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Innovation in seventeenth century grammatical philosophy: appearance or reality?*

(published in: *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36(5-6), 2008, 543-550)

In an earlier publication (Bronkhorst 2005) I have argued that Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita was innovative in the philosophy of grammar. What I have tried to show there is that Bhaṭṭoji introduced a notion of *sphoṭa* which was essentially different from the *sphoṭa* that had been used by all his predecessors. Before Bhaṭṭoji the *sphoṭa* had been an *ontological* entity: a word (the *pada-sphoṭa*, i.e., the *sphoṭa* which is the word), to take an example, is an existent thing, different from the sounds of which, we might naively think, it is constituted. With Bhaṭṭoji this changes: the *sphoṭa* is for him a *semantic* entity, and therefore primarily a meaning-bearer. An individual sound can therefore be a *sphoṭa* in the pre-Bhaṭṭoji sense (it is an existing entity that is different from the vibrations that seem to constitute it), but not in Bhaṭṭoji's sense (individual sounds have no meaning); when Bhaṭṭoji speaks of *varṇa-sphoṭas*, he is as a result referring not to sounds, but to (meaningful) morphemes.

The point of departure of this paper is the conclusion of the earlier one: Bhaṭṭoji did indeed innovate in the field of the philosophy of grammar. The questions to be addressed at present are: (i) why did he innovate? and (ii) did he know that he innovated?

With regard to the second question we observe that Bhaṭṭoji went out of his way to show, unsuccessfully, that he had really nothing new to say.¹ This by itself does not of course prove that he did not know that he was innovating, but if he did he kept it to himself. We will return to this second question below, after a consideration of the first one. To

* This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation (U.S.A.) under Grant No. 0135069. Most of the research was carried out during a stay at The Liguria Study Center for the Arts and Humanities in Bogliasco (Genoa), Italy, in the months of September and October 2003.

¹ Cf. Bhaṭṭoji's *Vaiyākaraṇa-matnamajjana* 1a-b and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa's comments thereon (VBhS, slightly different in VBh): ***bhāṣyābdheḥ śabdakaustubha uddhrta ity uktis tu śabdakaustubhoktānām arthānām ādhunikotprekṣitatvanirāsāya*** "The Śabdakaustubha is drawn from the ocean of the Bhāṣya': This is to dispel the notion that the topics recorded in the Śabdakaustubha have been invented by men of the present day" (tr. Joshi, 1995: 3).

answer the first question we will have a look at the intellectual context in which Bhaṭṭoji made his innovation.

I mention Bhaṭṭoji's intellectual context, not his social, political or economic context. The reason is *not* that the latter is unimportant. The contrary is true. However, intellectual traditions are not fully determined by social, political and economic factors. Intellectual traditions have a momentum of their own which can, in sufficiently favorable circumstances, largely determine how they will continue. In the present context it is essential to recall that certain changes, *intellectual* changes, can be brought about by unresolved issues within the tradition. The intellectual currents that interest us at present are currents of rational thought, by which I mean to say that they try to eliminate contradictions and look for coherence. This implies, among other things, that they take into account the criticism they are subjected to and that they are sensitive to different opinions. Social and political factors may determine whose criticism our thinkers are willing to listen to, and whose opinions they are willing to consider, if only perhaps to reject them; pandits of the time of Bhaṭṭoji were not keen to listen to criticism that came from without the Sanskrit tradition, nor were they ready to pay serious attention to opinions that were current outside their own group. But a great deal of criticism came from within the Sanskrit tradition, which harbored a variety of points of view. Scholars of this period compared their own positions with different ones current within the tradition. The differences constituted an ongoing challenge which new thinkers were free, or even encouraged, to take up.

Some modern scholars may not take the presumed rationality of the traditions under consideration very seriously, and look upon it as a cover to hide the fact that no one in these traditions was ready to change his mind even on minor details. I do not share this extreme skepticism. I even think that those who hold such views are not likely to reach more than a very limited and superficial understanding of what was going on in the different śāstras. Purely intellectual challenges had their role to play, and ambitious thinkers did take them up. Developments in the philosophy of grammar to which we will turn below will illustrate this.

