



The Concept of Sphoṭa in Sanskrit Grammar: Historical Development, Philosophical Foundations

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a critical, source-based examination of the doctrine of sphoṭa (स्फोट) within the Sanskrit grammatical tradition (vyākaraṇa), addressing a persistent problem in the secondary literature: whether sphoṭa should be treated as a single, continuous doctrine running from Patañjali to the later Vaiyākaraṇas, or whether the term in fact covers substantially different theoretical commitments at different historical stages. Building on the textual-historical work of Joshi and Cardona on the difference between Patañjali's and Bhartṛhari's usage¹, the paper traces the concept from its terminological antecedents in Pāṇini and its cognitive-linguistic use in Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya to its systematic elaboration as a philosophy of language in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya, and its subsequent codification by Kaṇḍabhaṭṭa and Nāgeśabhaṭṭa. Using textual-philological, historical, philosophical, comparative and linguistic methods, the paper analyses the sphoṭa–dhvani distinction, the classification into varṇasphoṭa, padasphoṭa and vākyasphoṭa, and the sustained objections raised by Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya thinkers, particularly Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and the Naiyāyika tradition represented by Jayanta Bhaṭṭa. It further examines the ontological, epistemological and metaphysical dimensions of the doctrine in relation to Bhartṛhari's concept of śabdabrahman, and considers, in a carefully bounded manner, its possible relevance to modern linguistics, cognitive science and Sanskrit computational linguistics. The paper argues that sphoṭa is best understood not as a single unified postulate but as a family of related theoretical devices addressing a genuine and recurring problem: how a temporally sequenced, physically divisible stream of sound gives rise to an apparently unitary and holistic act of linguistic cognition. The paper's contribution lies in its historically differentiated reconstruction of the doctrine, its integration of the philosophical and linguistic dimensions of the debate, and its cautious, non-anachronistic assessment of the doctrine's relevance to contemporary theories of language and cognition.

Keywords

Sphoṭa, dhvani, Bhartṛhari, Vākyapadīya, philosophy of language, Sanskrit grammar, Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya

Introduction

Among the conceptual innovations of the Sanskrit grammatical tradition, few have generated as much interpretive controversy, within the tradition itself and in modern scholarship, as the doctrine of sphoṭa. The term, derived from the root sphuṭ ("to burst forth"), denotes, in its most general sense, that which "bursts forth"

¹S. D. Joshi, as reported and discussed in Johannes Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on Sphoṭa" (unpublished paper, Section française d'Extrême-Orient / SKS Papers archive, Columbia University), pp. 1–3; George Cardona's 1968 review remarks on Joshi are cited in the same source at p. 2.

as linguistic meaning or linguistic form when speech-sounds are uttered.² It is used, however, in markedly different senses by different grammarians across a period of roughly seven centuries, from its earliest attested occurrences in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (c. 2nd century BCE) to its systematic elaboration in Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* (5th century CE, by the most commonly accepted dating)³, and its later codification in the *Vaiyākaraṇabhūṣaṇasāra* of Kaṇḍabhaṭṭa and the *Vaiyākaraṇasiddhāntamañjūṣā* of Nāgeśabhaṭṭa.

Popular and even some scholarly accounts frequently present *sphoṭa* as a single, continuous doctrine, moving in linear fashion from Pāṇini through Patañjali and Bhartṛhari to the later grammarians. Careful philological work, however, complicates this picture considerably. S. D. Joshi's analysis of Patañjali's usage, subsequently endorsed by George Cardona, shows that Patañjali never uses the term *sphoṭa* to denote a single, indivisible, meaning-bearing unit; for Patañjali the term designates the structure of an expression, which may or may not involve meaning at all.⁴ It is Bhartṛhari, and not Patañjali, who develops *sphoṭa* into what may properly be called a philosophy of language, a theory in which the indivisible, partless (*akhaṇḍa*) linguistic unit is understood as the true bearer of meaning, ontologically and epistemologically prior to its apparent decomposition into phonemes, morphemes and words.⁵ This distinction between an earlier, narrower grammatical usage and a later, expanded philosophical doctrine is the interpretive axis around which the present paper is organised.

The paper is motivated by a specific scholarly problem, elaborated in Section 2: whether *sphoṭa* should be read as a technical grammatical postulate, a convenient fiction for explaining how a sequence of phonetic segments correlates with a stable meaning, or as a substantive theory of the unity of linguistic expression, meaning and verbal cognition, with far-reaching ontological and epistemological consequences. This is not merely a philological question; it bears directly on how *sphoṭa* should be situated within, and compared to, modern discussions of linguistic form, compositionality and sentence processing.

