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HOW TO OBTAIN SALVATION THROUGH LANGUAGE? BHARTṚHARI ON *ŚABDAPŪRVAYOGA*

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Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* (5th century AD) is a seminal work in the history of Sanskrit grammatical tradition. It offers an original blending of linguistic and philosophical ideas that will have a strong impact in the ensuing history of Indian speculation. Among other issues, the work endorses the idea that language is capable to bring about spiritual consequences that goes far beyond the boundaries of the ordinary experience. In a nutshell, language has a soteriological import. In particular the article deals with a puzzling expression contained in the first chapter of the work — *śabdapūrvayoga* — which seems to embody Bhartṛhari's peculiar conception of language as a tool for obtaining “salvation”.

If one were to identify an area in which the relations between language and salvation are extensively discussed, India in its classical period would be a worthy candidate. The amount of technical discussion on linguistic issues was remarkable, and practically every philosophical school provided its own contribution to this problem.

In classical India, at least in the brahmanical milieu, the term generally used to convey the notion of salvation² is a Sanskrit action noun derived from the root *muc* ‘to free’. Among others (such as *mukti*), the word most commonly used is *mokṣa*, often translated as ‘freedom from’, ‘liberation’ or ‘deliverance’. The very idea of liberation presupposes inevitably the presence of something that constrains: almost all traditions have identified this factor with the mechanism of rebirth, which is propelled by the actions every individual has carried out in his/her previous lives. The origin of this notion (*saṃsāra* is the word most often used to indicate it) is still disputed,³ yet it is certain that it was a relatively

1 I am grateful to Prof Raffaele Torella, Dr Vincenzo Vergiani, Dr Elisa Freschi, Dr Elisa Ganser and Dr Paolo Visigalli for their valuable suggestions. Heartfelt thanks go also to Mark Schneider for having revised the draft and for his insightful remarks. Needless to say, all inaccuracies must be attributed to the author.

2 As explained in the introduction, the word “salvation” is used here in a very loose way. It indicates any kind of religious and philosophical endeavour directed to improve human condition in this life or beyond.

3 The idea of a cycle of births is inextricably tied up with the *karma* theory, so that it is very difficult to unravel the historical bonds between the two. Generally speaking, there are two quite distinct approaches to the question. Some scholars believe that the ideas of *karma* and rebirth developed from notions already present in the Vedic environment; others that they were developed

late innovation and that it played a minor role — or perhaps no role at all — in the first period of Indian religious history, the Vedic one. At that early time, dominated by the mechanism of sacrifice and in which even the idea of rebirth was scarcely attested, the religious goal seemed to be a more concrete affair than it became afterwards: the Vedic rites were not carried out to free man from the restraints of ordinary life but rather to recreate and prolong its positive aspects into the hereafter.

But this does not entail that the intellectual horizon of the early Indic man was limited to pure materialism. A full account of what happened in that first, ancient phase cannot be complete without taking into consideration another seminal idea of the Indian *Weltanschauung*, the one conveyed by the word *dharma*. This expression, attested before *mokṣa*,⁴ has a broader semantic range, encompassing meanings like ‘religion’, ‘duty’, ‘order’ and ‘morality’. Moreover, and more importantly for our purposes, *dharma* is frequently used to express the notion of ‘religious merit’ or ‘religious reward’. In such cases the word has clearly some semantic overlapping with the concept expressed by *mokṣa*: it is quite patent that to define exactly the boundaries between a *dharma* ‘religious reward’ and a *mokṣa* ‘soteriological fruit’ may turn out to be a rather awkward task.

Yet, even if it is difficult to disregard this semantic parallelism, mainstream Brahmanism started to interpret the two concepts as having different meanings. Eventually, both ideas were fixed in the well-known formula of the *puruṣārthas* ‘four purposes of men’s life’, in which *dharma* constitutes the third stage and *mokṣa* the fourth.⁵

The dynamics between the two notions have been discussed at length and both classical and modern hermeneutics have often stressed their antithetical nature.⁶ Assuredly both concepts concern regions that are beyond the tangible experience of man, but they do operate differently. *Dharma* has been generally interpreted as having a socially-oriented function, embodying a series of values that are relevant only within a social environment. *Mokṣa*, on the other hand, has been often explained as a purpose to be specifically cultivated on an individual level, sometimes on the margins of society, under certain circumstances explicitly outside it (cf. Gombrich 1988: 25–27).

outside it. A good example of the first interpretation is Tull (1989); for the second cf. Bronkhorst (2007).

4 Olivelle (2009) has argued that the use of *dharma* is a late innovation in classical Brahmanism. According to him the concept — present at first in Vedic literature and associated with the idea of kingship — was borrowed later by the Buddhists to indicate Gautama’s doctrine. Only since then it was reused in the Brahmanical field with the range of meanings reported below. In Vedic Brahmanism a semantic range similar to that of *dharma* was expressed by the term *rta*, cf. Gonda (1975).

