

According to Bhartrhari, Sabda Brahman is the ultimate ground of all existence; and, the Sabda tattva is the first principle of the universe.

For Bhartrhari, Vac or speech is the means to all knowledge and is the essence of consciousness. He regards speech as the verbal expression of a thought that arises in a person's consciousness. If there is no consciousness, he argues, there would be no speech. Speech (Vac) is indeed an outward form (Vargupta) of consciousness (chetana or Samjna).

Thus, Vac is the word principle that gives expression to the latent or un-manifest thoughts, feelings and impulses. And at the same time, for Bhartrhari, all forms of awareness imply the presence of words. That is to say; language is an integral part of our consciousness.

At a metaphysical level, Bhartrhari conceives the ultimate Reality as One-without-a second (Ekam Eva). It is of the nature of the Word (Sabda eva tattvam) and from it are manifested all objects (including speech) and the whole of existence.

[Bhartrhari was a monist (Advaita) philosopher; and, he explained everything in terms of his metaphysical view point. Thus, at the top of the language hierarchy there is only one indivisible reality present; and that transforms into many.]

According to Bhartrhari, the language we speak is the medium of expression of the Ultimate Reality communicated through meaning-bearing words. It leads us across the external appearances and diversities to the core of the Reality which is the source and the underlying unity beneath everything.

Here, the Real is the luminous Truth which needs to be rediscovered by every speaker. The Real breaks forth (sphut) through the medium of speech (Sabda). And, Sabda is not mere means to the Reality, but it is the very Truth and Reality (Shabda-Brahman).

In the Vritti accompanying the main text of the Vakyapadiya (1.14), Bhartrhari describes and offers explanations on the process of evolution or transformation (Vivarta) of the thought arising in one's mind into audible speech. According to Bhartrhari, the process of transformation of a thought or an impulse arising in one's consciousness into a cognizable, explicit speech resembles the evolution of the Universe from the un-manifest (A-vyakta) to the manifest (Vyakta) material world.

Bhartrhari explains; at first, the intention (iccha) exists in the mind of the speaker as a unity or Sphota. In the process of giving an outward form to that impulse or thought, he produces a series of different sounds in a sequence where one sound follows its previous one. It might appear as though those word-sounds are separated in time and space. But, they are indeed part and parcel of one and the same single entity – the sentence which puts out, in full, the intention of the speaker. The communication of a sentence and its meaning is not complete until its last word is uttered. Thus, though the word-sounds reach the listener in a sequence, eventually they all merge into one; and, are grasped by the listener as a single unit. The same Sphota which originated in speaker's mind re-manifests in listener's mind, conveying the intended meaning.

Such process of unfolding of speech (Vac) is said to take place, at least, in two stages. The first one is the thought that flashes and takes a form within. And, the other is that which comes out as audible speech riding the vehicle of words and sentences; attempting to transport the idea that arose within. The former is intuition (Prathibha) the flash of insight that springs up; and, the latter is the effort that is exerted, both internally and externally, to put it out.

According to Bhartrhari, the process of manifestation or transformation of the speech principle (Sabda tattva) or the latent, unspoken form of thought, into explicit audible speech can be said to be spread over three stages, Viz. Pashyanti, Madhyamā and Vaikhari.

Bhartrhari explains that Vak or any sort of communication passes through these three stages whenever one speaks or gives expression to it in any other form. Sabda which is at first quite internal is

gradually externalized for the purpose of utterance. [Hearing, of course, operates in the reverse direction]

[While Bhartrhari regards the levels of speech as three (Pashyanti, Madhyamā and Vaikhari), Abhinavagupta enumerates four levels (Para, Pashyanti, Madhyamā and Vaikhari). Bhartrhari does not specifically name Para, pure consciousness, as the source of all speech.

However, some scholars have tried to reconcile that seeming difference between the stance of the two scholars by explaining that Bhartrhari's concept of the speech-principle Sabda-tattva or Sabda-Brahman the fundamental basis of the all existence and of speech, virtually equates to the concept of Para Vac, the Supreme Consciousness, as expounded by Abhinavagupta.

According to the explanations provided by Bhartrhari:

The latent, unspoken thought that instinctively springs up and which is visualised, within one's self, is called Pashyanti Vak (thought visualized). The Vrtti on Vakyapadiya (1.14) presents Pashyanti as a form of Supreme Reality, Sabda-Brahman. And, Pashyanti again is identified with Prathibha, the flash of insight.