Historical Development of the Concept of *Sphoṭa*

The historical development of *sphoṭa* should not be read as a simple linear progression from Pāṇini to Patañjali to Bhartṛhari to the later grammarians. Wikipedia's summary of the doctrine, itself drawing on Cardona, notes that Pāṇini refers to a predecessor grammarian named *Sphoṭāyana*, whose work is lost, suggesting that reflection on the relation between sound and linguistic form pre-dates Patañjali's technical usage of the term.⁶ This detail should be treated cautiously: the identity and precise significance of "*Sphoṭāyana*" cannot be independently verified from a critical edition within the scope of this paper, and is noted here only as a traditionally reported terminological antecedent, not as established doctrinal history.

The first clearly attested technical use of *sphoṭa* occurs in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (c. 2nd century BCE), in the context of the *Paspaśāhnika*'s discussion of what a "word" (*śabda*) ultimately is.⁷ As Joshi's philological analysis (endorsed by Cardona) demonstrates, Patañjali's *sphoṭa* denotes the invariant phonological "structure" or "shape" of an utterance, the aspect of speech that remains constant despite variation in the individual speaker's voice, pitch, loudness or speed, and need not, in Patañjali's usage, involve any consideration of meaning at all.⁸ The companion term *dhvani* in Patañjali's usage denotes the variable, individually inflected acoustic event, the actually produced physical sound, which differs from utterance to utterance and from speaker to speaker.⁹

²See Harold G. Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language: A Philosophical Analysis* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), p. 12, for the etymological derivation and its bearing on the doctrine's technical use.

³For the dating of Bhartṛhari, see K. A. Subramania Iyer, *Bhartṛhari: A Study of the Vākyapadīya in the Light of the Ancient Commentaries* (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1969), Introduction; and Jan E. M. Houben, *The Saṃbandha-samuddeśa and Bhartṛhari's Philosophy of Language* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), Introduction, for a discussion of the dating controversy.

⁴Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on *Sphoṭa*," pp. 1–2, quoting S. D. Joshi (1967) and George Cardona's 1968 review (Cardona, 1968, p. 448).

⁵Harold G. Coward and K. Kunjunni Raja, eds., *The Philosophy of the Grammarians* (Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, vol. V, ed. Karl H. Potter; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), Introduction.

⁶See the discussion of the etymology and the reference to "*Sphoṭāyana*" as a predecessor cited in Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (6.1.123), noted with reference to George Cardona in the general encyclopedic literature on *sphoṭa*; the identity and date of *Sphoṭāyana* cannot be independently established and should be treated as an unverified traditional attribution pending confirmation in a critical edition of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*.

⁷Patañjali, *Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya*, *Paspaśāhnika*; the discussion of *śabda* as *dhvani* or as *sphoṭa* is a well-attested feature of the opening *āhnika*, though the exact page locator depends on the specific edition (e.g., Kielhorn's edition) and is not independently verified here.

⁸Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on *Sphoṭa*," p. 1, quoting Joshi (1967): "Patañjali has never used the term *sphoṭa* to refer to a single indivisible meaning-bearing unit. The term *sphoṭa* as used by Patañjali always stands for the structure of expression which may or may not have meaning."

⁹See the summary in the Wikipedia article "*Sphoṭa*," drawing on standard secondary accounts of Patañjali's usage: the acoustic element (*dhvani*) is variable, while *sphoṭa* is the invariant linguistic quality recognised despite this variability. This general characterisation is confirmed independently in Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language*, pp. 10–15.

It is Bhartṛhari who transforms this comparatively modest phonological distinction into a comprehensive philosophy of language. The term *sphoṭa* occurs nine times in the first *kāṇḍa* (Brahmakāṇḍa) of the *Vākyapadīya* alone, and Bhartṛhari's usage of the wider vocabulary of *śabda*, including *pada*, *vākyasphoṭa*, *dhvani*, *nāda*, *prākṛtadhvani* and *vaikṛtadhvani*—is considerably more differentiated than Patañjali's.¹⁰ For Bhartṛhari, *sphoṭa* is not merely an invariant phonological shape but the partless, indivisible (*akhaṇḍa*) linguistic unit that is directly and intuitively (*pratibhā*) grasped by the hearer, and which is ontologically prior to its apparent division into phonemes and words by grammatical analysis.¹¹

This shift, from an invariant phonological structure (Patañjali) to a partless, meaning-bearing metaphysical unity (Bhartṛhari), is the single most important discontinuity in the history of the doctrine, and later grammarians did not always preserve it clearly. As Joshi observes, later grammarians beginning with Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita, for whom *sphoṭa* necessarily refers to the significant unit, reinterpreted Patañjali's *varṇasphoṭa* to mean the smallest meaningful units such as stems, roots and suffixes, an interpretive move Patañjali's own text does not support.¹² The historical trajectory of *sphoṭa*, in other words, involves not merely expansion but genuine conceptual reinterpretation at each major stage, from Patañjali's phonological invariant, to Bhartṛhari's metaphysically grounded meaning-unity, to the later grammarians' systematised and, on Joshi's reading, partially retrojected doctrine.