5 The definition of four purposes for human life is quite a late idea. Yet the presence of three aims (*dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*) is older and already attested in the *Manusmṛiti* (cf. for instance 7.100).

6 There are important cases in which the opposition is felt so strongly that one of the two concepts is dropped. For instance, in the older Mīmāṃsā literature, up to Kumāṛila, *mokṣa* has no place at all and the focus is only on *dharma*, cf. Halbfass (1980).

Nonetheless this interpretation leaves some problems open. In particular, it fails to explain how the two purposes work together within the aforesaid formulation of the “four purposes of men’s life” (Malamoud 1994: 143–167): in the light of the previous perspective, the two notions look more like alternative values rather than two consecutive steps on the same ladder.

Is there a way to solve this problem? Basically there are two. A first possible approach might consist in devising a hermeneutical strategy capable of integrating the functions of *dharma* and *mokṣa* on a theoretical level. Karl Potter (1991: 5–15) has provided a remarkable example of this method in his *Presuppositions of India’s Philosophies*. His proposition consists in giving a slightly different interpretation of the meaning of *puruṣārthas*, considering them not simply as “aims”, but rather as “attitudes of concern” towards man’s ordinary environment. In this perspective the two lowest purposes (*artha* and *kāma*) represent attitudes of minimal concern while the two highest (*dharma* and *mokṣa*) denote attitudes in which concern is maximum. A man who has reached the *dharma* stage — using Potter’s words — «sees the importance of treating the others as himself but fails to generate the kinds of real concern which the man of passion has at his most glorious moment. He sees himself as respecting others, as bound by the concept of duty towards others» (Potter 1991: 14). On the other hand a man who has experienced *mokṣa* «is confident of his ability to gain that which he renounces but finds more mastery — greater freedom — in meeting the challenge of not exerting his power for gain» (Potter 1991: 15). Liberation is thus seen as an act in which there is the utmost concern for the environment, but it is not bound by duty, rather by self-knowledge and self-will.

An altogether different approach might consist in providing instances in which *dharma* and *mokṣa* are clearly treated as functional to a single soteriological purpose, without necessarily providing a theory to cover all instances.

It is precisely this latter approach that I am following here. The particular case I am proposing is a good example of how a specific school can develop a discourse on salvation preserving the notions of *dharma* and *mokṣa*, but redefining them according to modified contexts. The case in point is the Sanskrit classical grammatical tradition (*vyākaraṇa*), especially the works of Bhartṛhari, a grammarian and philosopher of language of the 5th century AD.⁷ Bhartṛhari made substantial contributions to such fields as metaphysics and linguistics, but more interestingly for us, also developed a peculiar discourse on soteriology whose consequences are still not clear. His salvation theory is based on the assumption that language, in certain circumstances, has soteriological capabilities.

7 Bhartṛhari was a key exponent of a long tradition of grammatical studies (*vyākaraṇa*) that flourished in India at least nine centuries before his time. The tradition is known as the “pāṇinian” school from the name of its alleged founder, Pāṇini (4th century BC). He composed an aphoristic grammar of Sanskrit, named *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, which was commented later on by two other pivotal figures of the school, Kātyāyana (3rd century BC) and Patañjali (2nd century BC). On the dates of Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patañjali cf. Cardona (1998: 261–268).

Bhartṛhari inserts the discourse on *dharma* and *mokṣa* in a wider framework consisting of a two-tier picture: the *dharma* stage corresponds to the level in which an individual must comply with a set of specific rules (established by a certain authoritative source, in this case grammar) and in the presence of other persons. For the *mokṣa* stage, conversely, the presence of this communal scenario is by no means required and the focus is totally on the individual. But the critical point to be kept in mind is that the latter stage is not possible without the former: the pursuit of *mokṣa* is not reserved for people who are able to bypass the social dimension of salvation. Only those who have fruitfully practiced *dharma* can achieve it. As I will make clear later *dharma* and *mokṣa* work together towards the same purpose; it is thus totally legitimate to attribute to *dharma* a soteriological role, certainly different from the one of *mokṣa*, but equally crucial.

Now, since Bhartṛhari's considerations are based on preexisting views, the first step toward understanding his point is to review the contributions on the same topic by the authors who preceded him in the *vyākaraṇa* lineage.

