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Language, Thought and Reality in the Indian Tradition: Reconsidering Bhartṛhari in the Context of Contemporary Linguistics and Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

The relationship between language and thought has been a significant concern in both Indian and Western intellectual traditions, although it has been approached through substantially different conceptual frameworks. In contemporary academic discourse, discussions of language and thought are frequently associated with Western linguistic theories, including structuralism, linguistic relativity, generative grammar and cognitive approaches. The Indian grammatical tradition, however, developed a sophisticated philosophy of language in which language, cognition, meaning and reality are closely interconnected. The present paper examines this relationship primarily through the linguistic-philosophical thought of Pāṇini, Patañjali and, particularly, Bhartṛhari, with special attention to the concepts of Śabda-Brahman, Sphoṭa and the levels of Vāk. These ideas are brought into dialogue with selected aspects of modern Western linguistic thought, especially the theories of Noam Chomsky and the Sapir–Whorf tradition. The paper argues that Indian grammatical thought does not treat language merely as an external instrument for communicating pre-existing thoughts. Rather, in Bhartṛhari's philosophy, language is deeply connected with cognition, meaning and the apprehension of reality. Chomsky's distinction between internal linguistic knowledge and its external manifestation provides an interesting modern point of comparison, while linguistic relativity offers another perspective on the relationship between language and conceptualisation. The comparison does not seek to establish superiority between Indian and Western traditions; instead, it demonstrates that different intellectual traditions have investigated related questions through different philosophical and methodological approaches. Such comparative engagement can contribute to a broader and more inclusive understanding of language, thought and human cognition in contemporary Indian academia.

Keywords: *Indian linguistics, Bhartṛhari, Pāṇini, Śabda-Brahman, Sphoṭa, Vāk, language and thought, Chomsky, linguistic relativity, NEP 2020*

Introduction

The relationship between language and thought is one of the fundamental questions in the study of language. Language is generally understood as a system through which human beings communicate ideas, emotions, experiences and knowledge. Yet the relationship between language and thought is considerably more complex than communication alone. Does thought exist independently of language? Does language merely express thoughts already formed, or does it participate in the formation of thought itself? Is language connected with the way human beings understand reality? These questions have occupied philosophers, grammarians, linguists and cognitive theorists across different intellectual traditions.

In contemporary Western linguistics, the relationship between language and thought has been examined from several perspectives. Saussure's structural linguistics emphasised the relational nature of linguistic signs; Sapir and Whorf drew attention to the relationship between linguistic categories and habitual patterns of thought; and Chomsky placed linguistic knowledge within the study of the human mind, proposing that language should be investigated as an internal system of knowledge. Chomsky's work subsequently contributed to a broader conception of linguistics as a means of investigating human cognitive capacities. His *Language and Mind* explicitly presents language as an important perspective for understanding human mental processes.

However, questions concerning language, thought and reality are not new to the Indian intellectual tradition. The Sanskrit grammatical tradition developed a sophisticated inquiry into the nature of language long before the emergence of modern linguistics as an academic discipline. Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* established an extraordinarily systematic grammatical description of Sanskrit, while Patañjali and Kātyāyana contributed substantially to the interpretation, Clarification and philosophical implications of the grammatical tradition. Bhartṛhari subsequently transformed grammatical inquiry into a comprehensive philosophy of language in the *Vākyapadīya*.

The significance of Bhartṛhari lies particularly in his attempt to understand the relationship between *śabda* (word/language), *artha* (meaning), cognition and reality. His opening verse presents *Brahman* as the imperishable linguistic principle:

anādi-nidhanaṃ brahma śabda-tattvaṃ yad akṣaram |
vivartate 'rtha-bhāvena prakriyā jagato yataḥ ||(*Vākyapadīya* 1.1)

The verse presents *Brahman* as beginningless and endless, and describes the *śabda-tattva* as the imperishable principle from which the manifestation of the world through meaning proceeds.

This conception places language beyond the narrow function of communication. In Bhartṛhari's philosophical framework, *śabda* is associated with cognition, meaning and the manifestation of reality. Consequently, the Indian grammatical tradition provides an important intellectual resource for reconsidering the relationship between language and thought.

