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Some remarks on a problem in Madhyamaka philosophy of language

Jan Westerhoff

University of Oxford

Correspondence address:

Lady Margaret Hall, Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6QA

westerhoff@cantab.net

Abstract

This paper attempts to dissolve an apparent difficulty arising in the philosophy of language as discussed by the Indian Buddhist Madhyamaka school. On the one hand Madhyamaka seems to be claiming that every entity is fundamentally linguistic in nature, on the other hand it also asserts that language does not exist. I argue that the difficulty is to be dissolved by distinguishing two different senses of language appealed to by the Mādhyamikas. They argue that one specific understanding of language is deficient (and that therefore language thus understood does not exist), but this is not the same sense of language according to which everything is linguistic in nature. The apparent contradiction is thereby resolved.

Keywords:

Madhyamaka

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Philosophy of language

Pan-fictionalism

The aim of this paper is to propose a solution to a puzzle arising in the Madhyamaka philosophy of language. The puzzle is pithily expressed in two verses from a work by the school's founder, Nāgārjuna. The following remarks could therefore also be considered as a commentary on these two verses, even though the problem they encapsulate is present in Madhyamaka thought on language more generally. Despite the centrality of the problem I want to discuss in these pages, I make no claims to a comprehensive treatment. The philosophy of language encapsulated in the thought of the "Middle Way" is complex and the primary literature on the relation between language, conceptualization, and the Madhyamaka's central concept, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is voluminous; we can here only hope to deal with a single, though important aspect of it.

The verses in questions come from one of Nāgārjuna's hymns, the *Acintyastava* ("Praise

of the Inconveivable”).¹ Addressing the Buddha, Nāgārjuna states:²

You have loudly declared that the entire world is only name.
Apart from the expression, nothing to be expressed can be found. 35

Therefore, you have declared that all phenomena are merely abstractions.
Yes, even the abstraction through which emptiness is conceived is said to be non-existent. 36

These two verses appear to make two main claims:

1. Everything is language.
2. Language (equated with abstractions (*kalpanā*)) does not exist.

Neither claim is unprecedented in Buddhist philosophical literature. The position that all existence is merely nominal (*nāmamātra*) can be found in a variety of sources,³ especially once we identify being merely nominal with being merely an abstraction (*kalpanāmātra*), as the above passage suggests.⁴ Furthermore, we also find a number of different assertions that seem to question the very existence of language. In his main work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, for example, Nāgārjuna states that the Buddha did not ever teach anything to anyone,⁵ and, elsewhere, we see him assert even more explicitly

It is said to be thus; expressions do not exist. Because identity, difference and both together do not exist all things are said to be non-existent. Therefore, while things do not exist referents and expressions do not exist.⁶

Now there seems to be a clear tension between these two assertions, with the first accepting language as a phenomenon such that we should spell out the existence of everything else in terms of it, and the second rejecting that very phenomenon. One way

¹ Lindtner 1982: 152-153.

² *nāmamātram jagat sarvam ity uccair bhāṣitaṁ tvayā |
abhidhānāt prthagbhūtam abhidheyam na vidyate | 35
kalpanāmātram ity asmāt sarvadharmāḥ prakāśitāḥ |
kalpanāpy asatī proktā yayā śūnyam vikalpyate || 36*

My translation follows Lindtner 1981: 153, with the exception of the term *asatī* in verse 36, which Lindtner renders as “untrue”, instead of “non-existent”. While the former is certainly a possible way of reading it, I follow here the Tibetan interpretation (*rtoḡ pa yang ni med ces gsungs*), which understands it in the latter sense. The two verses have interesting parallels in other Buddhist works, such as the *Bhavasamkrāntisūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, see Lindtner 198: 153, notes 35-36 for references.

³ See e.g. Tillemans 1999, 204-205, note 31; Tsuda 2014: 111.

⁴ For further references see Westerhoff 2011.

⁵ *na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ*, 25:24, Siderits/Katsura 2013: 304-305.