*

In the first extant work of the *vyākaraṇa* tradition — Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* — there is no reference at all to the problem of salvation. That is not surprising. The *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is a purely grammatical text aiming to investigate the morphology and the processes of formation of Sanskrit. The first *vyākaraṇa* work that looks upon language as a possible soteriological medium is Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* ("Great Commentary"). This text is a commentary on the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and, concurrently, on Kātyāyana's *vārttikas*, composed about a century earlier. The first part, known as *Paspaśāhnika*, is a sort of preliminary chapter in which the author discusses some general features of the science of grammar. Among these features, he considers also the one discussed here. According to Patañjali language has the power to produce a kind of "extraordinary reward". With "extraordinary reward" he clearly means something that goes beyond the natural purpose of words and sentences, that is to make human communication possible. The fact is explicitly affirmed several times in the text. In doing so, Patañjali sometimes highlights the role of grammar in the whole process: «a Brahmin should study and know the causeless *dharma* as the Veda with its six limbs; grammar is the most important among the six limbs, and an effort made on the most important thing bears fruit».⁸ Or: «the one who uses words following the science of grammar is joined to blissfulness».⁹ Sometimes he focuses on the importance of using correct words, as grammar teaches: «the meaning is expressed by

8 *brāhmaṇena niṣkāraṇaḥ dharmah ṣaḍaṅgaḥ vedaḥ adhyeyah jñeyah iti. pradhānam ca ṣaṭsu aṅgeṣu vyākaraṇam. pradhāne ca kṛtaḥ yatnaḥ phalavān bhavati.* See Kielhorn (1880: 1).

9 *śāstrapūrvakah yaḥ śabdān prayunkte saḥ abhyudayena yujyate.* See Kielhorn (1880: 10).

correct words not by incorrect ones. Acting in this way leads to blissfulness».¹⁰ Or the rather famous Kātyāyana's *vārtikka* that says: «while the use of language in the ordinary world is prompted by meaning, the restriction of merit is indeed established through grammar».¹¹ In all the former passages the words used to denote this “spiritual merit” are only two: the previously discussed *dharma*, and *abhyudaya*, generally rendered as ‘beatitude’ or ‘blissfulness’. Elsewhere in the text one may find also other statements indicating the capacity of grammar to bring about a spiritual reward (for example *śāstrapūrvaka* [*prayoga*] or *vāgyoga*). Nonetheless it is remarkable that they all point to a spiritual welfare that is significant only within the sphere of sociality. That is to say within the *dharma* sphere. Unfortunately Patañjali does not specify in any way what this blissfulness consists of and this might lead to the conclusion that in his view such “spiritual merit” operates only on the concrete level, that community-based environment which is the peculiar feature of *dharma*. Still, this may not be entirely true. There is at least one passage in which the *Mahābhāṣya* is quite explicit in stating that the merit produced by the knowledge of grammar transcends the boundaries of ordinary life: «he who is an expert in a particular field and uses words correctly, gains victory in the hereafter (*paratra*), but he is ruined by incorrect words».¹² The stress on the word *hereafter* and in particular the use of the word *jaya* ‘victory’, might lead us to think that Patañjali was at least aware of a different perspective in which the idea of transmigration was present, and in which individual salvation had a more solid role.

Unfortunately this perspective is not explored further and in the whole *Mahābhāṣya* there is no clear reference to the concept of liberation and no single occurrence of the word *mokṣa*. Given this picture one can only make suppositions: Patañjali lived in the period of the definitive passage from the old Vedic ideas to the newer ones brought into Brahmanism by the *śramaṇa* ideologies. Therefore his ambiguous position on soteriology may have been caused by a legitimate aspiration to remain faithful to the old brahmanical lore tempered with the influence of the new emerging tendencies.

*

Bhartṛhari composed his magnum opus, the *Vākyapadīya* (“Treatise on Sentence and Word”), around the 5th century AD,¹³ roughly seven centuries after the *Mahābhāṣya*. During this time the pāṇinian tradition somehow managed

10 *śabdena eva arthaḥ abhidheyaḥ na apaśabdena iti. evaṃ kriyamāṇam abhyudayakāri bhavati.* See Kielhorn (1880: 8).

11 *lokataḥ arthaprayukte śabdaprayoge śāstreṇa dharmanīyamah.* See Kielhorn (1880: 8).

12 *yaś tu prayukte kuśalo viśeṣe śabdān yathāvad vyavaharakāle so 'nantam āpnoti jayaṃ paratra vāgyogavid duṣyati cāpaśabdaiḥ.* See Kielhorn (1880: 2).

13 The work consists of roughly 2000 *kārikās* ‘stanzas’, divided into three main chapters. Four ancient commentaries of the *Vākyapadīya* have been preserved. The oldest, known simply as *Vṛtti*, was traditionally attributed to Bhartṛhari himself. Nowadays some scholars believe that the

to survive, but no text has been preserved to our days. Bhartṛhari had the historical merit of plunging the grammatical tradition into the philosophical mainstream of his time, opening up for his discipline the possibility of discussing theoretical problems that had been scarcely considered until then.