The present study therefore attempts to bring the Indian grammatical-philosophical tradition into conversation with selected Western approaches to language and thought. The objective is not to establish that one tradition is superior to the other. Rather, it is to demonstrate that Indian and Western thinkers have addressed comparable questions concerning language, meaning, thought, cognition and reality, although their conceptual frameworks and methods differ considerably.

Language and Thought in the Indian Intellectual Tradition

The Indian tradition does not always make a rigid distinction between linguistic inquiry and philosophical inquiry. Grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) was not merely concerned with describing linguistic forms. Within the philosophical grammatical tradition, the analysis of language became a means of investigating meaning, cognition and ultimately reality.

Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* represents one of the most systematic achievements of the Sanskrit grammatical tradition. Its rules provide a formal mechanism for describing and generating Sanskrit linguistic forms. Pāṇini's achievement demonstrates that language can be analysed as an organised system governed by principles and rules.

Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* and Kātyāyana's *Vārttikas* further developed the grammatical tradition by examining linguistic usage, grammatical rules and the relationship between linguistic form and meaning. The tradition therefore gradually moved beyond the description of linguistic forms toward questions concerning why language functions as it does and how linguistic expressions convey meaning.

This development reaches a particularly philosophical stage in Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya*. His work treats language as a central category for understanding cognition and reality. The opening verse is particularly significant because it identifies *śabda-tattva* with an imperishable principle and connects its manifestation with the world of meaning.

Thus, in the Indian grammatical-philosophical tradition, language is not simply an external code through which an already completed thought is communicated. Language is intimately involved in the process through which meaning is apprehended.

Bhartṛhari and the Concept of Śabda-Brahman

One of Bhartṛhari's most important contributions to the philosophy of language is the concept of **Śabda-Brahman**. The term refers to the ultimate linguistic principle through which language is connected with reality.

The opening verse of the *Vākyapadīya* describes *Brahman* as *anādi-nidhana*—without beginning or end—and as *akṣara*, the imperishable principle of *śabda*. The verse further states that this principle manifests in the form of meaning and from it proceeds the process of the world.

This conception has significant implications for the study of language and thought. If *śabda* is understood as a fundamental principle rather than merely a collection of spoken sounds, then language cannot be reduced to communication. It becomes connected with the processes through which human beings apprehend meaning and conceptualise their experience.

It is therefore possible to interpret Bhartṛhari as presenting a **philosophy of language in which language, cognition and reality are closely interconnected**. The purpose of grammar consequently extends beyond correctness. According to the philosophical grammatical tradition, linguistic analysis can lead toward questions concerning meaning, cognition and the nature of reality. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, for example, notes that Bhartṛhari's grammatical philosophy connects analysis of speech with sentences, meanings, sound-sense compatibility and spiritual significance. This is an important point for contemporary discussions of language and thought because it challenges the assumption that language is merely a secondary vehicle for transmitting independently formed ideas.

Sphoṭa: Language, Meaning and Cognition

Bhartṛhari's theory of **Sphoṭa** provides another important basis for understanding the relationship between language and thought.

In *Vākyapadīya* 1.44, Bhartṛhari distinguishes two dimensions associated with linguistic expression. The discussion subsequently distinguishes the underlying linguistic principle from the articulated sound through which it becomes manifest. The *Vākyapadīya* therefore allows a distinction between the underlying linguistic unit and its audible manifestation.

The significance of *Sphoṭa* becomes clearer when considered in relation to the experience of understanding a sentence. Speech is heard sequentially: sounds occur one after another. Yet the hearer does not necessarily experience

the meaning as a mechanical accumulation of individual sounds. Rather, meaning can be apprehended as a unified whole.

This is closely associated with Bhartṛhari's understanding of **sentence meaning and holistic cognition**. The process of linguistic understanding therefore involves more than simply adding the meanings of individual sounds or words.

The concept provides an important basis for discussing the relationship between language and thought because it suggests that linguistic expression and cognition cannot be completely separated. The external sequence of sounds is different from the cognitive apprehension of meaning.

This aspect of Bhartṛhari's theory has been extensively discussed by scholars of Indian philosophy of language, including K. Kunjunni Raja and Harold G. Coward.