⁶ *de kho na bzhin du brjod pa yin no / mngon par brjod pa ni med pa nyid do / gcig nyid dang gzhan nyid dang gnyi ga med pa'i phyir dngos po thams cad med par khas blangs pa yin no / de lta bas na dngos po med par mngon par brjod par bya ba dang / mngon par brjod pa yang med pa yin no | Vaidalyaprakaraṇa 74, Tola/Dragonetti 1995: 52-53.*

of resolving the tension is simply to draw the nihilist conclusion: everything is language, and since language does not exist, everything fails to exist, so there is nothing. The relation between Madhyamaka and various forms of nihilism is complex; I have pursued this at greater length elsewhere and will not continue this discussion here.⁷ Instead, I want to consider another strategy for resolving tensions of the above kind: parametrization. By appeal to this we simply say that two different concepts of language are involved in the two assertions. Nāgārjuna is then taken as claiming that a specific kind of language does not exist, but that this is not the kind of language he has in mind when he argues that all is language. The rest of this paper will focus on this way of understanding the content of the two verses quoted above. We will, then, have to answer two questions. First: What is the understanding of language Nāgārjuna rejects?, and second: What kind of language is acceptable to Nāgārjuna, and how can we make sense of the idea that the whole of manifest reality is somehow to be reduced to this kind of language?

1. The concept of language rejected by Nāgārjuna

When Nāgārjuna engages in discussions about language he is often seen as arguing against the proponents of one of the six major schools of classical Indian philosophy, Nyāya. The texts of this school put particular emphasis on a discussion of logic and rules for debate, as well as on epistemology. The Naiyāyika ontology was adopted from another of the six schools, Vaiśeṣika, so that the resulting system is sometimes referred to as Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. It is important to note that the logical and epistemological resources developed within the Nyāya school became widely adopted within classical Indian philosophy, even by schools that did not accept some of the key Nyāya assumptions. These resources provided a set of technical terms and a methodological framework in which much of Indian thought was formulated. As such, Nāgārjuna's debate with the Naiyāyikas is much more general than simply a disagreement between two schools of ancient Indian thought, a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist one. Nāgārjuna's criticism of the Nyāya position challenges central parts of the conceptual architecture in which much of Indian philosophical exchange was conducted.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika system was developed over two millennia and produced a voluminous amount of texts containing complex and sophisticated discussions. Anything we can say here cannot do more than merely scratch the surface, but fortunately we only have to introduce a couple of central Naiyāyika ideas about language in order to describe its profound disagreement with Madhyamaka.

First, the ontology of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika system sees the world as structured in terms of universals that inhere in individuals. For a sentence like "this clay pot is red" to be true there has to be an individual in the world, the pot, which is connected via the relation of inherence with the universal of redness, and the sentence has to link up with the universal-individual complex.

Second, Nyāya semantics has no place for non-referring terms. This might suggest that Nyāya is unable to express claims like "unicorns do not exist", although this is not the case. For them, all simple terms have to be connected with their ontological equivalents, but that does not hold for all linguistic expressions whatsoever. As long as we can spell

⁷ Westerhoff 2016a.

out the term ‘unicorn’ in terms of something simpler (such as being white, being a horse, having a horn, and so on), and as long as all these expressions link up directly with entities in the world, there is no problem with saying that nothing instantiates all of them together. That language has to link up with the world at some level does not require that it does so at every level.

A third point concerns the Nyāya position on statements about absences, such as “there is no pot in the kitchen”. For Nyāya, these statements only make sense if we can assert the existence of the absent item elsewhere, as, for example, the pot might be in the garden, though missing from the kitchen. But things cannot simply be absent without ever being present anywhere, otherwise we literally would not know what we are talking about.

