Generic Concept and Class-term in the Epistemic Analysis of the Word

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1. Introduction

The Grammarians in ancient India claimed a necessary relationship between the word (śabda) and its referent (artha). According to their theory, as long as it is called “a word” or to be precise, “a linguistic unit,” it must have a referent. In order to discuss this issue, however, one cannot but face a more fundamental issue, namely, the question what śabda is. Patañjali (2c. BC) introduced in his Mahābhāsyā the concept of sphoṭa by differentiating it from mere sound, and later, Bhartṛhari (5c.), who examined the question more philosophically, pursued the argument on the nature of the word by resorting to sphoṭa as well as other relevant terms. He equated the word’s generic aspect (sāmānyā) with the word’s own form (svarūpa) by using the term śabdākṛti, “the word’s generic form” on the basis of Patañjali’s argument. 1) Ākṛti is explained as the conceptual form arising gradually in the mind through the process of perceiving the word. So it is not the actual (or superficial) form of the word, but the concealed true nature that is perceived as it is beyond mere sounds. Accordingly, we may formulate the definition of śabda in the following manner:

[Condition 1] When the linguistic convention of a śabda is known,
[1] the śabda is connected both with its own form (svarūpa = ākṛti = sphoṭa) and with its meaning. Such a śabda is equivalent to pada or vākya “the word.”

[Condition 2] When the linguistic convention of a śabda is not known,
[2] the śabda is connected only with its own form (svarūpa = ākṛti = sphoṭa). Such a śabda is merely dhvani “sound.”

In this paper, I examine how Bhartṛhari and his follower Maṇḍanamiśra (7–8c.) discuss śabda or sphoṭa using the idea of the class (jāti), which is closely related with the
discussions of sāmānyā and ākṛti but has a slightly differing nuance.

2. Bhartṛhari’s Idea of the Generic Concept of the Word

In the Vākyapadīya (VP), Bhartṛhari discusses the class (jāti) as the alternative concept of the generic form (ākṛti). In general, the class is one of the causes of the application of a word (pravṛttinimitta). For example, the word gauḥ is applied to a cow because it has cowness (gotva). When we are discussing the word itself, however, we should go back to a more fundamental level, namely to the situation in which the word’s own form is the referent. In that case, the word gauḥ is applied to a sound /gauh/ because the sound has gośabdajāti as its essential quality. Also the class is not the class as the word (sabdajāti) because otherwise all words would reduce to that concept. It is rather the class of individual words. To explain, the class of the word X is extracted from numerous sound variations of X, and it is equated with the X’s own form (X-svarūpa). It is equated also with X’s generic form (X-ākṛti) and with the generic concept of X (X-sāmānyā = X-tva).

As to the relation between the word’s own form and the class, Bhartṛhari simply introduces several different opinions without providing his own conclusion. 2) However, the equation of svarūpa with jāti is inherited by Maṇḍana in his Sphotaśiddhi (SS), though this concept is explained in a slightly different manner. Thus, the two concepts of śabdavārūpa and jāti are at the very center of their language theory.

3. Maṇḍana’s Idea of the Word as the Class-term

After refuting the position that each individual phoneme can denote the meaning, Maṇḍana refers to the opponent’s hypothesis that phonemes composing the unitary word are the cause of the understanding of the word’s meaning. In this case the word is taken to be the collection (samudāya) of phonemes. 3) It is generally accepted that the collection is unitary even though it consists of parts. Then why do we not agree that the word is its phonemes? To prevent this, Maṇḍana points out the difference in the concepts of the class (jāti) and the collection (samudāya). 4) In the Grammarians’ tradition, as stated by Patañjali, the word gauḥ can refer to both the cow as the class and a cow as an individual member of that class. But such words, when they refer to the class of the cow, cannot denote the collection (samudāya) of cows. Here Maṇḍana equates the former with sphaṭa, and the latter with the collection of phonemes.
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As Bhartrhari said in his VP, Maṇḍana also emphasizes that “the word” in the statement “we understand the meaning from the word gauḥ” is not the word as the class (sabdajāti), because in that case the word gauḥ and the word aśvah would be the same.5) This sabdajāti is the property of all words (= sābdatva). It is that by means of which we can recognize a word as a word. However, “the word gauḥ” in the same statement is not an individual word gauḥ (gosabdavyakti), which would include numerous variations in accordance with each occurrence of speech. Here an individual word means the word gauḥ as one of the many instances of the same word gauḥ in different modalities.

The words brāhmaṇah and vrksaḥ are class-terms (jātiśabdāḥ) that refer to the individuals in their domains. When a class-term is used to express its components and has the same substratum as them, it refers to a number of individuals. Likewise, gosabda is the class-term which represents all of the gosabdas uttered by different speakers. In other words, Maṇḍana proposes here that gospoṭa, which is extracted from numerous gosabdas as their essential core, is the same as the gosabda as a class-term.

