Dharmakīrti’s Varṇa Theory in the *Sphoṭasiddhi*

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0. Introduction

Maṇḍanamiśra (8c.), who is the successor of the linguistic philosophy established by Bhartṛhari (5c.), developed the Sphoṭa theory in his *Sphoṭasiddhi* (SS). In the latter part of the SS, he shifts the focus of his criticism from the Varṇa theory of Kumārilabhaṭṭa (7c.) to the Buddhists’ theory concerning the non-eternity of Varṇa. Through quoting many phrases of the first chapter of Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika* (PV/PVS) (7c.), Maṇḍana first summarizes and then rejects the Buddhist’s theory that criticizes the Mīmāṃsakas, who insist that phonemes in a given sequence are the conveyer of meaning. In this paper, on the basis of SS and Rṣiputraparameśvara’s commentary *Gopālikā*, I shall illustrate how Maṇḍanamiśra interprets Dharmakīrti’s argument.

1. Dharmakīrti’s Opinion 1: Phonemes as the Cause of Understanding

On the basis of the Buddhist teaching of the momentariness of every existent, Dharmakīrti rejects the idea that phonemes are not manmade (*apauruṣeya*). In his view, there is no distinction of phonemes between Vedic passages and worldly speech. This view of Dharmakīrti’s goes against both of Mīmāṃsā and the Grammarians.

**Buddhists’ Standpoint:**

- Phonemes are manmade. An eternal sentence or word (*pada*) does not exist.
- There is no sentence different from phonemes. / The nature of sentence does not exist beyond phonemes.²
- Phonemes are the cause of the understanding of meaning.³
- Phonemes are momentary existents, and therefore, they are distinct and new in every word, even though they consist of phonemes that appear to be the same (like *jarā, rāja*).⁴

The view that a sentence forms a single entity is refuted because any understanding of
meaning is caused by phonemes. If it were a single entity, it must be answered whether it
can be separated into pieces and also whether its parts are meaningful. On the basis of his
understanding that phonemes are manmade, Dharmakirti shows contradiction in every al-
ternative regardless whether the sentence is eternal or not. 5)

2. Dharmakirti’s Opinion 2: Prior-Posterior Relation of mind-moments

What makes phonemes distinct from each other is the prior-posterior relation. This relation
is equivalent to the causality of the mind-moments of speaker and hearer.

SS: [Q] Then what is the prior-posterior relation? [A] It is the causal relation (kāryakāra-
ṇatā) between the [speaker’s] mind-moments producing them (the phonemes) and the
[hearer’s mind-moments] grasping them (the phonemes). In the same way, the nature of
the phonemes, which is accomplished by the [speaker’s] consciousness (pratīyāya) that serves as
both cause and effect and which accomplishes [the hearer’s consciousness serving as both
cause and effect], is quite different from word to word. This is because the latent impressions
of the mind-moments, which are the agents [of the phonemes], are different. Therefore dis-
tinction of meaning [between sarāḥ and rasāḥ] is established. 6)

The causality of the speaker’s mind-moments: (1) the relation between the speaker’s
intention (vivakṣā) of uttering the word and the intention of uttering phonemes, or (2) the
relation between such intention and phonemes produced from it.

The causality of the hearer’s mind-moments: the relation between phonemes and the
hearer’s perception or cognition and the knowledge of the word.

The prior-posterior relation of phonemes is the causal relation (kāryakāranaṇatā) of these
mind-moments, and a phoneme itself has distinction based on such a relation. In other
words, the prior-posterior relation is nothing but phonemes caused differently by the causal
relation: /s/ of sarāḥ and /s/ of rasāḥ are quite different by nature because the latent im-
pression of each /s/ is different through the causal relation of mind-moments. Convention
(saṅketa) works for combining the speaker’s mind and the hearer’s mind, so that the hearer
can infer the intention of the speaker. 7)

3. Maṇḍanamiśra’s Criticism 1: Difference in the Idea of Universal

According to the Buddhists, every worldly existent is momentary. Therefore, they do not
accept the existence of the universal (sāmānya). When the objects of knowledge are clas-
sified into either the individual character (svaḷakṣaṇa) or the generic character (sāmānya-
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*lakṣaṇa*, Dharmakīrti accepts only the individual character as the object of perception (*pratyakṣa*). According to him, the generic character is just an imaginary conception. There is no universal of words because they are caused by momentary phonemes.