It is evident that the Mādhyamika has to reject all three assumptions. The first, the assumption of an individual-universal complex out there in the world that somehow links up with language does not cohere well with the Madhyamaka criticism of intrinsic natures (*svabhāva*). The individuals and universals of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika do not require distinct entities they existentially depend on in order to exist. But a key implication of the Mādhyamika’s theory of universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is that because everything is empty of intrinsic nature everything is existentially dependent on some other thing, and cannot simply exist ‘by its own power’. Second, when Madhyamaka argues for the non-existence of intrinsic nature, it argues that the term is non-referring. Yet Nyāya does not allow for non-referring terms.⁸ Third, the Madhyamaka position cannot even be formulated in a semantics that accommodates only statements of local absence. For the Mādhyamika does not want to say that intrinsic natures are absent in some entities, but present in others, he wants to argue for the universal absence of *svabhāva*: nothing whatsoever comes endowed with an intrinsic nature.

If Nāgārjuna and his fellow Mādhyamikas reject the Nyāya understanding of language, what do they want to replace it with? Obviously, a Madhyamaka-compatible philosophy of language would have to allow for global statements of absences, for non-referring terms, and would have to account for meaning and truth without postulating an independent, pre-existent, self-sufficient world with which our statements link up.

An obvious choice from the Madhyamaka perspective would be a form of conventionalism. Instead of thinking of the relation between language and the world like that between a law-court’s toy-model of a motor-car accident and the real accident, we should think of it like the relation between chess-talk and chess. Chess-talk can be meaningful and meaningless, and true and false, but it does not link up with a pre-existent chess-reality. Rather, there is nothing more to chess than what is conventionally and collectively regarded as true about chess, and our chess-talk is simply part of this conventional framework.

However, there is an obvious problem with a thoroughgoing conventionalist theory of language, a problem that was already pointed out by the 8th century philosopher Kumārila, a prominent thinker of the Mīmāṃsā school, a school of classical Indian philosophy that puts particular emphasis on theorizing about language and its relation to the world. Kumārila argues that our account of language could never be *wholly*

⁸ It would be possible to work around this, analyzing the term ‘intrinsic nature’ in term of simpler, referring terms, and argue that they are not co-instantiated. This would not resolve the problem with the first Nyāya assumption, however, and this is why Nāgārjuna does not pursue this strategy. See Westerhoff 2010: 111-112 for further discussion.

convention-based. In the chess example just mentioned the chess players are able to establish an intersubjectively established system of convention because they *already* have a shared language in which to talk about chess. So we can only make sense of this set of conventions by assuming the existence of a prior set of conventions in which posterior conventions can be expressed. But then we have simply pushed the problem one step back, for now we need to assume tertiary conventions to make sense of the secondary ones. So, Kumārila argues, we can never explain language in terms of conventions, because we always have to presuppose the very thing we are trying to explain, namely the existence of a set of conventions. At some point the conventions have to link up with something non-conventional, i.e. there has to be some relation between language and the world that is what it is intrinsically, and that does not simply exist dependent on human interest and concerns, as a system of conventions does.

In responding to this challenge the Mādhyamika is given a helping hand by some developments in 20th century analytic philosophy; specifically by David Lewis' work on convention.⁹ In this Lewis developed an account that made it possible to explain how a system of conventions could bootstrap itself into existence without the assumption of a prior set of conventions in which the conventions are to be formulated. Lewis construction is based on the idea that there is a convention-independent notion of success in the interaction of two agents that need to coordinate their behaviour (whether they try to hunt together, build a shelter, or escape an enemy). While they may first assign specific symbols to specific meanings in a more or less random fashion, after repeated interactions they will have a strong preference for assigning those meanings to symbols that allow them to jointly solve their coordination problems, and these are also the assignments where both parties give the same meanings to the symbols both use. In this way a rudimentary system of conventions can arise without the assumption of prior conventions for establishing them, and once this system is in place it can then used to generate increasingly complex higher-level systems of convention.

While this provides a good reply to Kumārila's challenge it is unlikely (as is usually the case with any complex philosophical question) to settle the matter once and for all. For while it has been shown that conventions can emerge without pre-existing conventions that constitute a linguistic system for expressing the first conventions, it is still the case that we need thought for the first set of conventions to arise. The two characters in Lewis's example that try to coordinate have to think about their own and about each other's actions. And if thought requires the existence of language (as the Mīmāṃsakas assumed) then we still have the problem of having to explain how this language came into existence.¹⁰ In particular, if we cannot spell out this language of thought in terms of conventions, we seem to be back to some kind of approach that assumes the existence of an objective word-world relation which the Mādhyamika's appeal to convention wanted to avoid in the first place.