Which then was the intellectual challenge that Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita — as explained by his nephew Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa — was facing when he created his philosophy of grammar?² The answer lies in a development that was already a thousand years old at his time and had so

² For a more detailed presentation of the following, see Bronkhorst, forthcoming.

far largely run its course in two schools of thought different from grammar. I am referring to the discussions about the understanding of the sentence that seem to have begun in the Mīmāṃsā school of philosophy, had subsequently been taken up by Nyāya, and which came to be known as *śābdabodha* “verbal understanding.”

The philosophical writings of Bhaṭṭoji and his nephew Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa must be seen as the defensive reaction of two grammarians who were not willing to tolerate the incorrect way the Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas used traditional grammar. Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa protested against the misuse of Pāṇini's grammar and tried to arrive at a way of exhaustively analyzing the meaning of sentences which is in agreement with the statements of Pāṇini and, of course, those of his oldest commentators Kātyāyana and Patañjali. In an important way Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa reasserted the authority of tradition, and of the Pāṇinian grammatical tradition in particular.

The technique of sentence analysis called *śābdabodha* takes as its point of departure a clear definition of the meanings of the smallest meaningful elements of the sentence. There was plenty of disagreement about what precise meanings these smallest elements conveyed, but everyone agreed that the sentence expresses more than the sum of the meanings of its constituent morphemes. Somehow these meanings are structured in the resulting understanding of the sentence, so that the sentence meaning goes beyond the meanings of its constituent parts. Where does this extra meaning come from?

It is in answering this question that Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa could make good use of the discussions about the *sphoṭa* that had taken place before them, both inside and outside the grammatical tradition. In these earlier discussions the idea had been launched that a word is ontologically different from its “constituent” sounds, the sentence from its “constituent” words; these ontologically different entities were called *sphoṭa*. Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa were less interested in ontological questions, so they represented these earlier positions in the following modified way: The *pada-sphoṭa*, i.e. the word, is a different meaning-bearer from the “constituent” *varṇa-sphoṭas*, the morphemes; and the *vākya-sphoṭa*, i.e. the sentence, is a different meaning-bearer from the “constituent” *pada-sphoṭas*, the words. The expressive power of the word is not, therefore, merely the accumulation of the meanings of its morphemes; and the meaning of the sentence is not merely the accumulation of the meanings of its words, but has its own, different meaning. The *sphoṭa* theory, as revamped by Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa, provided a perfect

justification for the complex and structured meaning, different from the sum of the meanings of the constituent parts, which these grammarians assigned to the sentence.³

In order to further elucidate the issues at stake, one can do no better than cite the relevant passage from S. D. Joshi's *Sphoṭanirṇaya* (1967: 142-144). We read there:

The Naiyāyikas uphold that words denote isolated meanings and the relational meaning is communicated by the *tātparya* function or *saṃsargamaryādā*. According to them, the individual words convey their own meaning through the primary function (*abhidhā*) and the syntactically unified meaning is conveyed by virtue of the *tātparya* function (purport of words).

The Bhāṭṭa school of the Mīmāṃsakas maintains that words denote isolated meanings, and syntactically related meaning is conveyed by the secondary function (*lakṣaṇā*). ... The Bhāṭṭa school and the Nyāya school differ from each other in accepting ... different mediums through which the syntactic meaning is conveyed. [But] both the schools admit that the sentence-meaning is [something] over and above the primary meaning of words. ...

... the *vākyaśakti* theory of the grammarians assumes that the entire sentence is an indivisible unit, and its meaning is also an undivided whole which has no parts. ... For example, when the sentence *nīlo ghaṭaḥ* is paraphrased *nīlābhinno ghaṭaḥ* (“A jar non-different from the blue thing”), the meaning “non-different” is [as much part] of the sentence-meaning as ... “jar” and “blue”.

It is in this way that our grammarians, by using the *sphoṭa* theory, could avoid postulating functions such as *tātparya* or *lakṣaṇā*, and yet arrive at a satisfactory explanation of the sentence-meaning. The *sphoṭa* theory was thus used to solve a problem that accompanied *śābdabodha*. This solution was a grammarians’ solution, but the problem was common to all who were interested in this kind of analysis. The Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas had proposed other solutions to bridge the gap between the meaning of the sentence and the meanings of its constituent parts.⁴ This gap was real according to those other thinkers and therefore had to be bridged. The grammarians’ solution was more elegant in that it denied the importance, or even the existence, of this gap: Since these grammarians considered the sentence to be an expressive unit by itself, they believed that it would be a mistake to think that a sentence even expressed the meanings of its constituent words.