If Patañjali's position on soteriology is somehow questionable, Bhartṛhari's is certainly clearer.¹⁴ In the first chapter of the *Vākyapadīya* Bhartṛhari reaffirms the importance of language in gaining extraordinary rewards, with a set of arguments that is not so different from that of the *Mahābhāṣya*. To quote just a few: «[grammar] is the first step of the ladder leading to liberation» (VP 1.16); or «the correct words, acquired from cultured men through tradition, are the means of obtaining merit» (VP 1.27). Yet his speculation departs from Patañjali's when it shows a clear awareness that a soteriological goal can be pursued in two different — but not alternative — ways. Strangely enough, the passage most evidently in support of this idea is not to be found in the *Vākyapadīya*, but in the only other work we are reasonably sure Bhartṛhari composed, a commentary upon Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, known as *Mahābhāṣyaṭīkā*.¹⁵ This text, as already noted by Subramania Iyer (1964), offers a very straightforward comment on the question: at one point Patañjali asserts that «this collection of sentences and words which has flower and which has fruit [...] that must be known as the Veda». ¹⁶ In his commentary Bhartṛhari sets apart the expression *puṣpita* 'which has flower' from the expression *phalita* 'which has fruit'; according to him the word *puṣpa* 'flower' refers to a "visible" benefit, namely to *abhyudaya* 'blissfulness', while the term *phala* 'fruit' refers to an "invisible" one, that is tantamount to the bliss of the *niḥśreyasa* 'final emancipation'.¹⁷ Now it is clear that the visible benefit to which Bhartṛhari is referring is the socially oriented reward peculiar to the *dharma* sphere, while the invisible one indicates *mokṣa*. The jargon used to identify the former is the same as in *Mahābhāṣya*, with all the typical expressions (*dharma*, *abhyudaya*, *sāstrapūrvaka*) attested in the *Vākyapadīya*. But the real issue, the one that is worth discussing thoroughly, is the terminology used to identify the latter, i.e. the maximum level of emancipation that corresponds to the experience of *mokṣa*.

When one comes to the question of which term is chosen in our sources to transport this meaning, the most likely would be a particularly puzzling expression attested only five times in the first chapter of the *Vākyapadīya*. This expression is *śabdapūrvayoga*. At first glance it seems to be no more than a lexical

commentary must be accredited to a different author. All the contents of this article are based on the traditional assumption that the *Vṛtti* is Bhartṛhari's own work.

¹⁴ Some scholars have openly questioned that soteriology has a bearing on Bhartṛhari's thought. For a collection of various positions cf. Bronkhorst (1995: 97–98) and Biardeau's stance further on.

¹⁵ The *Mahābhāṣyaṭīkā* is preserved in a single manuscript in a badly corrupt form; it is not even certain if it was intended as a commentary upon the whole *Mahābhāṣya* or just upon the initial part. The text was edited for the first time in 1970 by Abhyankar and Limaye then by different scholars between 1987 and 1991. Cf. Aklujkar (1993: 34).

¹⁶ so 'yam akṣarasamāmnāyo vākyasamāmnāyaḥ puṣpitaḥ phalitaḥ [...] veditavyo brahmarāṣiḥ.

¹⁷ dṛṣṭādrṣṭābhyām abhyudayaniḥśreyasābhyām.

variation of the already mentioned *śāstrapūrvakaprayoga*. If so, *śabdapūrvayoga* would be just another phrasing to convey the idea that merit is gained by the use of correct words. But there are good reasons to think that this is not the case. In the five instances in which *śabdapūrvayoga* is mentioned there is no reference to a merit that is gained through the use of correct language. Instead, in all occurrences, the proper use of language seems to be just a preliminary notion to whatever is meant by *śabdapūrvayoga*. Let us consider the instances one by one.

The first occurrence of the term is in Bhartṛhari's *svavṛtti* on VP 1.14:

When one knows that the proper nature of language has an undifferentiated nature one, through the suppression of sequence, attains *śabdapūrvayoga*.¹⁸

The second occurrence is again attested in the commentary on VP 1.14:

Having reached a stage in which language is not mixed, one gets the *pratibhā* 'intuition' which is the source of all linguistic phenomena. Through that intuition, that is similar in nature to being, and through the cessation of the repeated cognitions [of temporal and spatial distinction] through *śabdapūrvayoga*, one attains the supreme reality that is the mere cessation of every transformation.¹⁹

The third occurrence is the only one appearing in a stanza, VP 1.20:

In that light the manifesting *nimittāni* 'causes' of language, such as the letters of the alphabet, appear like a reflection, because of *śabdapūrvayoga*.²⁰

The fourth occurrence is in the *Vṛtti* of VP 1.144 (Iyer ed. VP 1.123):

Through the repetition [of correct forms], having gained *śabdapūrvayoga*, and having well comprehended the intuition, that is the source of reality, that is the origin of the transformations of being, that is existence and that has the power to be both the means of accomplishment and the accomplished thing, then the attainment of *kṣema* 'supreme good' is assured.²¹

The fifth and last occurrence is in the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.159 (Rau ed. 1.134):

Still, the word in its *paśyantī* form is not corrupted, not mixed and beyond the range of worldly usage. According to the tradition of some thinkers that form of

18 *śabdapūrvam hi śabdasvarūpasyābhedatattvajñāne kramasambhāreṇa yogam labhate.*