The Levels of Vāk and the Formation of Thought

Bhartṛhari's discussion of *Vāk* provides another important way of examining the relationship between language and thought. **Bhartṛhari discusses three levels of speech: Paśyantī, Madhyamā and Vaikharī**. The later fourfold classification of *Parā, Paśyantī, Madhyamā,* and *Vaikharī* developed more fully in later philosophical and Tantric traditions.

The three levels can broadly be understood as follows:

Level	General significance
Paśyantī	The most subtle level, associated with undivided cognition and the apprehension of meaning
Madhyamā	The intermediate, internal/mental stage of linguistic formation
Vaikharī	The externally articulated and audible form of speech

At the *Vaikharī* level, linguistic expression becomes externally audible. At the *Madhyamā* level, language is associated with an internal or psychological dimension. At the *Paśyantī* level, language and cognition are presented in a much more integrated form. Scholarly discussions of Bhartṛhari associate *Paśyantī* with *Pratibhā*, the immediate flash or apprehension of understanding.

This framework provides an interesting basis for discussing **thought as a process rather than as something completely independent of language**.

The movement may be represented conceptually as:

Subtle linguistic consciousness → internal linguistic formation → articulated speech

This does not mean that Bhartṛhari proposed a psychological model identical to modern cognitive science. Rather, his framework provides a philosophical account in which language, cognition and articulation are interconnected.

Chomsky: Language as an Internal System

A significant point of comparison can be established with Noam Chomsky's conception of language.

Chomsky's generative approach shifted attention from merely describing observable linguistic behaviour toward the internal knowledge that makes linguistic competence possible. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) developed transformational-generative grammar and emphasised the need for an explicit account of the system underlying linguistic creativity.

Chomsky's later work distinguishes **internal language (I-language)** from the external manifestations through which language is produced and perceived. The Cambridge description of *Language and Mind* explains that Chomsky's framework investigates language as an internally represented system and relates this system to the biological basis of human linguistic capacity.

In more recent discussion, Chomsky has described the internal linguistic system as something accessed by production and perception rather than being identical with either activity. He has also connected language with systems of thought, reflection, inference and planning.

This provides an interesting comparative point with Bhartṛhari.

Bhartṛhari's distinction between subtle/internal linguistic processes and externally articulated speech and Chomsky's distinction between internal linguistic knowledge and external expression are **not equivalent theories**, but they provide a productive comparative question:

How does linguistic structure existing within the human cognitive system become externally manifested as speech?

Bhartṛhari approaches this question through a philosophical-metaphysical theory of *Vāk*, cognition and *Śabda-Brahman*, whereas Chomsky approaches it through formal linguistic theory and a cognitive/biological conception of the human language faculty.

Language and Thought: Indian and Western Perspectives

The comparison becomes more meaningful when the two traditions are considered without forcing them into an identical theoretical framework.

Dimension	Indian grammatical-philosophical tradition	Chomskyan perspective
Nature of	Connected with *śabda*, meaning,	Internal system of linguistic knowledge

language	cognition and reality	
Relationship with thought	Language and cognition are deeply interconnected	Language provides a window into aspects of human cognition
Internal dimension	*Madhyamā* and *Paśyantī*	I-language/internal linguistic system
External dimension	*Vaikharī*	Externalisation/performance
Meaning	Holistic apprehension is important in Bhartṛhari's account	Meaning is investigated through the interaction of syntactic and semantic structures
Ultimate framework	Philosophical/metaphysical	Cognitive/biological/formal
Primary concern	Language, meaning, cognition and reality	Structure, acquisition, creativity and the human language faculty

The comparison should therefore be understood as **analogical rather than identical**. It would be academically problematic to claim that Bhartṛhari anticipated Chomsky in the modern scientific sense. Similarly, it would be inaccurate to translate *Śabda-Brahman* directly into modern concepts such as "language faculty" or "brain mechanism."

The value of the comparison lies instead in demonstrating that both traditions raise questions concerning the relationship between an internal linguistic dimension and external linguistic expression, while providing fundamentally different explanations for that relationship.

Language, Thought and Linguistic Relativity

A further comparison can be made with the Sapir–Whorf tradition.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf examined the relationship between linguistic structures and habitual patterns of thought. Their work contributed to what is now generally discussed under the broader heading of **linguistic relativity**.