³ A similar argument could of course be made for the compound (cf. VBhS ed. ĀnĀśr p. 42 l. 9-10 [1st ed. p. 37 l. 7], ed. ChPS p. 384, ed. KSS p. 304, ed. Pr p. 380, Das, 1990: 140 l. 17-18: *samāse ... āvaśyikaiva samudāyasya ... viśiṣṭārthe śaktiḥ*), yet there is no such thing as a *samāsasphoṭa* for Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa. See further Biswal 1995: 40 ff.

⁴ See also Kunjunni Raja 1963: 191 ff. The sub-school of Mīmāṃsā linked to the name of Prabhākara denied that a sentence expresses more than the sum of the meanings of its constituent parts; for this position, known as *anvitābhidhānavāda*, see Kunjunni Raja 1963: 197 ff.; Joshi 1967: 146 ff.

Our grammarians were not totally original in postulating the sentence as a single meaning bearer. Bhartṛhari had said similar things.⁵ However, Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa were no longer interested in ontological issues, so that, in spite of lip-service to predecessors, their different *sphoṭas* were meaning bearers. It was convenient for them to know that the grammatical tradition had long maintained that sentences are different from their constituent words, and words different from their constituent morphemes, for it justified certain steps in their adoption of the *sābdabodha* procedure into grammar.

Having seen how and why Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa innovated, we have to address the question why they denied doing so? Were they incapable of seeing that a semantic *sphoṭa* is not quite the same as an ontological *sphoṭa*? Did they lack the historical sense to see that their predecessors were guided by questions and concerns different from their own? Did they fail to see that their own semantic concerns had succeeded and replaced the ontological concerns of those who preceded them?

In a certain sense these questions must no doubt be answered in the affirmative. At the same time, answers which base themselves on certain presumed intellectual shortcomings of the people concerned are not very satisfactory, and most probably incorrect. What is primarily at stake is not the intellect of one or two individuals, but the culture of which they were part. Our question must therefore be reformulated: What in the culture of these two individuals made them overlook the fact that a semantic *sphoṭa* is not quite the same as an ontological *sphoṭa*? What made them fail to see that their own semantic concerns had succeeded and replaced the ontological concerns of their predecessors?

At this point it is tempting to recall some remarks made by Sheldon Pollock (1985: 515): “[I]f in certain areas the shastric paradigm did encourage — or enforce — a certain stasis ..., elsewhere Indian cultural history in the classical and medieval period is crowded with exciting discovery and innovation ... These are not, however, perceived to be such; they are instead viewed, through the inverting lens of ideology, as renovation and recovery ...” Is it possible that Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa believed that their *sphoṭa* somehow corresponded to an “original” *sphoṭa*? Did they think they had “recovered” something? Did they see themselves as being part of some kind of Renaissance? Did they consider their new

⁵ Cf. Vkp 2.42: *sambandhe sati yat tv anyad ādhikyam upajāyate / vākyaṛtham eva tam prāhur anekapadasaśrayam* // “Was aber, wenn der Zusammenhang [der Wörter im Satze hergestellt] ist, an Weiterem hinzukommt, das allein nennen [diese Lehrer] den auf mehreren Wörtern beruhenden Sinn des Satzes” (tr. Rau 2002: 52). Cf. Kunjunni Raja 1963: 224 ff.

interpretation of the *sphoṭa* merely a rephrasing in modern terminology of some older truth of the ancients?⁶

There are two sides to the questions here asked. On the one hand there can be no doubt that our authors knew that they were reacting to and participating in developments that were relatively new. The kind of sentence analysis they were dealing with had received a new impetus from a school of thought that was known, also in their time, as “the new Nyāya” (Navyanyāya). In an important sense our two authors must have been aware that they were participating in new developments which had never taken place before. As a result renovation and recovery cannot explain all the contributions they made to the philosophy of language. On the other hand, there is a clear tendency in their writings to hold on to, and where necessary to recover, the teachings of tradition.