Sphoṭa in the Pāṇinian and Pātañjala Tradition

Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* itself does not present a developed *sphoṭa* doctrine; the term's significance at this stage is primarily terminological and historiographical, marking a possible pre-Patañjalian discussion of the sound-word relation associated with the name *Sphoṭāyana*, a reference whose precise doctrinal content is not recoverable with confidence from the surviving textual record.¹³ Kātyāyana's *Vārtikas* on Pāṇini, extant only through Patañjali's citations in the *Mahābhāṣya*, introduced sustained semantic discourse into the grammatical tradition, which Patañjali then elaborated considerably, producing a text that functions simultaneously as technical grammar and as philosophy of grammar.¹⁴

Within this context, Patañjali's *sphoṭa*-*dhvani* distinction functions primarily as a solution to a specific descriptive problem: how can a word retain a stable phonological identity despite the fact that no two utterances of it are acoustically identical? Patañjali's answer, that the invariant *sphoṭa* is what is linguistically relevant, while the variable *dhvani* is linguistically incidental, is, on this reading, closer to a theory of phonological type-versus-token than to a theory of meaning as such.¹⁵ It is a modest but genuine linguistic insight, addressed to the problem of phonological invariance under performance variation, rather than to the metaphysics of meaning that later becomes central to Bhartṛhari's project.

Bhartṛhari and the Systematisation of Sphoṭa

Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* opens its first *kāṇḍa* (the *Brahmakāṇḍa*) by identifying the Word-principle (*śabdatattva*) with Brahman itself, the beginningless and endless reality from which the manifest world of objects arises through the transformation of the Word.¹⁶ This metaphysical framing is essential background to Bhartṛhari's *sphoṭa* doctrine: *sphoṭa* is not an isolated technical device but an application, at the level of ordinary

¹⁰See the philological observation that the term *sphoṭa* occurs nine times in *Vākyapadīya* I, and that Bhartṛhari's use of several closely related terms for "sound" creates genuine interpretive difficulty in fixing *sphoṭa*'s precise referent, in a study titled "The *Sphoṭa* Theory: For and Against," published in the *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research* 6, no. 7 (July 2019).

¹¹Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language*, ch. 2; see also K. A. Subramania Iyer, trans., *Vākyapadīya*, *Kāṇḍa* I (1965), I.1, for Bhartṛhari's opening identification of the Word-principle (*śabdatattva*) with Brahman.

¹²Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on *Sphoṭa*," p. 1, quoting Joshi (1967), p. 7: "Since for [later grammarians], the term *sphoṭa* necessarily refers to the significant unit, they tried to interpret the term *varṇasphoṭa* to mean the smallest meaningful units like stems, roots and suffixes ... To Patañjali the term *sphoṭa* need not necessarily involve consideration of meaning."

¹³On the methodological caution required in using the *Sphoṭāyana* reference as evidence of a developed pre-Patañjalian *sphoṭa* doctrine, see Cardona, Pāṇini: *His Work and Its Traditions*, for the broader historiographical principle that isolated grammarian-names in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* should not be over-interpreted absent corroborating textual evidence.

¹⁴See the summary account of the *Mahābhāṣya*'s status and its incorporation of Kātyāyana's semantic *vārtikas*, drawing on Cardona's standard account of the text's structure and historical role (Cardona, 1997, pp. 245, 267–268, 280).

¹⁵This type-token characterisation of Patañjali's *sphoṭa*-*dhvani* distinction follows the interpretation defended by Joshi and Cardona as reported in Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on *Sphoṭa*," pp. 1–2, and is consistent with the general account in Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language*, pp. 10–20.

¹⁶K. A. Subramania Iyer, trans., *Vākyapadīya*, *Kāṇḍa* I (Poona: Deccan College, 1965), I.1; see also the summary of this opening move in Coward and Kunjunni Raja, eds., *The Philosophy of the Grammarians*, Introduction.

linguistic communication, of a wider monistic metaphysics in which language (śabda) is treated as ontologically fundamental.

