by its hearers. The context and the atmosphere of the *agrahara* also exert their influence on the utterance. The “situatedness” of the hearer is the key to her/his comprehension of meaning. No one in the *agrahara* comprehends the

complete intentions of Praneshacharya's utterance as everyone is situated "outside" each other's territory. Hence, only a partial meaning is possible for the hearers as they grope in darkness to understand the complete "spectral dispersion" of his utterance. This becomes clear in Garudacharya's utterance 'yes. Ye.....es. Yees". The "location" of Garudacharya allows him to comprehend Praneshacharya's utterance as a complex problem that requires careful investigation. Dasacharya and Lakshmanacharya proceed to interpret the problem from a personal standpoint as they are more concerned with the extent to which the current problem would harm their living.

Thus, from Bakhtin's view, the reason for the varied interpretations is the "ratio of otherness" that the brahmins present in the "event of co-being" in the agrahara. Though the brahmins share their existence, they are also individuals who "live" outside each other's territory. Such an "outsideness" which each self enjoys is distinct and distant from the other's "outsideness". That is, all the brahmins of the agrahara enjoy outsideness that differs in "ratios of otherness". Due to the differential ratios of otherness the capacity to enjoy the surplus of seeing over the others is never constant. As a result of the operation of the differential ratios of otherness, the interpretations provided by Garudacharya, Dasacharya and Lakhmanacharya is discourse marked by partial cognition and divergent interpretations of the utterance of Praneshacharya.

However, the reader enjoys a higher degree of surplus than the brahmins of the agrahara in terms of a comprehension of the situation that confronts them. This is because the space of operation of a reader is located completely outside the space of the action in the novel. Bakhtin would term such an outsideness as "transgression". In Michael Holquist's words, "[T]ransgression [...] is reached when the *whole* existence of others is seen from outside not only their own knowledge that they are being perceived by somebody else, but from beyond their awareness that such another even exists" (Holquist 1990: 32-33). The cognitive capacity of such a transgressive self (in our case the reader) is much higher; hence, s/he is able to "conceive" the meaning of the situation in a better way.

IV

The analysis undertaken above leads us towards a few concluding statements. Bhartrhari and Bakhtin provide us with identical theoretical formulations on the notion of *sabda*/word, the process of communication of meaning and the task of cognizing meaning. Many of Bakhtin's ideas, which he presents with higher degree of theoretical sophistication, seem to be a continuation and extension of Bhartrhari's postulates. For instance, Bakhtin's notion of the word being a "tension-filled phenomenon" is articulated by Bhartrhari in his views on *sabda* being a complex structure with *artha*, *dhvani* and *sabda-tattva*. Bhartrhari's *sphota* doctrine finds an echo in Bakhtin's theory of "spectral dispersion" of meaning. Though, Bhartrhari's concept of *pratibha* and *pratyaksha* are not the same as Bakhtin's "outsideness" and "transgredience", it is possible to observe a connective link in the manner in which these concepts explicate the process of meaning cognition. Bhartrhari's ideal hearer who is capable of perceiving the complete *sphota* is similar to Bakhtin's "superaddressee" situated in a different temporal and spatial category for who complete meaning is possible.

If Bhartrhari's theoretical positions could be critiqued for their monist transcendentalism, Bakhtin's dialogism could be debated for its unfinalizable anarchic thrust. Bhartrhari's theoretical positions operate at an abstract and transcendental plane. The metaphysics and the controversies in interpreting Bhartrhari's views have also contributed to the abstruseness of his philosophy. He moves away from the social context towards the divine essence, and completely ignores situatedness of cognition. Bakhtin in an act that foregrounds social context jumps into an abyss of indeterminacy. Bakhtin is both a philosopher and a social scientist; and he utilizes ideas from both the domains to present a theory that encompasses formalist and contextualist assertions on language. This aspect gives the leeway for Bakhtin to examine certain concerns such as the role of "outsideness", and the question of "otherness" in articulation and comprehension of utterances. Arguably, such an emphasis on context also leads to a theory of language where every interpretation is valid as there cannot be a "true" comprehension of the dialogic utterance.

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