19 *so 'vyatikīrṇām vāgavasthām adhigamya vāgvikārānām prakṛtiṃ pratibhām anuparaiti. tasmāc ca sattānugūṇyamātrāc śabdapūrvayogabhāvanābhyāsākṣepāt pratyastamitasarvavikārollekhamātrām parām prakṛtiṃ pratipadyate.*

20 *yatra vāco nimittāni cihnānīvākṣarasmrteḥ | śabdapūrvayoga yogenā bhāsante pratibimbavat ||*
21 *tadabhyāsāc ca śabdapūrvakam yogam adhigamya pratibhām tattvaprabhāvām bhāvavikāra-prakṛtiṃ sattām sādhyasādhanaśaktiyuktām samyag avabudhya niyatā kṣemaaprāptir iti.*

the word is gained either through grammar or through *śabdapūrvayoga*, acquirable through the knowledge of correct forms.²²

Considering the baffling nature of the expression it is no wonder that scholars have been troubled by it several times in the last decades. In her translation of the first chapter of the *Vākyapadīya* Madeleine Biarreau (1964) systematically translates *śabdapūrvayoga* as ‘yoga de la parole’; a choice that might seem inconclusive but Biarreau (1964: 269–270) is quite explicit in negating any kind of soteriological connotation in Bhartṛhari’s thought; she wrote:

Il ne faudrait alors pas trop presser le sens des affirmations, d’ailleurs vagues, concernant la délivrance, ni prendre sans plus de précautions à la lettre l’hémistiche [qui dit]: il accède au Brahman suprême.

No doubt she provides a rather minimalist translation, but her choice is at least perfectly fitting to her approach to the matter.

Subramania Iyer has frequently touched upon the issue of *śabdapūrvayoga* in his writings, providing substantial contributions. Among other works, the 1964 article “Bhartṛhari on *vyākaraṇa* as a means of obtaining *mokṣa*” is certainly the one where the matter is discussed most thoroughly. With his interpretation Iyer establishes a sort of “classical standpoint” on Bhartṛhari’s soteriology, which is to some extent still influential. What does this “classical standpoint” consist of? Iyer (1964: 126) starts his discussion pointing out once again that there is a clear-cut distinction between the spiritual merit gained through the correct application of the *śāstra* and the attainment of the highest reward as conveyed by *śabdapūrvayoga*: «the mere acquisition of spiritual merit by the use of the correct forms of the word is not enough for the attainment of Prakṛti or Parā prakṛti». Or: «whether it be Pratibhā, Prakṛti or Parā Prakṛti it cannot be reached by mere knowledge and use of the correct forms of words but only through *śabdapūrvayoga*». But how should we interpret the expression? According to Iyer *śabdapūrvayoga* is used by Bhartṛhari to allude to a yogic path that would eventually lead the practitioner to identification with the supreme metaphysical principle, Brahman. This identification is equal to the attainment of *mokṣa*: «[*śabdapūrvayoga*] refers to some kind of yogic path as a means of attaining Brahman or the eternal word». This yogic path is characterised by the suppression of sequence, seen as a hindrance to the realisation of supreme reality: «a necessary step in being united with the one undifferentiated Reality is the elimination of sequence» (Iyer 1964: 126). Moreover, according to Iyer, the path consists of a series of steps that from the ordinary use of language leads to the awareness of the supreme principle. He says: «[in all the passages of the *Vṛtti* in which *śabdapūrvayoga* occurs] there is

22 *paraṃ tu paśyantīrūpaṃ anapabhraṃśāsamkīrṇaṃ lokavyavahārātītaṃ. tasyā eva vāco vyākaraṇena sādbutvājñānalabhyeṇa vā śabdapūrvaveṇa yogena adbhigamyate ity ekeṣāṃ āgamah.*

an attempt to recognise stages in the process». These stages are expounded by Iyer (1964: 127) as follows:

The aspirant, after having attained the unmixed form of speech, free from all corruptions, reaches *Pratibhā*, identical with the mind, the source of all words and meanings. It is also called *Paśyantī*. It is from here that the word descends into the stage of differentiation, that it becomes associated with the activity of *prāṇa* [...] the aspirant goes from *Pratibhā* or *Prakṛti* to *Parā Prakṛti* or the ultimate Reality.

In short, Iyer's approach to the question can be summarised as follows: *śabdapūrvayoga* refers to a graded yogic path whose main goal is to suppress the sequence inborn in the ordinary linguistic expression and consequently gain identity with the supreme metaphysical principle. As a result Iyer, in his translation of the first chapter of *Vākyapadīya*, chooses to render the expression in various ways but always stressing the idea of "union" with the metaphysical principle (cf. for example Iyer 1965: 21).