For Bhartṛhari, language must be considered from two complementary perspectives: the metaphysical perspective of sphoṭa, the partless linguistic unity that exists prior to and independently of its manifestation, and the cognitive-acoustic perspective of nāda or dhvani, the sequence of sounds through which that unity is manifested to a hearer.¹⁷ The sphoṭa exists, on this account, as a unity in the mind of the speaker prior to utterance, and is latent, in a corresponding way, in the mind of the hearer; the uttered sounds do not create the meaning but merely manifest (vyañjaka) a sphoṭa that is, in some sense, already available to be recognised.¹⁸ This is a strong and philosophically demanding claim, and it is precisely the claim that Bhartṛhari's Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya critics.

A crucial textual locus for Bhartṛhari's account of the sphoṭa's unity versus the sequential, divisible character of sound is Vākyapadīya I.93, where Bhartṛhari characterises sphoṭa as the linguistic universal or type, the sentence-type or word-type, as distinct from its phonetic tokens, and distinguishes sphoṭa, which is whole and indivisible, from nāda, the sound, which is sequenced and therefore divisible.¹⁹ Bhartṛhari also discusses, at Vākyapadīya I.82–84 and again in the third kāṇḍa (III.1.6), the manner in which conventional usage (vyavahāra) among the learned (vṛddha) establishes and transmits the capacity of words to convey meaning, treating this capacity not as a human convention created ex nihilo but as the actualisation of an already-existing natural fitness (yogyatā) between word and meaning.²⁰

Applying the analytical structure required for major passages: the literal meaning of these passages is that a stable, non-arbitrary connection between word and meaning underlies ordinary usage; the traditional interpretation, as systematised by later commentators such as Puṇyārāja and Helārāja, treats this connection as grounded in the eternal, unmanifest Word-principle; the philosophical significance is that Bhartṛhari thereby avoids a purely conventionalist account of meaning while also avoiding a naive realist account in which meaning simply resides in the physical sounds; the linguistic significance is that meaning-bearing capacity is treated as a property of the whole linguistic unit rather than of its constituent phonemes in linear combination; and the critical evaluation, pursued further in Section 10 and Section 14, is that this holism, while philosophically coherent within Bhartṛhari's monistic framework, creates specific difficulties for any account of how novel sentences, never previously encountered as wholes, can nonetheless be understood, a difficulty the Mīmāṃsakas pressed with particular force.

Sphoṭa and Dhvani

The sphoṭa-dhvani distinction addresses a problem that recurs, in various guises, throughout the philosophy of language: how can a physically sequential, temporally extended and in principle divisible stream of sound give rise to what is subjectively experienced as a single, unified act of understanding? One account reported by Bhartṛhari, though not necessarily his own final position, holds that sphoṭa is the original sound produced by the contact of the vocal organs with their places of articulation, a sound that disappears as soon as it is produced but which causes further sounds, called dhvani, to spread outward, like ripples, becoming progressively weaker as they move away from their point of origin; the commentarial tradition illustrates this with the example of the sound of a bherī (a large drum), whose initial percussive sound gives rise to a spreading, decaying resonance.²¹ Whatever the merits of this particular acoustic model, its underlying philosophical motivation is clear: to explain

¹⁷See the summary of this bipartite analysis in "The Sphoṭa Theory: For and Against," Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research 6, no. 7 (2019): "Bhartṛhari maintained language (śabda) from two perspectives, viz. 1) Metaphysical (Sphoṭa), and 2) Cognitive (Nāda)/(dhvani)."

¹⁸Coward, The Sphoṭa Theory of Language, ch. 2–3, for the manifestation (abhivṛtti) model of the relation between dhvani and sphoṭa.

¹⁹Vākyapadīya I.93, as discussed in the secondary presentation "The Sphoṭa Theory of Language as Revelation," based on Coward, The Sphoṭa Theory of Language (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1st ed. 1980; reprints 1986, 1997). The precise kārikā numbering follows the edition used by Coward; readers consulting Rau's critical edition (Wilhelm Rau, Bhartṛharis Vākyapadīya, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 42.4, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977) should verify the corresponding numbering, since kārikā counts differ slightly across editions and this has not been independently cross-checked against Rau's edition within the scope of this paper.

²⁰See Harold Coward, "The Meaning and Power of Mantras in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya," Journal of Dharma / reprinted discussion, referencing Vākyapadīya III.1.6 and I.82–84 on yogyatā as eternal (nitya) and not humanly created (apauruṣeya).

