The Perception and Contrary Cognition of the Word in the Sphoṭa Theory

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0. Introduction

The Sphoṭa theory is at the peak of the development of the linguistic philosophy in medieval India. Sanskrit grammarians conceive of sphaṭa as the smallest, non-sequential (akrama) meaning-bearing unit of language. With regard to its manifestation, we can see the first concrete discussion in the Vākyapadīya of Bhartrhari (5c.), Maṇḍanamiśra (8c.), while acceding to his thought, further developed the Sphoṭa theory by reformulating the logic in his Sphoṭasiddhi (SS). According to this explanation, the word (śabda) is not manifested by some sequential phonemes, but by a process in which “the unitary but ambiguous cognition of the word becomes gradually clearer.” And in this process sounds (dhvani/nāda) play a more important role than phonemes (varṇa).

Then what is his view of phonemes? Maṇḍana considers the cognition of phonemes as a contrary cognition (viparyāsa), and tries to incorporate it into the Sphoṭa theory. In this paper, drawing attention to the discussion of the contrary cognition in SS, I try to make clear (1) why the concept of viparyāsa needs to be accepted, (2) how opponents (Mimamsaka = Varṇavādin) think of it, (3) how Maṇḍana defines it based on the VP, and (4) the relationship of the cognition of phonemes and sphaṭa.

1. The Cognition of Phonemes—the Necessity of the Idea of Viparyāsa

In the manifestation of the word phonemes have no place in the Sphoṭa theory. But in practice, we perceive (or seem to perceive) not an unitary sphaṭa but partial phonemes. We cannot claim that both can be related to each other, because phonemes and sphaṭa are categorically distinct entities: the latent impression (bhāvanā/samskāra/vāsanā) produced by phonemes can never support the manifestation of sphaṭa.

To answer such a problem, the Sphoṭavādin needs another postulation. Therefore he adds
the concept of viparyāsa to the Sphoṭa theory. But here arises a problem. Can we define the cognition of phonemes as contrary (erroneous) cognition? Of course, the Varṇavādin opposes such an idea.

2. **Viparyāsa Defined by the Varṇavādin**

The Varṇavādin defines contrary cognition as follows, *Viparyāsa* is non-grasping (*agra-ha*) or grasping in a different way (*anyathāvaprapākaśana*). And there must be a trigger (*nimitta*) for its arising. In the case of a word however, there is no trigger of *viparyāsa*—sounds (*nāda*) are not a trigger because they are the cause of ascertaining the real nature of the word (*tattvaparicchedahetu*).4)

Moreover *viparyāsa* has no certainty or inevitability (*niyama*). To be more precise, for example in the case of a rope and a snake, (1) the misunderstanding of rope as snake does not always (necessarily) take place. (2) The kind of misunderstanding is different for each person—one misunderstands it as a snake, one as a stream of water. (3) The process of misunderstanding is also uncertain—in some cases one misunderstands first as a snake and next as a stream of water, and in some cases the reverse.5)

In this way *viparyāsa* possesses no certainty, while the cognition of phonemes do possess certainty. Therefore the Varṇavādin insists that *viparyāsa* cannot be applied to the process of understanding meaning, much less can it be applied to the cognition of phonemes.

3. **Maṇḍana’s Acceptance and Re-definition of Viparyāsa**

Against the opposition mentioned above, Maṇḍana claims that *viparyāsa* occurs inevitably in every cognition that includes an understanding of meaning. Although the point of departure is the same—for Maṇḍana also, *viparyāsa* is defined as non-grasping or grasping in a different way—in his position, any understanding has its process interrupted by grasping otherwise, just as one misunderstands trees seen from a distance as an elephant, or one misunderstands a rope as a snake when one enters a dark room. Additionally, the knowledge of the elephant is the effect of the contact of the trees with the sense organ, so it has trees as its object. That is to say, the contrary cognition will be necessarily corrected at some point. If the contact of trees with the sense organ is not the cause of the cognition of the elephant, eventually it will produce the cognition of trees.6) The previous experience
becomes the cause of a correct understanding giving rise to a latent impression whereby subsequent experiences become stronger.

4. The Function of Sound as the Cause of Viparyāsa

In Maṇḍana’s position, sounds have two ambivalent functions, that is, they are the cause of judgment of the real state as well as the cause of a contrary cognition. It is the same as in the case of grasping: the contact of object with the sense organ is the cause of both, the cause of judgment and the cause of a contrary cognition.

Sounds possess mutual similarity on different levels, according to the equality of internal effort of the mouth (karana) and the place of articulation (sthāna) etc. Because of this similarity, there remains a small confusion and it can produce only partial knowledge. One imagines that one grasps the subordinate elements gradually in order to reach the goal which is unitary varṇa, pada or vākya (sphoṭa).