Other scholars have followed Iyer's main ideas (for example Varma 1976 and Carpenter 1985), but a truly new contribution to the question came up only in 1995 with Johannes Bronkhorst's (1995) paper "Grammar as the door to liberation". The article is remarkable because it proposes the first real alternative to Iyer's idea of a "meditative path". Actually Bronkhorst does not deal directly with *śabdapūrvayoga*. He is a strong supporter of the idea that Bhartṛhari did not compose the *Vṛtti* and, since most of the occurrences of *śabdapūrvayoga* are in the commentary, I suspect that he simply judged *śabdapūrvayoga* irrelevant to Bhartṛhari's soteriological picture. Nevertheless the tenets in the article are so broad-ranging, bold and innovative that I believe they are worth discussing. After having discarded the idea that in Bhartṛhari the soteriological issue is insignificant Bronkhorst (1995: 97–98) begins his argument with an open criticism of Iyer's approach:

We can [...] discard the possibility that Bhartṛhari advocated some sort of meditative way as leading to the ultimate aim. Nothing is said about that in the *Vākyapadīya*, so that, if it played any role at all, then only a minor one.

Bronkhorst's main concern is to show how the way to reach the ultimate reality is indeed a kind of special knowledge: «it seems indeed wiser [than postulating a meditative path] to assume that Bhartṛhari expected some sort of knowledge to do the job» (Bronkhorst 1995: 98). Now, *Vākyapadīya* mentions a very special type of cognition: the intuitive insight proper of the Vedic seers. According to Bronkhorst (1995: 98) this is a kind of knowledge which is «beyond the reach of language, and has no external object». The next logical step in Bronkhorst's argumentation is to identify this kind of special knowledge with the knowledge necessary to reach the ultimate goal: «it would be reasonable to assume that pure

knowledge referred to by Bhartṛhari constitutes the insight which leads to liberation». As for the way in which this intuitive cognition is gained Bronkhorst agrees that proficiency in grammar has only a preliminary function. The real knowledge is a spontaneous phenomenon that cannot be expressed through words and that is beyond language. In the final part of the article Bronkhorst searches for the possible origin of the idea of an intuitive knowledge capable of producing the final emancipation. His conclusion is that Bhartṛhari drew the notion from the Buddhist sphere, particularly from the works of the Mādhyamika school: both sides share the idea of an ultimate reality that is free from conceptualisations and language, albeit with some differences. To use Bronkhorst's (1995: 104) words:

The highest reality for Bhartṛhari is not emptiness [as it is in *Mādhyamika*] but like emptiness it is beyond the range of speech.

Now, both the approaches considered so far show a good amount of useful insights but I do not feel that they are completely satisfactory. Subramania Iyer's analysis is, as usual, well balanced and pondered; his interpretations of a text do not usually break fresh ground but he rarely fails to offer a reliable and faithful reading. Yet, in this case, his main idea cannot be safely accepted. Iyer stresses two aspects of *śabdapūrvayoga*: firstly, he assumes that it is a meditative path consisting of different stages; secondly, that it is practised in order to eliminate temporality. While it is difficult to play down the importance of the latter assertion, considering the importance of time in Bhartṛhari's metaphysical view, the former idea, the really original one, is harder to defend. Bronkhorst is certainly right in pointing out that references to a meditative path leading to the comprehension of ultimate reality are hard to find in the *Vākyapadīya*. Moreover I may add that the quotations from Vṛṣabhadeva's *Sphuṭākṣarā*²³ that Iyer uses to confirm his opinions are far from being a sound argument. In particular he quotes the following sentence: «Bhartṛhari now explains the stages of this obtainment of Brahman». ²⁴ Now such a comment may well appear as a strong indication that absolute reality must be obtained through a graded path, but a closer reading of the commentary gives a totally different impression. The sentence immediately following in *Sphuṭākṣarā* clearly supports a rather different view: «in a first phase the word is known combined with corrupted forms. Later it is known as no different from those diversified forms; because these forms are unreal» (Iyer 1966: 48, comment ad VP I.14). It is clear that the author is referring here to the two different stages of awareness already discussed, in which the first and preliminary stage is the purification of speech through grammar

23 Cf. Iyer (1964: 126–127). This commentary is usually known as *Paddhati*, but there are good reasons to believe that its real name is *Sphuṭākṣarā*, as stated by Vṛṣabhadeva himself in the dedicatory verses.

24 *ekasyā eva brahmaprāpteḥ kramam idānīm varṇayan āha*. This is the sentence in Iyer's edition of the *Paddhati/Sphuṭākṣarā*. In the article discussed here the text is slightly different: *etasyā*°.

and the second refers to what is usually called “liberation”. The graded access to the ultimate reality refers to the differentiation between the *dharmā* stage (the proper use of language) and the *mokṣa* one (the definitive attainment of Brahman). There is no reason to suppose that *mokṣa* stage must also be intended as graded as Iyer implies.

Bronkhorst’s approach is quite the opposite of Iyer’s: his conclusions are, if not revolutionary, at least very original. Let us consider, for instance, the strongest tenet proposed in the article, namely the idea that there is a kind of supernatural knowledge whose mastering would eventually lead to the attainment of the absolute reality. This kind of idea — Bronkhorst argues — has a nature similar to the knowledge that the *ṛṣis* ‘Vedic seers’ have of the Veda, and it is beyond the range of language. Now this second point is especially daring, and goes against what is generally believed to be Bhartṛhari’s most seminal assumption, the idea that language pervades every aspect of reality. Such a strong assertion needs to be discussed in detail.