²¹See the account of this view, with the bherī (drum) analogy from the Vākyapadīya commentarial tradition, in the study of the Tattvabindu of Vācaspati Miśra published on Wisdomlib (a digital repository of Sanskrit studies, drawing on the printed edition and commentary of the Tattvabindu); the specific kārikā and commentarial locus for the bherī example should be independently verified against a critical edition of the Vākyapadīya commentary (the Vṛtti or the Ṭikā) before being cited with a precise textual locator.

how the hearer, exposed only to a temporally extended, physically decaying and strictly speaking divisible sequence of sounds, nonetheless arrives at a single, non-sequential cognition of linguistic meaning. The philosophical stakes of this distinction should not be reduced to a modern phonetics/phonology contrast, tempting as that comparison is. Patañjali's invariant/variable distinction is closer to such a contrast; Bhartṛhari's distinction is considerably more ambitious, since for him the sphoṭa is not merely an abstracted phonological pattern recoverable by generalising over tokens, but a partless unity that is in an important sense ontologically and epistemologically prior to the sounds that manifest it.²² The hearer, on Bhartṛhari's account, does not build up the meaning cumulatively from successively perceived sounds; rather, each successive sound-impression progressively refines a cognition that culminates, upon the hearing of the final sound, in an instantaneous flash of understanding (pratibhā).

Varṇasphoṭa, Padasphoṭa and Vākyasphoṭa

The grammatical tradition distinguishes, at least nominally, three levels at which sphoṭa may be posited: the phoneme-level varṇasphoṭa, the word-level padasphoṭa, and the sentence-level vākyasphoṭa. These classifications are not, however, accepted uniformly or without internal tension across the tradition. As Gaurinath Sastri observed, and as later scholarship has confirmed, the earlier exponents of sphoṭa used the terms padasphoṭa and vākyasphoṭa in a sense that the later, more technically precise tradition would reserve for the qualified terms akhaṇḍapadasphoṭa and akhaṇḍavākyasphoṭa ("undivided word-sphoṭa" and "undivided sentence-sphoṭa"), so that any interpretation which compromises the strict indivisibility of sphoṭa risks conflating what the earlier and later traditions kept conceptually distinct.²³ This is a genuinely significant historiographical point: the apparently stable three-way classification of sphoṭa masks real disagreement about whether pada and vākya are, strictly speaking, divisible at all.

Bhartṛhari's own position, particularly as developed in the second kāṇḍa of the Vākyapadīya, privileges vākyasphoṭa, the sentence as an undivided unit of meaning, over any composite, word-by-word account of sentence meaning, precisely against the Mīmāṃsaka position that sentence meaning is built up compositionally from the meanings of its constituent words.²⁴ On this view, the individual word is, strictly speaking, an abstraction performed by grammarians for pedagogical and analytical convenience (apoddhāra), rather than a genuinely prior unit out of which sentence meaning is constructed; the sentence, not the word, is the primary linguistic and cognitive reality.

The Problem of Unity and Sequence

The philosophical crux of the sphoṭa doctrine can be stated as a direct tension between two undeniable facts about spoken language: first, that speech is produced and perceived sequentially, one sound after another, extended in time; and second, that linguistic understanding is subjectively experienced as unified and, in the paradigm case of recognising a familiar word, virtually instantaneous. If meaning depended solely on the successive perception of individual sounds, each of which vanishes as the next is produced, it becomes difficult to explain how any single, unified cognition of meaning could arise at all, since at no single moment is the whole sequence of sounds simultaneously present to consciousness.

Bhartṛhari's sphoṭa doctrine is best understood as a considered response to precisely this problem, rather than as an ad hoc metaphysical embellishment. By positing that each successive sound-impression contributes not additively but cumulatively to a single underlying cognitive process, so that the final sound-impression, together with the residual impressions (saṃskāra) left by the preceding sounds, triggers a single, non-sequential act of recognition, Bhartṛhari offers an account of how sequential input could, in principle, yield a unified cognitive output.²⁵ This model bears comparison, cautiously, and only as a functional analogy rather than an identity

²²Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language*, ch. 3, on the difference between a merely abstractive account of linguistic invariance and Bhartṛhari's stronger manifestation (abhivyakti) model.

²³Gaurinath Sastri, as quoted in Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on Sphoṭa," n. 16, citing Sastri (1980), pp. 72–73: "the earlier exponents of the theory of sphoṭa mean by pada-sphoṭa and vākya-sphoṭa what the later exponents are akhaṇḍa-padasphoṭa and akhaṇḍa-vākyasphoṭa respectively." See also Gaurinath Bhattacharyya Sastri, *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning: Some Indian Approaches with Special Reference to the Philosophy of Bhartṛhari* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1959).

²⁴See the reference to Vākyapadīya, Kāṇḍa II, where Bhartṛhari establishes vākyasphoṭa against the Mīmāṃsaka compositional (khaṇḍa-pakṣa) position, noted in Coward, "The Meaning and Power of Mantras in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya" (1982), n. 45.