Addressing Dharmakīrti’s argument, Maṇḍana asks how completely dissimilar phonemes without any universal can cause the understanding of meaning. How does the hearer understand a word if it is something completely new?³ Maṇḍana accepts the universal broadly as the eternal existent related to the word or phonemes, and regards them as the objects of the auditory faculty.⁹ This idea is in contrast with that of Kumārila’s Vāṇavādins, who admit the universal only to a limited extent. The reason why the Mīmāṃsakas reject the universal of phonemes is quite different from that of the Buddhists. For the Mīmāṃsakas, each phoneme, which is an eternal and pervading substance, is identified as the same phoneme by recognition (*pratyabhijñāna*).¹⁰

For Maṇḍana in the statement “we understand the meaning from the word cow” (*gaśābd-dād arthāṃ pratipadāyāmahe*), “the word” means neither the universal nor the individual, but the nature of word (*sabdātman*). The word-ness or phoneme-ness functions as the quality of the word, as well as the means of recognizing the word as itself.¹¹ However in Dharmakīrti’s opinion, the cause of understanding of meaning is phonemes newly produced instantaneously. But in that case, distinct words or phonemes cannot be established, because he does not accept any similarity.


Dharmakīrti’s view that the prior-posterior relation of phonemes is the causal relation of mind-moments is criticized by Maṇḍana from both the speaker’s and the hearer’s side. In neither case does he find an adequate explanation of the connection between the speaker’s and the hearer’s mind-moments.

- **Against the causal relation of hearer’s mind-moments:** There is no difference between utterance of phonemes continually by multiple speakers and by one speaker. Even if various speakers utter phonemes, the hearer should get some meaning, because those phonemes have a sequence (prior-posterior relation). However this would happen exceptionally, only when the speech of one was not interrupted by another’s. Here the causal relation of hearer’s mind-moments is criticized in the same way in which of Kumārila’s idea for the sameness of speaker was criticized.¹²
Against the causal relation of speaker's mind-moments: If the speaker is in an enclosed space and the hearer cannot know how many speakers there are, it is impossible for him to know the causal relation of the speaker's mind-moments. This is because the causal relation is known by the sameness of the speaker; and one cannot know that without the conception of word, unless the speaker is in front. Even though, as Dharmakirti said, the causality of speaker's mind-moments could be accepted as combining phonemes with the mind, its function is not so essential for the understanding of meaning. Maṇḍana concludes that the most important cause of this is the knowledge of word, which we can get at the time of convention.

5. Conclusion

The linguistic theory of Dharmakirti treats phonemes, which are lost in every moment, as accomplishing the word (pada) by combining them with mind-moments of the speaker and hearer. As Ōmae [1999: p.299, ll.16–23] points out, what plays an important role in his logic is the convention. Maṇḍana criticizes this by asking whether the causality of speaker's mind-moments is really needed at the point of convention. On this point, Maṇḍana's argument is quite similar to that with which he accepted Kumārila's Varna theory to a certain extent by importing it into the process of perception. In other words, whether there is a causal relation or distinction of phonemes in the middle of perception, Maṇḍana basically makes a concession to their ideas as unessential but not impossible before rejecting them in the end as contrary cognition (viparyāsa).

1) See Ihara [1961]. 2) PV k.247cd; PVS p.127, ll.3–8; SS p.210, l.1–p.211, l.1. 3) PVS p.127, ll.6–8; SS p.211, l.1. 4) PVS p.127, ll.8–13; SS p.211, l.2–p.213, l.1. 5) PV kk.248–249; PVS p.127, l.16–p.128, l.27; SS p.213, l.1–p.218, l.1. 6) SS p.232, l.1–p.233, l.2. This part corresponds to PV (kk. 301–304) and PVS (p.160, l.19–p.161, l.6). See Wakahara [1988: 12–14]. 7) See Ōmae [1999]. 8) SS p.240, ll.3–5. 9) SS p.240, l.1–p.24, l.4. 10) For the Mīmāṃsaka, the object of the auditory faculty = word is nothing but phonemes themselves, which are not any universal (vartavta etc.) related to them. Ōmae [2004] argues on the relevant part of Ślokaśāstra Sphotaśāstra, and refers also to the idea of universal of Prabhākara and Maṇḍana. 11) The topic here is not the meaning target of the word. By recognition (pratyabhijñāna) one grasps the relation between a word and its meaning. SS p.74, l.1–p.75, l.2. 12) SS p.245, l.1–p.246, l.2. 13) SS p.248, l.1–p.249, l.2. 14) SS p.250, l.1–p.251, l.2.
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〈Abbreviations and Primary Sources〉

**SS**  
*The Sphoṭasiddhi of Ācārya Maṇḍanamiśra with the Gopaḷikā of Ṛṣiputra Paśmeśvara.* Edited by S. K. Rāmanātha Šastri, Madras University Sanskrit Series, no.6. [Madras]: University of Madras, 1931.

**PV/PVS**  

〈Secondary Source〉

**ŌMAE [1999]**  

**ŌMAE [2004]**  

**IHARA [1961]**  

**WAKAHARA [1988]**  

(This work was supported in part by a Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows Grant Number 24·5455)

〈Key words〉  
*sphoṭa, Sphoṭasiddhi, Maṇḍanamiśra, vyākaraṇa, Dharmakirti, ānupūrvi, krama*  
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