It seems that to settle this question we first have to solve the problem of intentionality,

⁹ Lewis 1969, see also Westerhoff 2011.

¹⁰ We might do so by assuming the existence of an innate language of thought. The source of the intentionality of this innate language may then be located in causal relations that both bring about the innate language (presumably by some evolutionary processes) and simultaneously connect it with its intentional objects.

and in particular the problem of the source of intentionality: can it arise from non-intentional entities, in the same way in which living things can arise from inanimate matter, or does there have to be an original source of intentionality that cannot in turn be reduced to anything else? As answers to these questions do not seem to be readily forthcoming, let us bracket them for the time being, and let us assume that there is a way in which the Mādhyamika's conception of language as wholly conventional can be made to work. This would then give us a way of accounting for the second of Nāgārjuna's puzzling claims mentioned above, namely that language does not exist. It would then be understood as the rejection of a specific (and widely accepted) understanding of language that incorporates the central Nyāyā idea of an objective link between language and world intrinsically independent of human interests and concerns, replacing it by a conception according to which language derives its existence from a shared system of conventions that is inextricably linked with us, our actions, and our intentions. It then remains to make sense of Nāgārjuna's first claim. Given the kind of de-ontologized language just described, how can we make sense of Nāgārjuna's claim that *everything* is just language (*nāmamātra*)?

2. What does it mean to say that everything is language?

In the contemporary Western discussion of Madhyamaka we occasionally find its position described as a form of pan-fictionalism.¹¹ There is no unanimous agreement on what pan-fictionalism amounts to,¹² but for our purposes it is sufficient to describe it in relation to local forms of fictionalism. Local fictionalisms are familiar from areas like ethics or the philosophy of mathematics where the problematic status of specific entities like norms or abstract objects is addressed by treating them as akin to fictional objects. Numbers, the fictionalist about mathematics might argue, do not exist like tables or chairs, though in a more permanent and less concrete form, but their nature is best compared to characters in a novel. Even though Sherlock Holmes is not a flesh-and-blood person like other humans, we can still speak meaningfully about him, and make statements that are true or false, based on the stories that describe him. In the same way mathematical entities are created by the theories mathematicians invent (given the familiar logical constraints), and when we speak about them we refer to them in a similar way as to Sherlock Holmes.

The pan-fictionalist now extends this picture from local theorizing about specific kinds of entities to *all* entities whatsoever: they are all to be treated along the same lines as entities in a piece of fiction. In order to determine whether the idea of pan-fictionalism is useful for understanding the Madhyamaka framework we first of all need to determine what precisely the role of fiction in 'pan-fictionalism' is. We can distinguish at least three kinds of properties we usually associate with fiction.

¹¹ "Madhyamaka is fictionalism all the way down." (Garfield 2006, 6.), "The Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness [...] entails that everything is a conceptual fiction ." (Siderits 2015: 115), "[T]he Prāsaṅgika philosopher would work out the Madhyamaka rejection of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) by adopting a fictionalist approach to all conventional domains of discourse." (D'Amato 2012: 416), "[A]lthough the pan-fictional theory was not held only by Madhyamikas [...] I will be offering an interpretation which is most in keeping with the Madhyamika position as I understand it." (Crittenden 1981: 323).

¹² For a summary of different accounts of spelling out pan-fictionalism see Konrad 2014, 235-254.

1. Fiction is usually understood in contrast with non-fiction. The easiest way to explain to somebody what makes a specific text a piece of fiction is to contrast it with something non-fictional, for example a report in a newspaper. We can then say that while the report relates to a world of tables and chairs that we see around us, the piece of fiction either refers to a different kind of world (a platonic realm inhabited by the creatures from a novel, say), or that it relates to our world, but in a way fundamentally different from the report (by being about ideas in the author's mind, for example). Which of these two theories of fiction we choose is not of great importance for our present discussion, the key point to keep in mind is that fiction is usually understood in a contrastive way, as distinct in an important way from what is not fictional. In addition, the distinction between fact and fiction is commonly understood to indicate an important divide in the structure of reality, a fundamental distinction between different kinds of things (abstract vs concrete entities, or material vs mental entities, for example).