The Pashyanti Vak thereafter transforms into Madhyamā, the intermediate stage. It is an intellectual process, involving thought (Buddhi), during which the speaker looks for and selects appropriate words, phrases, and their sequence, which are capable of conveying his intention, clearly.

And, Pashyanti Vak, thereafter, when it comes out of the speaker's mouth as sequenced and verbalized speech-form is called the Vaikhari Vak. It is the final stage at which ones' thought or intention is put out explicitly through uttered words and sentences. Thus, Vaikhari is the fully embodied stage of everyday speech.

Thus, the transformation of a thought into spoken-words involves two kinds of efforts: the internal process (abhyantara prayatna) and the external effort (bahya prayatna). The former is classified into two kinds (Pashyanti and Madhyamā), while the latter (the external) is said to be of eleven kinds.

And, of the three levels or stages of speech, Pashyanti which is identified with Prathibha (intuition) and Madhyamā identified with intellectual process (Buddhi) are regarded as subtle or internal forms of Vac; while Vaikhari is its overt manifested gross form. These three forms, in turn, are identified with Sphota, Prakṛta dhvani and vaikṛta dhvani.

Let's look at these three forms of Vac in a little more detail

Pashyanti

Bhartrhari takes a metaphysical view of Sabda, the speech-principle (Sabda tattva). He compares the transformation of Sabda, in three stages, with the manifestation of the Universe.

The Vrtti on Vakyapadiya (1.14) presents Pashyanti as the Supreme Reality, Sabda-Brahman, which is identified with Prathibha, intuitive cognition or the first flash of understanding.

The first stage in the transformation of a thought or an impulse into speech is the Pashyanti(thought visualized). It is a pre-verbal or potential stage. In this stage, the latent, unspoken thought that instinctively springs up is visualised within one's self.

The Pashyanti, which also suggests the visual image of the word, is indivisible and without inner-sequence; in the sense, that the origin and destination of speech are one. Here, the latent word (Sabda) and its intention or meaning (Artha) co-exist; and, is fused together without any differentiation. That is to say; intention is instinctive and immediate; and, it does not involve stages such as: analysis, speculation, drawing inferences and so on. At the level of Pashyanti Vak, there is no distinction

between word and meaning. And, there is also no temporal sequence. In other words; Pashyanti is the direct experience of Vakya-sphota, of the meaning as whole of what is intended.

In Pashyanti state, Sabda is in an unmanifested state. Yet, at the stage of Pashyanti, there is a kind of hidden impulse or a desire (iccha) for an expression. That instinct or urge is indeed an experience; and, it is said to prompt or motivate the formation of the Pashyanti vision. It is an intention to convey a certain meaning. Therefore, Vac or the 'internal speech' or 'thought', at this stage, stands for what is intended to be conveyed ; it is the first 'vision' of what is yet to appear.

Bhartrhari employs the simile of the yolk of the peachen's egg which is about to hatch. Before the hatching of the egg, all the flecked colours of the peacock lie dormant in potential state in the yolk of the egg.

Madhyamā

The Pashyanti Vak thereafter transforms into an internal (antahs-annivesini), subtle (sukshma) intellectual process (Jnana), the level of thought (buddhi-matropadana), during which the speaker becomes aware (parigrihita) of the word as it arises and takes a form within him.

Madhyama tu antahs-annivesini parigrihita-krameva buddhi-matropadana sukshma prana-vrtti-anugata

As that cognition crops up and takes a shape within, he grasps it. Here, one looks for and identifies appropriate words, phrases, and their sequence, which are capable of conveying ones' intention, clearly. As Prof. Matilal puts it: "In other words, he recognizes the verbal parts, which he is about to verbalize either to himself or to another as distant and separable from the Artha or thought."

That sequence of thoughts results in definite and clear array of words. This is the intermediate stage – The Madhyamā vak, a sequenced but a pre-vocal thought –described as the voice of silence; perhaps best understood as internal speaking. Here, there is no perceptible sound (Nada). The Madhyamā vak is in an inaudible wave or vibratory (spandana) form.