The possibility of a supernatural knowledge is certainly admitted in the *Vākyapadīya*²⁵ but the claim that this kind of knowledge is completely beyond the grasp of language is questionable. To support his view Bronkhorst starts by quoting VP 2.139.²⁶ The verse is translated as: «what the seers see and what is established in the [highest] reality, is not expressed in language, it is not based on words» (Bronkhorst 1995: 99). The problem is that such a translation may be misleading. I am inclined to believe that Bhartṛhari is simply saying that the knowledge of the seers is impossible to translate into the language of ordinary communication. The focal point of this verse is the word *śabda*: it is true that Bhartṛhari very often uses the term to indicate language in the most general way, namely as a cognitive, abstract structure; but in this case there is little doubt that what he intends by it is concrete language, the words pronounced by every single speaker in ordinary exchange. There is a further point that corroborates this interpretation: the presence in the same verse of the word *vyavahāra*, clearly employed here with the meaning of ‘verbal communication’. The correct way to intend the relation between the knowledge of the *ṛṣis*, the absolute reality and the dimension of concrete speaking, is plainly expressed by the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.5:

The Seers who have an immediate intuition of merit see the word as subtle, eternal and beyond the senses; wishing to transmit that word to the ones who do not have an immediate intuition of merit, they hand down a fragment, wanting to communicate what they have heard, seen and experience as happened in a dream.²⁷

25 Cf., for instance, VP 1.38. For a detailed treatment of the “extraordinary cognitions” in Bhartṛhari and in a wider context cf. Torella 2012.

26 *ṛṣinām darśanam yac ca tattve kimcid avasthitam | na tena vyavahāro ’sti śabdā lokanibandhanāḥ ||*

27 *yām sūkṣmām nityām atindriyām vācam ṛṣayaḥ sāṅgātṛtadharmaṇo mantradṛśaḥ paśyanti tām asaṅgātṛtadharmaḥ paśyanti ’parebhyah pravedayiṣyamānā bilmam samāmananti svapnavṛttam iva dṛṣṭaśrūtānubhūtam ācikyāsanta.*

Therefore the seers see the absolute reality, which is equal to the Veda, already in the form of language. The intuition of the seers is already linguistic. If it had not been so it would have been impossible even for the seers to transform their intuition into the normal, audible language we are accustomed to use.

Another passage quoted by Bronkhorst to support this idea of supernatural “alinguistic” knowledge is the rather famous VP 1.131 that says:

There is no cognition in the world that does not follow language. All knowledge appears as if permeated by words.²⁸

Here the problematic term is *world*. According to Bronkhorst this verse can be read in a sort of negative way: only worldly knowledge is permeated by language, the supernatural one, the one necessary to obtain the highest reward, is not. Now this interpretation would seem to be challenged by the subsequent stanza (VP 1.132) in which the linguistic nature of all knowledge, ordinary and extraordinary, seems to be reaffirmed:

If it is dismissed that what is an object of knowledge has a *vāgrupatā* ‘linguistic nature’, then knowledge would not manifest at all, because a linguistic nature is the basis of cognition (Bronkhorst’s translation).²⁹

The *Vṛtti* is even plainer in the same passage in which the linguistic nature of knowledge is judged so critical that it is compared to the capacity of fire to illuminate, as well as to the presence of an *antaryāmin* ‘inner controller’ in consciousness.

Finally Bronkhorst (1995: 100) quotes a third passage in which he believes that a supernatural knowledge beyond language is suggested. These are two verses (VP 2.233–234)³⁰ from the second chapter of the *Vākyapadīya*; in them Bhartṛhari explains how real knowledge arises spontaneously. At the end of the second verse he says: «knowledge, too, is inexplicable, it only appears to be obtained by means of the science [of grammar]» (Bronkhorst’s translation). Now, here too, Bhartṛhari’s assertions seem to be less bold than they appear in Bronkhorst’s interpretation. Real knowledge is not accessible (only) through the use of the instruments of grammar: grammar designates real knowledge indirectly. Of course, this does not necessarily imply that real knowledge is completely “alinguistic”. The inexpressibility discussed in the verse does not seem to refer to knowledge in itself, rather to the fact that it is outside the purview of grammatical science.