4. Maṇḍana’s Idea of the Collection or Totality

On the basis of his theory of the class-term, Maṇḍana negates the possibility that “the word” refers to the collection (samudāya) of various individual phonemes.6)

The concept of the class-term (jātiśabda) is not same as that of the collection of individuals. Just as no individual tree can achieve a concept of the forest, so no individual phoneme can achieve a concept of the word. For that we require a different perspective. However, there is a situation in which the class-term denotes the collection of individuals.7) The opponent proposes that sahakārāḥ in the plural is used with vanam in singular in the same case-ending, and likewise, plural phonemes are in the same locus with the unitary word. Against this, Maṇḍana points out that there is no word here denoting the collection of phonemes, while sahakārāḥ refers to individual mango-trees and therefore is in grammatical congruity with vanam. If they were really in the same situation, the word gauḥ should be plural. Namely, the opponent’s claim is not appropriate unless an expression which denotes plurality of phonemes (g-au-ḥ-Jas) is in grammatical congruity with śabdaḥ.8) Therefore, Maṇḍana refutes the idea that “the word” means the collection of individual phonemes.
The concept of the class-term teaches us that the different pronunciations or usages of each individual word are reduced to one concept, which is referred to by Bhartrhari as \( \text{sabdasvarupa, sphota, and sadakrti.} \) Maṇḍana does not depend on Bhartrhari’s statements to explain the essential core of the word, but what he explains through the term \( \text{jatiśabda} \) corresponds to what we have seen in the VP’s explanation of \( \text{jati.} \) And as we have seen before, the concept of \( \text{jati} \) is closely related with that of \( \text{akrti} \) or \( \text{sāmānyya.} \) From this very fact, it should be appropriate to conclude that Bhartrhari’s and Maṇḍana’s concepts of \( \text{sphota} \) equally refer to the universal idea of an individual word, whose form is conceptual.

5. Conclusion

Maṇḍana’s point is that the concept of the class (\( \text{jati} \)) is different from that of the collection (\( \text{samudāya}. \) As far as the word \( \text{X} \) is concerned, the class of \( \text{X} \) represents all the ways of expressing \( \text{X} \) in different modalities. Bhartrhari’s related idea, i.e., the word’s generic form (\( \text{sabdakrti} \)), focuses on its conceptual form. Maṇḍana’s idea of the class, on the other hand, is more focused on its property. The concept of the collection requires a different perspective, which cannot coexist with that of the class or the generic form, just as we do not focus on the components of the cow (tail, dewlap, and so on) when we think of the cow as the class which is extracted from all cows.

Maṇḍana’s idea of \( \text{jatiśabda} \) gives us an important clue that he was familiar with the discussion of \( \text{jati} \) in the VP. Maṇḍana explains this idea in an easily understandable manner by using the class-term, whose \( \text{jati} \) is on the side of the referent and therefore is slightly different from the case of \( \text{sphota}. \) But by introducing this idea, Maṇḍana succeeds in relating \( \text{sphota} \) with the concept of universal. The most serious issue of the unitary entity is how to perceive it without parts. Therefore, after refuting the idea of the collection of phonemes, Maṇḍana proceeds to the discussion of the perception of the unitary word, \( \text{sphota}. \)

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Notes

1) This idea of equating \( \text{sabdasvarūpa} \) and \( \text{sabdakrti} \) has been proposed by Akamatsu [1996a] and Akamatsu [1996b], both of which are annotated Japanese translations of the Mahābhāṣyadīpikā I. 16.26–18.5. Akamatsu focuses on the eternity of the word and, using also the VP, points out that the word’s generic form (\( \text{sabdakrti} \)) is conceptually equivalent to \( \text{sabdajāti} \) and \( \text{sabdasvarūpa}. \)
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2) Bhartṛhari lists various views about the concept of jāti related to the Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.1.68 (VP, vol. 1, p. 128, l. 1–p. 132, l. 7), but he fails to conclude. 3) Ihara [1981] gives a Japanese translation of this part of the SS. 4) SS v. 9 (p. 73, ll. 3–4): “It is not seen that the class-terms (jātiṣabda) denote the collection (samudāya). For those [terms] address either the class (jāti) or the individuals united with the class.” 5) Auto-commentary on the SS v. 9 (p. 74, l. 1–p. 76, l. 2). 6) Auto-commentary on the SS v. 9 (p. 76, l. 2–p. 78, l. 2). 7) Auto-commentary on the SS v. 9 (p. 80, l. 1–p. 82, l. 4). 8) Manḍana is not talking about the plural form gāvah, which denotes the plural concept of “cows.” What he means is that the collection of phonemes /g/-/au/-/h/ should have the plural case-ending. And such an expression is impossible.

**Abbreviations and Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


**Key words**  *sphoṭa, Sphoṭasiddhi, Manḍanamiśra, vyākaraṇa, Bhartṛhari, Vākyapadiya, jāti*  
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