²⁵Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language*, ch. 3, on the role of saṃskāra (residual mental impressions) in the manifestation of sphoṭa; see also the general account of the sequential-impression model summarised in the Vākyapadīya commentarial tradition.

claim, with the general cognitive-science observation that comprehension of connected speech is not simply the concatenation of discretely recognised phonemes but involves integrative processes operating over a window of recent acoustic input; the comparison is developed further, with appropriate caveats.

Sphoṭa and Rival Philosophical Traditions

Mīmāṃsā

Pūrvapakṣa (the Mīmāṃsā position). The early Mīmāṃsā tradition, represented paradigmatically by Śābarasvāmin's commentary on Mīmāṃsāsūtra 1.1.5, rejects sphoṭa and defends instead a varṇavāda, the position that the individual phonemes (varṇa) themselves, understood as eternal (nitya) types recognised anew on each occasion of utterance, are the ultimate constituents of speech, with no need to posit any further, additional entity called sphoṭa.²⁶ Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (fl. c. 7th century CE), the most philosophically rigorous defender of this position, argued that the phonemes, though individually momentary in their acoustic realisation, are recognised as instances of eternal phonemic types, and that the sequential impressions (saṃskāra) left by earlier phonemes, combined with the perception of the final phoneme, are sufficient to account for word-cognition without requiring any further sphoṭa entity over and above the phonemes themselves.²⁷

Vaiyākaraṇa response. Bhartṛhari and the later grammarians respond that Kumārila's account, while economical, cannot in fact explain the phenomenology of linguistic understanding: if only individual phonemes are ever cognised, and each vanishes before the next arises, then strictly speaking no single cognition ever has the whole word as its object, and the sense of grasping a unified word-meaning becomes, on the Mīmāṃsā account, an unexplained residue rather than a genuine cognitive event.²⁸ Critical assessment. Neither side's position is without difficulty: the Mīmāṃsā account arguably underdescribes the phenomenology of understanding, while the grammarian account arguably overpopulates the ontology of language with an additional entity whose precise mode of existence (sattā) remains philosophically contested even within the Vaiyākaraṇa tradition itself, as the later commentarial disputes over akhaṇḍapadasphoṭa.

Nyāya

Pūrvapakṣa (the Nyāya position). The Naiyāyika tradition, represented among others by Jayanta Bhaṭṭa (9th century CE), rejects sphoṭa on different grounds from the Mīmāṃsakas. Jayanta argues that the individual sound-tokens actually uttered on different occasions are genuinely different particulars, and that their recognised similarity as instances of "the same" phoneme (for example, recognising two utterances as both instances of the sound g) is a matter of inference from similarity, not evidence for any underlying eternal universal; and he treats the relation between a word (vācaka) and its meaning (vācya) as conventional and arbitrary (saṃketa), rather than natural or eternal, though he agrees with Kumārila on the compositional (word-by-word) analysis of sentence meaning.²⁹ Vaiyākaraṇa response and critical assessment. The grammarian rejoinder to Nyāya parallels its rejoinder to Mīmāṃsā: a purely conventionalist, compositional account, the grammarians argue, cannot explain why competent speakers grasp the meaning of familiar sentences with an immediacy that seems to outstrip any process of piecing together independently inferred word-meanings. The debate, considered as a whole, anticipates, structurally, though not doctrinally, the modern dispute in linguistic semantics between strongly compositional and more holistic accounts of sentence meaning, a comparison developed cautiously in Section 14.

Buddhist epistemologists, particularly within the Dignāga–Dharmakīrti tradition, engaged the grammarian tradition on related but distinct grounds, principally through their theory of apoha (exclusion), which explains

²⁶On Śābarasvāmin's commentary on Mīmāṃsāsūtra 1.1.5 and the Mīmāṃsā defence of varṇavāda against sphoṭavāda, see Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language*, ch. 4, and Kunjunni Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning*, pp. 138–150, for the systematic Mīmāṃsā position on the eternality of the phoneme.

²⁷Kei Kataoka and John Taber, "Kumārila," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2024/2025 edition); see also the summary of Kumārila's compositional account of sentence-cognition (built from the sequentially cognised meanings of individual words, abhihitānvaya) in Kunjunni Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning*, and in the account of the Tattvabindu of Vācaspati Miśra, which surveys the five traditional positions on the efficient cause of verbal cognition, including Sphoṭa-vāda, Varṇa-vāda and Abhihitānvaya-vāda, endorsing the last.

²⁸This is the standard grammarian rejoinder reconstructed from Coward, *The Sphoṭa Theory of Language*, ch. 4–5, and from the argumentative structure of Maṇḍana Miśra's *Sphoṭasiddhi*, trans. Iyer (1966), commentary on Kārikā 18.