2. The authors of fiction are not fictional themselves. Whatever kind of being Sherlock Holmes is, he is very different from Arthur Conan Doyle, who was a creature like you and me. To use the currently popular notion of grounding, fictional characters are grounded in the non-fictional character (the author) that has created them, and without whom they would not exist.

3. The readers of fiction are not fictional either. The reader of the fiction differs from the creatures in the fiction in the same way the author does. If we assume that author and reader are jointly responsible for the existence of the fiction, the fictional characters would be partly grounded by the reader, and partly grounded by the author.

However, if we interpret Madhyamaka as a pan-fictionalism, it needs to be based on an understanding of fiction which does not have any of these three properties.

First, consider the contrastive understanding of fiction and non-fiction. The obvious equivalents of fiction and non-fiction in the Madhyamaka context are conventional and ultimate truth. But the Mādhyamika's theory of the emptiness of emptiness (or at any rate the semantic non-dualist understanding of that notion) implies that the only truth there is is the conventional truth, and that a substantially existent ultimate truth is undermined by the Madhyamaka arguments in the same way all other substantial entities are undermined. But if there is *only* fiction we can no longer understand it in contrastive terms as what is different from non-fiction. The distinction between the two evaporates; it seems to be that when everything is fiction, nothing is.¹³

This problem appears to be unchanged whether we believe in an ontological interpretation of fictional discourse (according to which fictional discourse is about a world other than our own) or in some de-ontologized version (e.g. by holding what we *do* with fictions is different from what we do with factual reports.¹⁴ In the former case, because all worlds are now equally fictional, no distinction between fictions and reports

¹³ Compare Ferraro 2013: 214.

¹⁴ For this distinction see Crittenden 1991: 158-174.

is forthcoming any more. In the latter case, if what we do with statements always conforms to the fiction-type of behaviour, and never to anything else, we can no longer use our practices in order to demarcate a distinction between the fictional and the factual. The way the Mādhyamika gets around this problem is by declaring the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth to be only valid at the level of conventional truth. Transposed to the case of fiction this amounts to saying that there is a distinction between fiction and non-fiction, but that this is itself fictional. Whether this move stops the distinction between the two truths from evaporating is a complex question, and not one we can resolve in the context of the present paper. What we can note, however, is that to the extent we can draw a distinction between fiction and non-fiction along Madhyamaka lines at all, it is going to be very different from the usual contrastive understanding that takes this contrast to correspond to an important fissure in the structure of reality.

Second, for Madhyamaka the author of the fiction equated with conventional reality is not considered to be substantially real either. What sense fictionalism makes of the nature of the author of the fiction is not entirely straightforward, but the two possibilities just mentioned supply us with useful example of the kind of view they are most likely to defend. In the case of ontological fictionalism, we have a kind of ontologically elevated narrator who tells a story, and this story then appears to us not as a story, but as the manifest reality that we see around us. Possible examples of this include versions of Berkeleyanism (where the ‘story’ is simply a succession of ideas in the mind of God that appear to us like the external world) or version of Vedānta, where what appears as the world is a story narrated by Brahma. For interpretational fictionalism, there is no transcendent narrator, but we ourselves tell the story, based on input received from the senses. The resulting story then appears to us in the way we ordinarily perceive the world. Both kinds of fictionalism need spelling out in more detail, but it is already clear from this rudimentary sketch that the narrator in each case is a creature very different from those that inhabit the narration. Madhyamaka is closer to interpretational than to ontological fictionalism (there is no place for an ontologically elevated crafter of conventions in the Madhyamaka system), as conventional reality is something created by us, as we are collectively putting conventions into place. But it makes no sense to ascribe to the convention-maker any greater sense of reality than the various objects that arise as part of the convention. There is no non-fictional author.