5. The Inevitability of Viparyāsa

We saw before three kinds of problems concerning the inevitability of viparyāsa. Against this, Maṇḍana accepts all kinds of inevitability.

1) The inevitability of viparyāsa: Because of the similarity of sounds, one inevitably analyses the constituent elements in the unitary entity. \( \Rightarrow \) Viparyāsa inevitably occurs.

2) The inevitability of the form of viparyāsa: For any listener or speaker, the form that results in an effect from analysing varṇa, pada and vākya is determined. Therefore the trigger of viparyāsa for one person is the same as the trigger for another person. \( \Rightarrow \) The form of viparyāsa is determined.

3) The inevitability of the process of viparyāsa: For example when we understand some number, every number making up that number is subsumed in a particular sequence. In the case of a word also, previous cognitions of phonemes have a particular sequence, but it is lost by the time of the manifestation of sphoṭa. \( \Rightarrow \) The sequence of viparyāsa is certain.

In this way, (1)–(3) of the inevitability, which was refuted by the Varṇavādin are justified by Maṇḍana. In fact, however, Maṇḍana’s definition of viparyāsa is quite unique, while the Varṇavādin’s one is very common.

Also, we find that the Sphoṭavādin accepts the cognition of phonemes (= division of the word) at a lower level as viparyāsa, despite the fact that they insist on the indivisibility of
the word. But as mentioned above, one does not stop in the contrary cognition, which inevitably takes place, and finally one must achieve the cognition of the truth. Therefore one repeats the process of analysis when one listens to or speaks the word, and once one perceives every part one understands that such a cognition is erroneous, and attains the real word = sphota.

6. Viparyāsa as the Cause of Correct Understanding

The contrary cognition must be experienced for the sake of the attainment of sphota. Only after analyzing gradually from phonemes to a sentence, one can attain the word that is meaningful, and then one realizes that such process of analysis was erroneous. It is not until discovering it to be contrary cognition that one realizes the true process of manifestation of sphota. In other words, one cannot attain the correct understanding without contrary cognition. 13) Therefore contrary cognition is said to be the cause of correct understanding.

7. Denial of Co-existence of Phonemes and Sphota—“reverting” (viparyaya)

Now we come to the question of whether phonemes can co-exist with sphota even if they are not erroneous.

Maṇḍana answers that “sphota penetrated by the concept of divisible phonemes” cannot be accepted. Even though one thinks that one perceives each divided element at first, in the final, indivisible cognition, every kind of discrimination of varṇa or pada is removed. At that level, the concept of phoneme is completely lost. 14) Such a moment of awareness of viparyāsa is the moment of “reverting” (viparyaya) into the process of the manifestation of sphota, and there one returns to the correct process of perception. He realizes the process leading from phonemes to sentence is erroneous, and the real process of manifestation of the word is that leading from the vague to the clear.

8. Conclusion

Viparyāsa as defined by Maṇḍana: Viparyāsa in a word-cognition is the cognition of constituent phonemes or other subordinated elements, and it necessarily occurs in the manifestation of sphota. Its form and sequence of process are also fixed in any case, We can find that his viparyāsa is not a “misunderstanding” but rather, the process of judging what it is—after seeing the object—is compared to the manifestation of word. And such an erroneous
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cognition necessarily changes into the correct understanding. It is called reverting.

The relationship between the cognition of phonemes and that of sphoṭa: Separately from the process of the manifestation of sphoṭa, the cognition of subordinate elements such as phonemes takes place inevitably. But after reverting to the correct understanding (viparnaya), one realizes that the process of the cognition of phonemes is not authentic, and there is another true process. Thus the Sphoṭavādin gives room to the Vāraṇa theory. By adopting the method of awareness of the error by completing the process, Maṇḍana informs the ordinary cognitive process, which we experience (or believe to experience) in practical cases, with the theoretical process.

1) See SS k.18 (p.125). 2) SS p.134, l.l-3. 3) SS k.6. 4) SS p.135, l.2-136, l.3. 5) SS p.137, l.1-138, l.3. 6) SS p.140, l.1-2. 7) SS k.20. 8) SS p.145, l.3-p.149, l.2. According to Maṇḍana, both viparyāsa and tattvapariccheda are subsumed in the perception (upalabdhi) and they are same as far as class (jāti) is concerned.


Abbreviation and Primary Source

SS The Sphoṭasiddhi of Ācārya Maṇḍanamiśra with the Gopālikā of Ṛṣiputra Paramēśvara, Edited by S. K. Rāmanātha Śastri, Madras University Sanskrit Series, no.6 [Madras]: University of Madras, 1931.

Secondary Sources


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