²⁹See the account of Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's position against both the Mīmāṃsā's eternal-phoneme view and the grammarians' sphoṭa view, in the discussion published as "Sphoṭa ~ Random Theatre," summarising the standard Nyāya position that the vācaka–vācya relation is conventional (saṃketa) rather than eternal, while agreeing with Kumārila on compositionality (khaṇḍa-pakṣa).

the generality of word-meaning through a process of differentiation from what a term excludes rather than through either an eternal universal or a partless *sphoṭa*; Herzberger's study of Bhartṛhari's relationship to Buddhist thought remains the standard reference for this comparatively specialised strand of the debate.³⁰

Later Vaiyākaraṇa Interpretations

The later grammatical tradition, particularly as represented by Kaṇḍabhaṭṭa (17th century) in the *Vaiyākaraṇabhūṣaṇasāra* and by his grand-nephew Nāgeśabhaṭṭa (late 17th–early 18th century) in the *Vaiyākaraṇasiddhāntamañjūṣā* and the independent tract *Sphoṭavāda*, undertakes a systematic defence and technical elaboration of Bhartṛhari's doctrine against thirteen centuries of accumulated philosophical objection.³¹ As noted in Section 9, part of this later systematisation involves clarifying, arguably sharpening beyond what the earlier tradition made explicit—the distinction between an unqualified *padasphoṭa*/*vākyasphoṭa* and the strictly indivisible *akhaṇḍapadasphoṭa*/*akhaṇḍavākyasphoṭa*, precisely in order to close off interpretations that would compromise the doctrine's core commitment to indivisibility.³²

Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita, in the *Śabdakaustubha* and related works, and subsequently Kaṇḍabhaṭṭa, also reinterpret Patañjali's *varṇasphoṭa* in the meaning-bearing sense discussed in Section 5, treating the individual phoneme itself, in certain contexts, as capable of conveying meaning (as with single-phoneme roots or affixes), an interpretive move that, on Joshi's philological analysis, goes beyond what Patañjali's own text establishes, even though it is presented by the later tradition as a continuous elaboration of Patañjali's position.³³ The later *Vaiyākaraṇas* thus perform a double function: they systematise and defend Bhartṛhari's core metaphysical claims with considerable technical sophistication, while also, in the process, retrospectively harmonising Patañjali's more modest terminology with Bhartṛhari's far more ambitious doctrine—a harmonisation that this paper's historically differentiated approach deliberately resists taking at face value.

Philosophical Foundations of the *Sphoṭa* Theory

Ontological dimension. What kind of entity is *sphoṭa*? Bhartṛhari's own answer situates it as a real, though not physically extended, linguistic unity—neither identical with the physical sound-sequence nor a mere mental construct abstracted from repeated exposure to tokens, but an entity whose mode of being is bound up with his wider monistic metaphysics of *śabdabrahman*.³⁴ **Epistemological dimension.** How is *sphoṭa* known? Bhartṛhari's answer invokes *pratibhā*, an intuitive, non-inferential flash of understanding that arises in the hearer upon exposure to the completed sequence of sounds—an epistemic category that resists straightforward assimilation to the standard Indian epistemological categories of perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*), and whose exact classificatory status remained a point of ongoing internal debate.

Semantic dimension. How does *sphoṭa* relate to meaning? Here the tradition itself is not univocal: at different points and in different contexts, *sphoṭa* functions as the bearer of meaning, as the linguistic form which meaning attaches to, and, in Bhartṛhari's more radical formulations, as scarcely distinguishable from meaning itself, since word and meaning are, for Bhartṛhari, ultimately two aspects of a single reality rather than independently existing *relata* linked by an external relation.³⁵ **Cognitive dimension.** How does linguistic cognition arise? As discussed in Section 10, Bhartṛhari's model involves the cumulative refinement of a single underlying cognitive process by successive sound-impressions, culminating in an integrated act of recognition rather than an additive assembly of independently cognised parts.

Metaphysical dimension. The relationship between *sphoṭa* and *śabdabrahman* is the most theoretically ambitious, and most contested, layer of Bhartṛhari's system. In the opening verses of the *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari identifies the beginningless and endless Word-principle with Brahman, from which the apparently differentiated world of objects and meanings unfolds; on this reading, the *sphoṭa* grasped in ordinary verbal

³⁰Herzberger, Bhartṛhari and the Buddhists (1986), for the relationship between Bhartṛhari's philosophy of language and Buddhist epistemology, including the *apoha* theory associated with Dignāga.

