Bhartrihari and the Theory of Sphota

Developing the thought of Patanjali, Bhartrihari goes farther and makes an overall survey of what is “single entity” and how it works on all levels of speech. For Bhartrihari a sentence and not a separate word is a single undivided speech-unit. The whole world as it is has a Meaning which can be grasped only as an indivisible unity. This meaning is inherent in the consciousness of man from his very birth, with which he later finds its partial correspondence in his language and reproduces it through articulation, and that is Sphota.

Sphota, literally means “sudden opening”, “disclosure”, it is taking place in both speaker and hearer, through the process of articulation in both. The sound of the speech (dhvani) simply evokes the Sphota in the hearer, as varṇa-sphota, pada-sphota and vākya-sphota, the phoneme/morpheme-articulation-cognition, the word-articulation-cognition and the text-articulation-cognition, respectively. The differentiation between sound and articulation is one of the fundamental features of the theory of Sphota. Sphota is not a sound we hear but the sound we articulate. According to Bhartrihari Sphota operates within universal sounds whereas dhvani within a particular sound. The opposition between sphota and dhvani is also presented as the opposition of class to individual. In modern terms Sphota can be understood as having constant distinctive phonetic features, whereas dhvani is of a phonic nature. Sphota is that which is to be manifested (vyāṅgya), and the dhvani is manifesting (vyāñjaka). Sphota is not uttered but it is perceived by the hearer.

To make the distinction clearer Bhartrihari introduces two types of dhvani: prākṛta-dhvani, natural sound, and vaikṛta-dhvani, uttered out or distorted sound; where sphota is revealed through the former one only. The secondary vaikṛta sounds are only to indicate the primary ones, and thus to kindle up the Sphota, which with a help of pratibhā, the flash of insight, reveals the meaning of the text.

On semantic level, as it was developed by latter grammarians, Sphota makes the text correspond with a universal Text-Totality, śabda-brahman, and therefore the text can be easily understood as such. And once the inner perception (pratibhā) of the hearer flashes out, reflecting something from that totality, the Sphota, the revelation of the meaning of the text, takes place in his consciousness.

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1 Therefore a foreign language can be studied, for any language is only a particular access to the Reality, which is wider than any language.
2 It is Saussure’s definition of ‘signifier’.
So, the Sphoṭa can be seen as a communication-device based on recognition of the truth of existence through a word/text in the hearer-speaker, (sattā). It therefore is of a psychological nature, as any human speech is, for the recognition of the meaning of the text is perceived by a consciousness which lies beyond the analytic capacity of the external mind, and carries in itself all meanings; and as such, its proper understanding requires a psychological experience. Even today this theory is widely recognized among modern linguists as the most complete investigation into the profundities of language, making a considerable contribution to the Philosophy of Language, the Psychology of Speech, and especially Semiotics.

**General overview of all major theories of Sphota:**

The general overview of the concepts and different approaches to Sphota must be made here in order to show the richness and the precision of the topics being discussed among ancient and medieval grammarians in India. There are eight major approaches to the theory of Sphota:

1) varṇa-sphoṭa
2) pada-sphoṭa
3) vākya-sphoṭa
4) akhaṇḍa-pada-sphoṭa
5) akhaṇḍa-vākya-sphoṭa
6) varna-jāti-sphoṭa
7) pada-jāti-sphoṭa
8) vākya-jāti-sphoṭa

Here we will briefly outline some of their central concepts and issues, especially related to the studies of meaning:

1) **Varna sphota** is defined as denotative, vācaka, when a single phoneme or a stem or affix is found to be so, and therefore the varna-sphota is taking place. This theory utilizes the analysis from “bottom-to-top”, which is mainly found in grammatical treatises such as Panini’s descriptive grammar.

Varna sphota has its difficulties in the immediate application to the analysis of the word, especially when the synthetic forms of the word are examined such as ghaṭena, ‘with the pot’, for it cannot clearly define them into separate and meaningful units. ³

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³ Where the stem ends and suffix begins in this word? Is it ena, or ina, or na? And still it is none of them. So what is then this na- or ina-? It is a clear example of how the grammatical analysis is incapable to find out the meaning of grammatical units. It breaks down the oneness of the system of etymons into bits and pieces, demanding from every bit to be meaningful in itself without referring to its system of meaning.
2) **Pada sphota** maintains that the finished word as a unique entity conveys the meaning, and the division into the morphological components into suffixes, stems etc. does not occur when the speaker or the listener understands the speech. This theory claims that the text can be described by listening to the words and their meaning, as well as by perceiving the relation between them in a syntactic structure of the sentence. It is by listening to the meaning of every word and linking it with another word that the meaning of the sentence can be understood. But since the meaning of the sentence is the final meaning which is to be understood then the pada-sphota theory is found insufficient in the description of perception of meaning and leads to the next level of synthesis: vākyasphoṭa.

3) **Vākya-sphota** maintains that the sentence is a unique entity which conveys the meaning. The sentence in itself is a unit of meaning. Vakya sphota however does not claim that the constituents of the sentence do not have meaning. The main point of this theory is that the word should be always seen and understood in a context. The words have their meaning only when they form a part of sentence.

4) **Akhandapada-sphota** maintains that the word is perceived as undivided single meaning bearing unit. It is not perceived by its parts: suffixes, stems etc., but as a single and undivided meaningful entity.

5) **Akhandavākya-sphota** says that it is insufficient to perceive the separate word, for in ordinary communications the sentence as the whole is perceived as meaningful and not a separate word. Bhartrihari thinks that such division of the sentence into words and stems etc., does not exist in the ordinary perception of speech. In common use of speech the meaning is taken as a whole, including the context. It is only when the utterance is made that the speaker can dwell on it and analyze it in parts as words, stems etc., but not when he is speaking. And if he is able to grasp the parts of speech, such as syllables, he will lose the meaning of it all. According to this theory the varna and pada sphota describe language in its functions, but not in its use.

6) **Vyakti sphota and Jāti sphota**

To answer the question whether Sphoṭa is particular or universal there are two theories the Vyakti-sphota-vāda and Jāti sphoṭa-vāda.

The Jāti sphoṭa-vāda maintains that non-difference in the varied individual elements is generic, while vyakti-sphoṭa-vāda says that difference is associative. For the Jāti sphoṭa-vāda the meaning-bearing word is the class (as for instance: ‘gotva’, ‘cowness’) which is revealed
by the individual instances (vyaktis). The individuals are not meaning
bearers.\footnote{Against this Nāgeśa says that individual member is the meaning conveyor which is revealed by the individual sounds associated with diverse features.}

There was one more distinction important to mention here, which
formulated the two different approaches to the understanding of Sphota:
the abhihitānvayavāda and anvitābhidhānavāda theories.

The abhihitānvayavāda theory maintains that the words and grammatical
units have their own meaning and by joining together through their
syntactic relation build up the meaning of the sentence.

The anvitābhidhānavāda theory on the contrary affirms that the meaning
of the word can be understood only in the context of the sentence.

All these theories of Sphota with many other variations and commentaries
make a rich layout for the linguistic studies of meaning in the terms of
structural semantics, and together represent a holistic view in defining all
possible approaches to meaning within the grammatical structures
(morphology and syntax).