

## Book Review

**Bimal Krishna Matilal. 2001.**  
*The Word and the World:*  
*India's Contribution to the Study of Language*  
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Anyone interested in the Indian philosophical tradition will recognize Bimal Krishna Matilal (1935–1991). He was an eminent British-Indian philosopher who penned seven important books on the Indian tradition(s) of philosophy. Almost all of his works provide a detailed comparison of Eastern and Western philosophical thoughts. “The Word and the World: India’s Contribution to the Study of Language” was the last book published in his life, initially published in 1990. The book is an excellent combination of the three traditional disciplines of classical India: Darsana (philosophy), Vyakarana (grammar and linguistics), and Alamkara (rhetoric and literary criticism).

The book is divided into general studies, special issues, and appendices. Both general studies and special issues contain six chapters each, and the appendices section has three chapters.

### General Studies

The book begins with an introductory chapter discussing the idea of philosophy in Indian traditions. He discusses the concept of sabda, generally translated as ‘language.’ But he further adds from Nyayasutra, “Sabda or Word is instructed by a trustworthy

person (APTA)” (p. 6), stating that everything we hear is not linguistically significant. Following Vatsyayana, he also defines apta: “Any expert who is knowledgeable about certain facts would qualify as an apta irrespective of caste or creed or sex.” (p. 6). Thus, Matilal moves from saba to sabdapramana, i.e., the means of knowledge called ‘word.’

The second chapter talks about grammar and linguistic studies. Matilal begins with Panini and Yaska’s ideas about language and grammar. Vyakarana (“grammar” in the modern sense) is said to be the gateway to other disciplines. It was known as Veganda, one of the six limbs necessary for successfully studying the Vedas. The basics of Panini’s Astadhyayi (5th-4th c, BC) were discussed; the derivation of nouns from the roots is discussed as an example of it. The views of Panini’s predecessors, Yaska and Gargya, are discussed. They believed that not all nama (nouns) are derived from roots (dhatu) and that certain nominal stems were “atomic” in the sense that they were not derived. In a later section, Matilal discusses the distinction and analysis of synonyms and homonyms.

The third chapter discusses the meaning of words in each language. The chapter begins with the classical idea of word classification, i.e., parts of speech, and then moves on to the categories of things. Both these sections are primarily based on Yaska’s ideas. He identifies two main ontological categories: a process or an action and an entity or a being of a thing. The third section discusses a word’s primary and secondary meanings, where metaphor is discussed. Based on the Nyaya school, the saying (abhidhāna) and pointing, signifying, or indicating (lakṣaṇa) are discussed. Traditionally, lakṣaṇa is equated with metaphor. Another perspective here is of ‘suggestive’ power, which, according to some critics, plays a vital role in poetry. The last part of the chapter discusses the role of the speaker’s intention in the meaning of the word. The chapter ends with discussing whether the word-object relationship is conventional or eternal.

The fourth chapter deals with naming things: Is it based on some specific attributes of the things? The chapter begins with the controversy between Bharṭṛhari and Dinnāga. Kātyāyana’s formulation talks about ‘quality’ (guṇa), but it is not sure whether it refers to some specific attribute or some universal (jāti). Nyāyasūtra asks, “What does the word mean or convey? What is the ‘meaning’(artha) of a word?” It replies in terms of three meanings: the thing or the individual (vyakti), the ‘form’ of the thing (ākṛti), and the universal (jāti). Patañjali mentions four classes of words based upon the distinction of their ‘occasioning ground or basis’ (nimitta): they are class names, quality names, action names, and arbitrary names or proper names. The Mīmāṃsakas argue that word meaning must be universal, neither individual nor configurational. According to them, the word-meaning relationship is underived, natural, and eternally established; only our learning of it is acquired through some convention or other. The convention reveals but does not create the relationship. Bharṭṛhari’s central view of language is that each

linguistic unit is an invariant, sequence-less, and part-less ‘whole’ entity, which only manifests by the corresponding audible noise in speech. Thus, all the various views on the word and its meaning are covered in this chapter.

Chapter 5 is devoted to Kāraka theory. It is one of the ‘basics’ of Pāṇini’s derivational system. All the six varieties of Kāraka are discussed with examples. The dispute over the syntactic-semantic nature of Kāraka is discussed concerning the ancient dispute between the logicians (Naiyāyikas) and the grammarians (Vaiyākaraṇas).

The next chapter, the sixth, discusses the knowledge we derive from linguistic utterances. It introduces linguistic utterance as one of the most essential sources of knowledge. The chapter highlights various aspects associated with linguistic understanding and knowledge derived from it. Multiple levels of meaning, the idea of false belief, the concept of perception, etc., are discussed here. The chapter ends with a discussion of the speaker’s qualities.