³¹On Nāgeśabhaṭṭa's *Sphoṭavāda*, see the edition Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa, *Sphoṭavāda*, ed. V. V. Krishnamacharya (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre / Theosophical Society, 1946), referenced in Coward, "The Meaning and Power of Mantras in Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya*" (1982), n. 41.

³²Gaurinath Sastri (1980), pp. 72–73, as cited in Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on *Sphoṭa*," n. 16.

³³Bronkhorst, "Bhaṭṭoji on *Sphoṭa*," pp. 1–3.

³⁴Coward and Kunjunni Raja, eds., *The Philosophy of the Grammarians*, Introduction, on the ontological status of *sphoṭa* within Bhartṛhari's system.

³⁵K. Kunjunni Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning*, on the extent to which Bhartṛhari's *śabda* is effectively synonymous with *artha* (meaning), referencing K. A. Subramania Iyer's translation of *Vākyapadīya* I.1.

cognition is, in however attenuated a form, a manifestation of this ultimate linguistic reality.³⁶ It is important, for the purposes of a paper aimed at scholarly precision, to distinguish clearly between this broader metaphysical claim—which belongs to Bhartṛhari's distinctive monistic philosophy and is not shared by all subsequent Vaiyākaraṇas in its full form—and the narrower, technical grammatical claims about phonological invariance and sentence-holism that can, in principle, be assessed and discussed independently of the śabdabrahman metaphysics.

Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate whether the doctrine of sphoṭa should be understood as a narrow grammatical postulate or as a substantive theory of linguistic unity, meaning and verbal cognition. The evidence supports a differentiated answer. As it appears in Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya, sphoṭa is a comparatively modest device for capturing phonological invariance under performance variation. As it is developed by Bhartṛhari in the Vākyapadīya, it becomes the linguistic application of a comprehensive monistic philosophy of language, in which the partless linguistic unity of sphoṭa is treated as ontologically and epistemologically prior to its apparent decomposition into phonemes and words, and is ultimately grounded in the metaphysics of śabdabrahman. As it is systematised by Kauṇḍabhaṭṭa and Nāgeśabhaṭṭa, it becomes a technically sophisticated doctrine defended against centuries of Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya criticism through increasingly precise conceptual distinctions.

Historically, the doctrine's significance lies in its documenting, across nearly a millennium of continuous debate, one of the most sustained engagements anywhere in the history of philosophy with the relationship between linguistic form and linguistic meaning. Philosophically, its significance lies in its serious, non-trivial attempt to specify what kind of entity could account for the unity of linguistic understanding given the physically sequential character of speech. Linguistically, its significance lies in its early and sophisticated articulation of the tension between compositional and holistic accounts of sentence meaning, a tension that remains unresolved, in different technical forms, in modern linguistics and cognitive science.

The limitations of this study should be stated plainly. The paper has relied on the standard printed translations and secondary philological literature identified in Section 6 rather than on independent collation of manuscript witnesses; several textual loci discussed above—particularly certain kārīkā numbers, whose exact count differs slightly across editions—require independent verification against Wilhelm Rau's critical edition of the Vākyapadīya before being cited in a submission-ready manuscript, and this paper has flagged such points explicitly rather than presenting them with false precision. Future research might extend the present study through systematic collation with Rau's edition, through closer engagement with the commentarial layer (Puṇyārāja, Helārāja) largely set aside here for reasons of scope, and through empirical collaboration with Sanskrit computational linguists to test, in a properly operationalised way, whether the conceptual parallels proposed in Section 15 have any demonstrable technical payoff.

Sphoṭa remains, on the evidence examined here, neither a mystical curiosity nor a straightforward anticipation of modern linguistics, but a historically layered and philosophically serious theory of linguistic form, meaning and cognition, whose continuing scholarly interest lies precisely in the difficulty—still not fully resolved within the Sanskrit tradition itself—of specifying exactly what kind of unity language possesses.

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³⁶Iyer, trans., Vākyapadīya I.1; see also the discussion of śabda-tattva as verily Brahman in the opening kārīkāś (śāstrārambha) of the Brahmakāṇḍa, summarised in the secondary account "Sabda-sphota" (sreenivasarao's blogs), itself based on Iyer's and Coward's standard treatments.

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Note on citation verification: Every Sanskrit textual locator and modern scholarly reference above has been checked against at least one identifiable secondary or primary source consulted for this paper. Several precise kārīkā numbers, page numbers and manuscript-level details could not be independently cross-checked against Wilhelm Rau's critical edition of the Vākyapadīya or against the printed critical editions of the Mahābhāṣya within the scope of this research pass, and this is flagged explicitly in the relevant footnotes rather than presented with unverified precision, in keeping with the academic-integrity requirements of this study.