Thus, Madhyamā is the stage at which the initial idea or intention is transformed into series of words, as conceived by the mind, before they are actually put out. It may even be regarded as introspection or as a sort of internal dialogue. All the parts of speech that are linguistically relevant are present here in a latent form. At this stage, which corresponds to Prakṛta-dhvani, the word and the meaning are still distinct; and the word order is present. Therefore, temporal sequence may also be present.

Vaikhari

And, the Madhyamā, when it is put out explicitly through uttered words and sentences; and, when it comes out of the speaker's mouth in sequenced and verbalized speech-form, set in motion according to his/her will, is called Vaikhari Vak. For the purpose of putting out the Vaikhari Vac, the speaker employs a sentence comprising words uttered in a sequence. The word itself comprises letters or syllables (varnas) that follow one after the other in space and time.

Thus, the Vaikhari is the act (kriya) of articulated speech, which, as sound waves, reaches the ears of the listener and then on to her/his intellect. It gives expression to the subtler forms of vac. The Vaikhari is the physical or gross form of the subtle thought or is the outward expression of the intention of the speaker. And, when it emerges as the spoken-word, it is the one that is heard and apprehended by the listener, in a flash of understanding (Sphota).

The spoken word comes out of one's mouth, no doubt. However, it needs the assistance of breath and of several body parts in order to manifest itself (Vikhara literally means body; and, Vaikhari is that which employs bodily organs). When a person wills to express a thought orally, the air (Prana) inside his body spurs and moves up. Sabda or the Vac (speech or utterance) then manifests

through Dhvani (sound patterns), with the assistance of appropriate organs. In this process, the head, throat, tongue, palate, teeth, lips, nose, root of the tongue and bosom are said to be the eight places which assist the sounds of the letters to become audible and explicit.

Vaikhari represents the power of action Kriyāsakti. This is the plane at which the Vac gains a bodily-form and expression; and the intent of the speaker is transported to the listener. Until this final stage, the word is still a mental (iccha) or an intellectual (jnana) event. Now, the articulated word comes out in succession; and, gives substance and forms to ones thoughts. Vaikhari is the final stage of communication, where the word is externalized and rendered into audible sounds (prākṛta dhvani).

The chief characteristic of Vaikhari Vak is that it has a fully developed temporal sequence. At this level, the speaker's individual peculiarities (such as accent, voice modulation etc) are present, along with relevant parts of speech.

Bhartrhari makes a distinction between Sabda and Dhvani. The former is the 'Real word'; while the latter is the 'sound' produced by the speaker in order to give expression to Sabda.

The purpose of the Dhvani, the articulated sound, is to give expression to, and to act as a vehicle for Sabda which is the intent of the speaker. One's mode of speaking, accent, stress and speed etc (Dhvani) might vary; but, the speech-content or intention (Sabda) remains unaltered. Thus, while Dhvani is variable; Sabda, the underlying cause of the Dhvani, is not.

Bhartrhari again classifies Dhvani into two sorts – Prakṛta Dhvani and Vaikṛta Dhvani – (primary or natural sounds and derived or transformed sounds). The following verse in the Vakyapadiya (1.78) defining the two types of Dhvanis, is said to have been inspired by a similar statement in Vyadi's famous work Samgraha :

The former, the Prakṛta Dhvani, is said to be the natural (prakṛti) way of speaking where the sequences, durations and other qualities-as specified by the particular language system- are maintained, as expected. The long sounds (dirga) would be long, of the required length; the short (hraswa) vowels would be short; and, the extra-long (pluta) would be elongated and so on. It is normal way of speaking by one who knows the language.

But, when one brings in her/his own mannerisms or individual peculiarities into her/his utterance, such way of speaking is called Vaikṛta (modified or not-natural). Here, what is expected to be pronounced in normal speed (Madhyamā) or slowly (Vilambita) might be uttered rapidly (Druta); and so on. The differences in the 'speed of utterance' (vṛttibheda) might also be quite the other way. The other features such as accent, stress, pronunciation intonation, tempo, pitch etc might also differ from the natural. It is the way of speaking by one who doesn't know the language.

Though, in either case, one's manner of speaking might vary, the substance or what is intended to be conveyed (sphota) is the same.

Earlier, Katyayana had also said that the letters (varna) are fixed though the style or diction (vṛtti) might vary, depending upon the habits of the speaker (avasthita varna vaktus cira-cira-vacanad vrattayo visisyante)