The strongest form of linguistic determinism—the claim that a person cannot possess a concept unless the language contains a corresponding word—is too absolute for an academic treatment of Sapir and Whorf. A more defensible formulation is that **the categories and structures available in a language can influence habitual patterns of attention, categorisation and interpretation**.

Bhartṛhari's position is different. His concern is not primarily with the ways in which different languages create culturally different worldviews. Instead, his philosophy places *śabda* at a much more fundamental level, connecting language with cognition and reality.

Thus, an important contrast can be drawn:

Sapir–Whorf: linguistic structure may influence patterns of conceptualisation.

Bhartṛhari: *śabda* is fundamentally connected with the manifestation and apprehension of meaning and reality.

Both perspectives challenge a simplistic view of language as a passive container for already completed thought, but they do so from different intellectual premises.

From Language as Communication to Language as Cognition

The comparison between these traditions reveals a broader conceptual shift.

Language can be understood at several levels: **Language as communication → language as meaning → language as cognition → language as a way of understanding reality.**

Modern linguistics has increasingly explored the cognitive dimensions of language. Chomsky's work, for example, explicitly connects the study of language with the study of the human mind.

The Indian grammatical tradition had already developed a philosophical inquiry in which linguistic analysis was connected with meaning, cognition and reality. Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* is particularly significant because it does not maintain a rigid boundary between grammar and philosophy. This does not mean that ancient Indian grammarians were practising modern cognitive science. The methodological foundations are different. Nevertheless, the comparison reveals a shared intellectual concern: **what does the human capacity for language tell us about the nature of human cognition?**

Relevance to Indian Academic Discourse and NEP 2020

The present inquiry also has relevance in the context of contemporary Indian higher education. The renewed emphasis on Indian knowledge traditions creates an opportunity to revisit classical Indian intellectual traditions not merely as historical subjects but as sources for contemporary academic inquiry. In this context, the Indian grammatical tradition deserves greater interdisciplinary attention.

The study of Pāṇini, Patañjali, Kātyāyana and Bhartṛhari can contribute to contemporary discussions in linguistics, philosophy, cognitive studies, literature and education. Rather than treating Indian linguistic thought as a historical curiosity, it can be examined as an intellectual tradition that developed sophisticated questions concerning language, meaning, cognition and reality.

The purpose, however, should not be to replace Western linguistic theories with Indian theories. A more productive academic approach is to bring different traditions into dialogue and examine their similarities, differences, conceptual assumptions and methodologies.

Such an approach is particularly relevant to an educational environment that seeks to engage with India's intellectual heritage while maintaining dialogue with global scholarship.

Conclusion

The relationship between language and thought constitutes an important field of interdisciplinary inquiry. The Indian grammatical tradition offers a particularly rich body of material for such an investigation because it developed an extensive reflection on language, meaning and cognition through the works of Pāṇini, Patañjali, Kātyāyana and Bhartṛhari.

Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* is especially significant in this context. Its opening discussion of *Śabda-Brahman*, its treatment of *Sphoṭa*, and its analysis of the levels of *Vāk* demonstrate that language was understood in the Indian grammatical-philosophical tradition as something considerably more profound than an instrument of communication. Language is connected with the apprehension of meaning and, in Bhartṛhari's philosophical framework, with reality itself. Modern Western linguistic theories provide a different but valuable perspective. Chomsky's conception of internal linguistic knowledge and his broader investigation of language and mind place language within the study of human cognition. Linguistic relativity, meanwhile, draws attention to the relationship between linguistic structures and patterns of conceptualisation.

The comparison therefore reveals **convergence without identity**. Indian and Western traditions address related questions about language, thought, meaning and cognition, but they conceptualise these questions through different philosophical and methodological frameworks.

Bringing these traditions into dialogue can broaden the study of language and thought by allowing Indian intellectual resources to participate more fully in contemporary linguistic and interdisciplinary scholarship. The significance of such comparative inquiry lies not in establishing the superiority of one tradition, but in recognising the plurality of intellectual approaches through which human beings have attempted to understand language, thought and consciousness.

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Conflicts of interest

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