So far I have tried to show that the two most influential treatments of Bhartṛhari’s soteriology, though insightful to some extent, are not completely

²⁸ *na so ’sti pratyayo loke yaḥ śabdānugamād rte | anuviddham iva jñānam sarvaṃ śabdena bhāṣate ||*

²⁹ *vāgrūpatā cet utkrāmed avabodhasya śāśvatī | na prakāśaḥ prakāśeta sā hi pratayavamarśinī ||*

³⁰ *śāstreṣu prakriyābhedaḥ avidyāivopavarnyate | anāgamavikalpā tu svayam vidyopavartate anibaddham nimitteṣu nirupākhyam phalaṃ yathā | tathā vidyāpy anākhyeyā śāstropāyeva lakṣyate ||*

sound. Now the question is: is it possible to go further? I think that a close reading of the occurrences of *śabdapūrvayoga*, could lead to the following considerations:

1. *Śabdapūrvayoga* is always used in a context in which the attainment of the highest reward is mentioned. Sometimes it is called *parā prakṛti* (second passage of *Vṛtti* on VP 1.14), sometimes *kṣema* (*Vṛtti* ad VP 1.123), sometimes it is mentioned with the word *paśyantī*, indicating the highest stage of the word (VP 1.134).³¹ Even VP 1.20, in which the supreme reward is not explicitly mentioned, suggests the same conclusion: the stanza in question must be read in a broader context. The *kārikās* from 1.18 to 1.22 constitute a syntactical unit in which the attainment of the supreme good (Brahman in this case, as affirmed in VP 1.22) is described. VP 1.20 seems to describe *śabdapūrvayoga*, highlighting its function: it is only through it that one is prevented from considering the subdivisions of speech as real entities: these subdivisions are no more than *pratibimba* ‘reflections’.
2. As already noted by Bronkhorst (1995: 101), the term is in two cases out of five connected with the expression *pratibhā*, a critical term in Bhartṛhari’s jargon, often translated as ‘immediate intuition’. Ashok Aklujkar (1993) has convincingly shown that the original sense of the word is to be found within the context of verbal communication. *Pratibhā* is the knowledge produced in a listener by the comprehension of the meaning of the sentence uttered by a speaker; it is immediate, devoid of temporal sequence and prompts the listener to act (cf. Akamatsu 1993: 40). Interestingly, in the second passage of the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.14 *pratibhā* and *śabdapūrvayoga* are virtually equated.
3. In the same context *pratibhā* is said to be the “source of all differentiations”, which clearly gives to the expression also a metaphysical and creative connotation that must be borne in mind (cf. Tola and Dragonetti 1990).

What kind of conclusions can we draw from all this? I think that in treating any aspect of Bhartṛhari’s speculation one must take care to remember that he was, first and foremost, a grammarian and a keen investigator of human language. Keeping in mind this aspect, and the strict relation between linguistics, metaphysics and epistemology, it seems reasonable to affirm that *śabdapūrvayoga* refers to some kind of “access” to the absolute reality and it is certainly a term with deep soteriological implications. But how should we understand this “access”? The presence of *pratibhā* in most passages is a fair proof that Bhartṛhari is thinking of an intuitive and immediate act of cognition, not of a graded one. This cognition presupposes the knowledge of grammar (that represents the *dharma*

31 Bhartṛhari distinguishes three different levels of *vāc*. Cf. VP 1.159.

stage) but the mere knowledge of grammar is not sufficient to bring it about. It is useful to remember that when Bhartṛhari talks about grammar, he is not thinking of the actual grammar of Sanskrit but more generally of the method of linguistic *apoddhāra* 'analysis' that is independent from any, single, concrete language; moreover, according to him every linguistic analysis, being based on differentiation, is ultimately unreal. Hence the idea to which *śabdapūrvayoga* refers must be a kind of cognition that transcends differentiation and temporal connotation. But that does not imply that this cognition is *alinguistic*.

Finally, why did Bhartṛhari choose to use this particular expression and how can it be translated? I think that the answer to that question should be sought in its association with *pratibhā* and in the strong parallelism between Bhartṛhari's metaphysics and his ideas on the functioning of verbal communication. There is a strong correspondence between the mechanism of a linguistic act and the way Bhartṛhari conceives his metaphysics. Even if this correspondence is sometimes overlooked, it is in this case critical: just as on the linguistic level the meaning of the sentence is grasped instantaneously with a flash of understanding and it is the only real meaning that one is able to realise, similarly the cognition of the ultimate reality, on a metaphysical plane, is instantaneous and allows one to discard all unreal differentiations.

My suggestion is therefore to take *śabdapūrvayoga* as indicating the aforementioned correspondence. The term might be translated simply as '[cognitive] union that is based on language' but bearing in mind some specifications. The *yoga* 'union' is — quite naturally — with the highest metaphysical principle. And its "being based on language" indicates a precise state of affairs: the cognitive mechanism that leads to the comprehension of the absolute reality is identical to the cognition of the meaning of a linguistic expression. Such linguistic expression is primarily a sentence, since according to Bhartṛhari the sentence is the fundamental element of the process of communication. In short, the linguistic act works as a model for the cognition that leads to absolute reality. Following this path, Bhartṛhari achieves a perfect symmetry between metaphysics and epistemology, even on a soteriological level: language is not only the core feature of the highest reality, as expressed at the very beginning of the *Vākyapadīya*, but also the blueprint of the cognition that is required to gain it.

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