We do not need to postulate that in the opinion of our authors all problems had already been solved before their time, so that their sole task was to recover the earlier solutions. We can safely abandon this idea, and yet accept their complete reliance on tradition. The traditionalism of our authors rather implies that they were convinced that the tools and concepts provided by tradition were adequate, not only for certain tasks, but for all possible tasks in which they might play a role; this also includes new tasks that may have never presented themselves before. Pāṇini's semantic indications were perhaps not formulated for the purpose of *śābdabodha*, but they are — i.e., have to be — more than adequate in this context, too. Therefore the *sphoṭa* as made known by tradition must also be such as to be useful in this new context. In the opinion of our two authors, although the tools and concepts handed down by tradition may not constitute the whole truth, they certainly are the elements with whose help we may hope to reach it.

The historically oriented reader will object that the *sphoṭa* before Bhaṭṭoji had a different function from the one he assigned to it. It seems likely that Bhaṭṭoji did not so much think in terms of function, but rather in terms of a transhistorical reality; as a result he did not think historically either. The *sphoṭa* was a transhistorical concept provided by tradition, so that also new problems, not yet known to his predecessors, had to be solved with its help. If this was axiomatic for him, it is not surprising that he forced the concept somewhat where that was necessary for his purposes. Did Bhaṭṭoji know that he forced the concept? Unfortunately it is not possible to interrogate him on this subject, but I consider it

⁶ This last question is based on the quotation from Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's Nyāyamañjarī (introduction, verse 8) cited by Pollock, in Matilal's translation: “How can we discover any new fact or truth? One should consider novelty only in rephrasing the older truths of the ancients in modern terminology.” (*kuto vā nūtanam vastu vayam utprekṣitum kṣamāḥ / vacovinyāsavaicitryamātram atra vicāryatām //*)

likely that he would have responded that the classical *sphoṭa* concept *had* to be interpreted more widely (and had been meant by its originators to be interpreted more widely), precisely because otherwise it would not solve the new difficulties encountered in connection with *sābdabodha*. From his point of view — in which tradition reveals to us elements of a transhistorical reality, without claim to completeness — this would make perfect sense.

The traditional thinker and the historically oriented outsider will in this way interpret the same events differently. Both might agree that Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa were caught up in a developmental stream that had begun some centuries earlier, and in which they could only try to stay afloat. Staying afloat in an intellectual stream means adapting one's views so as to keep them coherent, and reacting to the challenges that present themselves. To the outsider, such adaptations and reactions may look original or innovative. The traditional thinker would disagree, for all he tries to do is proceed in such a manner as to preserve tradition in its full authority. From Bhaṭṭoji's point of view, the *sphoṭa* he talks about may perhaps not be found in the writings of his predecessors, yet the interpretation he gives to it must have been the one intended by the ancient sages, for only thus can the *sphoṭa* play a useful role in the new developments that were taking place at his time. Bhaṭṭoji *recovered* the correct interpretation of the *sphoṭa* in order to steer the *new* developments of his time in the right direction, i.e., in agreement with ancient tradition. We do not know for sure whether Bhaṭṭoji was aware of the fact that his *sphoṭa* was different from the one of his predecessors, but if he did, this, I submit, is how he would explain this difference.

For the outside observer it is important to keep in mind that the current in which Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa found themselves was an *intellectual* current. The existence of this current was, of course, made possible by features of the surrounding landscape. The influence of the surrounding landscape on those who find themselves in the midst of the river is, at least in cases like the one just considered, indirect and of relatively secondary importance. However, earthquakes may change the surrounding landscape beyond recognition, and bring it about that existing currents lose much of their volume, change their course or disappear altogether. This did not happen at the time of Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita. It

was going to happen, not so very long after him. This coming earthquake is however beyond the scope of the present paper.⁷

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⁷ See Kaviraj’s “The sudden death of Sanskrit knowledge” (2005) for a discussion.

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Abbreviations:

AAWL	Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz, Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse
JIP	Journal of Indian Philosophy
VBh	(Bṛhad-)Vaiyākaraṇa-bhūṣaṇa; for the editions see the bibliography under Kaṇḍa Bhaṭṭa
VBhS	Vaiyākaraṇa-bhūṣaṇa-sāra; for the editions see the bibliography under Kaṇḍa Bhaṭṭa
Vkp	Bhartrhari, Vākyapadīya, ed. W. Rau, Wiesbaden 1977