Finally, the same also holds for the reader, or the recipient of the conventionally created reality. While in the case of fiction there is always an ontologically substantial divide between the non-fictional readers and the fictional characters they read about, for Madhyamaka the subject that navigates its existence on the basis of conventional reality is not substantially real either.

It is therefore apparent that when we spell out Madhyamaka in terms of pan-fictionalism, the ‘fiction’ that underlies this characterization is very different from the everyday understanding of fiction that sees it as contrastively defined relative to non-fiction, and as involving non-fictional authors and readers. Rather, the Madhyamaka fiction is characterized by two peculiar properties:

Vortex:

The fiction itself subsumes the distinction between fiction and non-fiction.

Bootstrapping:

The creator of the fiction is created by the fiction the creator creates. The reader of the fiction is created by the fiction the reader reads.

Even though the combination of these two properties is peculiar to Madhyamaka,¹⁵ both have also occupied the minds of philosophers in the Western tradition.¹⁶ How to make sense of these two properties is the principal problem in making sense of Madhyamaka, and one that we cannot pursue in the present paper. However, it is apparent that because of the peculiar understanding of fiction that the Mādhyamika presupposes (an understanding that due to its inclusion of the vortex and bootstrapping properties is fundamentally different from the idea of fiction commonly presupposed), the explication of Madhyamaka in terms of a comprehensive fictionalism explains actually very little. If we understand fiction in the ordinary sense, panfictionalism is likely to misrepresent the Madhyamaka position, for example by describing a position according to which there is no important distinction between fictional and non-fictional texts, while leaving the ontological status of authors and readers of these texts untouched. If, on the other hand, we come up with a conception of fiction that actually accords with Madhyamaka ideas, as the one described above, we have not really advanced in our understanding, since this new conception of ‘fiction’ is as much in need of explication as the Madhyamaka position itself.

Despite these difficulties, the fact remains that it is clearly attractive to spell out certain key positions of Madhyamaka in terms of fiction, and to do so by describing it as a global, rather than a merely local account. One obvious reason is that if we work through the Madhyamaka analysis it becomes apparent that we end up with a case of reference-failure for much of ordinary discourse. This is clear in the case of individuals, as already the Abhidharma rejects the assumption of enduring entities like tables and chairs that our common way of speaking refers to. Abhidharma mereological reductionism states that there are literally no such things. Madhyamaka adds another turn of the screw by arguing that we also cannot assume the existence of ultimately real entities (the Abhidharma’s *dharmas*) underlying the medium-sized dry goods of our everyday acquaintance. If we accept the semantic non-dualist interpretation of the emptiness of emptiness, according to

¹⁵ The bootstrapping property is not specific to Madhyamaka but can be found in all Buddhist traditions beginning with the Abhidharma. It is a consequence of the no-self theory that argues for the existence of physico-psychological components none of which constitute a self, but which in combination generate the appearance of a self that can be reflexively aware of its relation to the physico-psychological components. It is the mind’s self-talk that creates the appearance of a self, while the self also appears to be the source of the self-talk in the first place.

¹⁶ The vortex property arises in attempts to construe versions of Kantianism without a noumenon (see Vaihinger 1935: 74–76, 151–153, 313–315, Westerhoff 2016b), and in discussions of global anti-realism when the status of the anti-realist position itself becomes an object of scrutiny (Boghossian 2006: 52-57). The bootstrapping property has been discussed by a variety of authors who defend a reductionist account of the self. See, for example, Hofstadter 2007: xii, Dennett 1991: 418, Metzinger 2009: 108.

which ultimate reality is only conventionally real, there is no way of speaking about what goes on at the ultimate level that would in any way transcend our conventional discourse. There are thus no individuals to speak about at the conventional level, nor are there any at the ultimate level. Buddhism's position towards universals is not any more accommodating, as becomes apparent in the nominalism spelt out by the later thinkers Diñnāga and Dharmakīrti. We therefore end up with a scenario where unreal universals are instantiated by non-existent individuals. Yet our conventional talk about tables and chairs is evidently not nonsense, and for this reason there is some justification for spelling it out in terms of fictional discourse or, to be more precise, in terms of discourse about fiction. For this allows us to accept on the one hand that not every assertion about Sherlock Holmes is as good as any other, that there are true and false things to be said about the great detective, but also, on the other hand, that Sherlock Holmes does not exist. Moreover, as the Mādhyamaka arguments against intrinsically existent objects are wholly general, they demand that the fictionalist perspective should be adopted globally, and not just with reference to specific sets of objects.