## Special Issues

The seventh chapter provides a historical introduction to Sphoṭa theory and Patanjali’s views related to it. The basic idea here is that a word or a sentence is not just a combination of various smaller units; it is a whole unit in itself and presents a holistic meaning. It is a sign that bears meaning, irrespective of its size and internal structure.

Chapter eight continues the discussion of Sphoṭa theory. Here, it centers around the ideas of Bhartṛhari, who is considered to be the most prominent advocate of the theory. Bhartṛhari thinks the concept of a ‘meaning-bearing unit’ is inaccurate and equates Sphoṭa with the proper linguistic unit. Matilal quotes some verses with commentary from Bhartṛhari to underline the sphoṭa-nāda distinction, the difference between the meaningful units of the utterance and sounds.

Continuing the discussion on Sphoṭa, the ninth chapter discusses various critics of the theory and views of the later grammarians. Mimamsakas and Naiyayikas are the two primary sources of criticism towards the concept of Sphoṭa. Later grammarians identify four stages in which Sphoṭa becomes spoken: paraa (the ultimate), pasyanti (the undifferentiated), madhyamaa (the intermediate), and vaikhaari (the spoken). At the same time, Bhartṛhari’s work does not identify paraa as one of the stages.

Chapter ten continues the discussion of grammatical aspects and talks about words versus sentences. The discussion begins with the question of the divisibility and indivisibility of sentences. Bhaatta and Praabhaakara’s anti-Bhartṛhari views were also antagonistic to each other, which revolves around the question, “When we listen to a sentence, do we first cognize or recognize the meaning of each constituent word and then join these bits and pieces of meaning together to cognize a connected whole—the sentence meaning?” The Bhaatta view answers in “yes” and the Prabhakaran view

answers in “no.”

Chapter eleven again centers on Bharṭhari, this time on his idea of Sabda (Language) and its implications for translation. Translation is a philosophical problem that involves not only the issues of language but also the questions of intercultural understanding, interpretation, and evaluation. For Bharṭhari, language is an activity in which all sentient beings engage. He calls it sabdana-vyaapaara (language). For him, it is the very vibration of consciousness. Sphota asserts that language is an integral part of our consciousness.

Chapter twelve talks about language and cognition, and here, Bharṭhari’s idea of Sabda and awareness are at the center of the discussion. The chapter begins with the thesis of Bharṭhari on cognition and language. The author discusses the strong and weak versions of the thesis. The robust version equates the cognitive episodes with verbal thoughts. The weak version states that most cognitive episodes are verbal thoughts at some implicit level. Each person’s consciousness is inextricably linked to vag-rupataa, the ability to articulate the grasped object in language. Each awareness episode is empowered by prakaash (illumination) and vimarsh (verbal discrimination). Prakaash allows the user to identify the new object, and vimarsh enable the user to distinguish it from other objects verbally. In this process, manaskaara—mental attention—plays an important role.

## Appendices

Appendix One talks about the issue of logic and language. The author argues that language captures similarities and shared characteristics between experiences; hence, a linguistic symbol conveys the shared or shareable part of the experience.

Appendix Two deals explicitly with the idea of sign and semiotics in the Indian argumentation theory. It begins by discussing three types of debates: honest debate (vaada), a tricky debate (jalpa), and a destructive debate (vitandaa). Then, he elaborates on the Nyaya Model of discussion and its limbs. Then, the author talks about the nature of sign-linga. Here, the relationship between sign and signified is discussed, and it is stated that the signified must be absent in the absence of a sign and vice versa. Dinnaga’s conditions for the logical sign also stand for the same.

Appendix Three talks about meaning in literary criticism. It concentrates on Vakrokti and Dhvani. Kuntaka, a Kashmiri rhetorician, says, “Poetryhood consists in ornamentation (of speech).” This idea of “ornamentation” is the key to the entire chapter. There are two views. The first view takes alamkara as an embellishment to the body, while the second view considers it an essential part of the body. Abhinava distinguishes between arthalankaras (such as similes) and sabdalamkaras (such as alliteration).

### In the end

It must be visible to us that Bhartrhari dominates the second section, and considering the novelty of his thought, rightly so. Matilal never fails to present any specific point from the perspectives of multiple schools, and that is where we also understand the variations in thoughts and practices. For most of us trained in Western philosophical traditions, Matilal's comparisons with them make the ideas expressed in the Sanskrit tradition comprehensible. There is a lot of repetition of ideas, but it was a blessing; it helped me comprehend things better.