The fictionalist perspective also allows us to produce a coherent understanding of what happens when the Mādhyamika debates with other kinds of philosophical approaches. If the Mādhyamikas present arguments in support of their position, they have to do so using terms with the meaning agreed to by all parties in the debate. Otherwise no consensus about any position could possibly emerge. But we might then worry that the assumption that the terms involved have a meaning independent of the philosophical position one happens to hold is simply the assumption that the meaning of these terms is not fixed by their use, and thus by a network of conventions, but that their meaning is somehow grounded in convention-independent criteria. And such a picture of a convention-independent semantics is precisely one that the Mādhyamika's criticism of *svabhāva* undermines. For this reason the Prāsaṅgika interpretation of Mādhyamaka claims that the Mādhyamika never offers free-standing arguments (*svatantra*) in support of their position, but will only ever offer *reductios* (*prasaṅga*) of the philosophical positions that their opponents hold. One way of understanding this is to say that the Mādhyamika treats his opponents' systems akin to fictional texts, and offers his arguments strictly limited to the horizon of these texts. In this way the Mādhyamika sets out to show, from within the opponent's philosophical fiction, that this fiction is committed to contradictory assertions at some point, and therefore has to be rejected as an inconsistent system. He does not set out to construct his own system, in order to attack the opponent's position from within this system. Because the root of philosophical confusion arises at the conventional level, at the level of fiction, its refutation must also take place within the framework of the convention, that is, in the fiction. In this way no convention-independent meaning has to be supposed, since all the meaning that the Mādhyamika needs for his *reductio* is already supplied within the philosophical fiction in which the opponent operates.

Given the undeniable attractions of spelling out Mādhyamaka ideas with respect to fiction, as well as the obvious limitations of classifying the Mādhyamaka position as pan-fictionalism, how are we then to understand Nāgārjuna's claim that everything is just language? It clearly has to be understood as global fictionalism with a twist. In the passage cited above Nāgārjuna spells out his claim with reference to *kalpanā*, abstraction or conceptual construction. This construction comes without a constructor, and without

an unconstructed distinction between the constructed and the unconstructed.

It is now apparent how the perceived tension between Nāgārjuna's two positions on language mentioned above is to be dissolved. First, the claim that language does not exist has to be understood as a rejection of the widely accepted Nyāya view of an objective structure in the world to which the structure of linguistic entities somehow manages to connect. It does not mean that the Mādhyamika rejects the existence of language altogether. Rather, he has an alternative understanding in mind, one in which meaning and truth do not simply result from a set of objective word-world relations, but one where the entire language is generated by a set of shared speaker conventions.

Second, it is such a de-ontologized understanding of language that can then be used in spelling out the Madhyamaka idea that everything is language. However, we need to be careful that we do not introduce features into this conventionalist understanding of language that are at odds with the Madhyamaka perspective. Even if all language is conventional, one may think, this does not imply that the creators of the convention, that is, the members of the community of speakers are conventional too. This, of course, is not the Mādhyamika's understanding, he conceives of language in terms of *kalpanā*, abstraction or conceptual construction, and this notion comes without a unconstructed constructor by whom the construction is constructed by, without an unconstructed recipient the construction is constructed for, and without an unconstructed basis the construction is constructed from. How this notion of *kalpanā* is to be spelt out in detail, what its properties are, and what arguments are put forward to support its essential role in the Madhyamaka framework are questions that remain for another occasion. I hope to have been able to show to the reader, however, how, once a clear understanding of the view of language based on *kalpanā* the Mādhyamika operates with has been obtained, the initial tension between the claims that all is language, and that yet language does not exist can be seen to disappear.

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