The Karaka Theory of The Indian Grammarians

It is characteristic of contemporary formal paradigms in Linguistics to choose to ignore all that pertains to cognition and meaning in the grammatical theories that comprise the Indian linguistic tradition. There is near-total neglect of the essential semantic ingredient of the Sanskrit grammar since Panini (1). If at all the semantics in this tradition is paid any attention to it is only in a manner completely divorced from the central grammatical principles and categories. Thus, though Chomsky (1965) claimed the Paninian grammar to his 'generative enterprise' because of the recursive properties manifested by the latter, he paid no attention not only to the metaphysical and epistemological ideas that underlie Indian grammatical system, but also to an entire literature which would fall within the gamut of philosophy of grammar, especially those authored by Patanjali and Bhartrhari.

We shall present here one central concept in the Indian grammatical theory, namely the karakas, and explore the ontological and cognitive bases of its formulations. In the process we will also see how the semantic domain is essentially conceived in dynamic terms, and therefore, the primary end of language is to represent/reveal activity that is ultimately identified with the 'reality' of the world itself. In our view this particular facet of the Indian philosophical tradition represents some sort of 'monist dynamicism' which covers the physical as well as the metaphysical aspects of language, cognition and 'reality'. For the present, we shall mainly concentrate on the views presented in Vakyapadiyam of Bhartrhari (7th century A.D.) who to a great extent relies on the interpretation of the karaka theory given in Patanjali's Mahabhashya, the great commentary on Panini's Asthadhyayi.

It is important to state at the outset that the view that is made explicit in the philosophy of grammar of Bhartrhari is that there is no ontology other than that can be obtained from a study of language. But this is in contrast to a whole fund of metaphysical notions that he presents, which imply an ontology, on the basis of which the form and meaning of language is to be understood. This problem is further complicated by the fact that there is lack of agreement whether the IIIrd chapter (kanda) of Vakyapadiyam, belongs to this work, or it is a separate work authored by Bhartrhari himself. It is in this chapter that issues specific to the karaka theory are discussed (2).

The karakas are recognized by most scholars as basic semantic notions that pivot sentence constructions. They are similar to the case roles/ relations proposed in the case grammars. But karakas are much more than these, and their crucial role as a common substratum of ontology, cognition, and grammar can be understood only if we regard them as a manner of classifying 'actions' in the real world.

It may not be however inappropriate to suggest that the karaka notions are conceived as properties of the world corresponding to, though independent of their grammatical/morphological manifestations. Panini himself was probably merely projecting the karakas (literally, 'a factor of action') from morphological occurrences in the form of cases to a set of possible actions in the world. This point has been most aptly made by a recent commentator:

"If the notion of karakas was perhaps derived from an observation of Sanskrit cases, Panini had raised them above the level of case values and made them intermediaries between reality and the grammatical categories. Their importance, often misunderstood, goes far beyond the syntax of

cases; next to the roots, they are the prime moving factors of the whole grammar." (Scharfe, 1977: 95)

Panini identifies six karakas corresponding to six cases, viz., the nominative, accusative, dative, instrumental, locative, and ablative. Possessive and vocative are conspicuous by their absence in Panini's grammar. This is how Panini defines the six karakas (Ashtadhyayi, I.4.24-54):

- Apadana (lit. 'take off'): "(that which is) firm whendeparture (takes place). This is the equivalent of the ablative notion which signifies a stationary object from whicha movement proceeds.
- Sampradana ('bestowal'): "he whom one aims at with the object". This is equivalent to the dative notion which signifies a recipient in an act of giving or similar acts.
- Karana ("instrument") "that which effects most". This is equivalent to the instrumental notion.
- Adhikarana ('location'): or "substratum". This is equivalent to the locative notion.
- Karman ('deed'/'object'): "what the agent seeks most to attain". This is equivalent to the accusative notion.
- Karta ('agent'): "he/that which is independent in action". this is equivalent to the case of the subject or the nominative notion. (On the basis of Scharfe, 1977: 94)

Patanjali's Mahabhashya defines karakas in relation to the notion of kriya, or the 'distinctive mode of action of the accessories' (karakanam pravrttivisesaha kriya). The following points of Mahabhashya are relevant:

- the root can be defined as something which expresses kriya,
- it is necessary to understand kriya or action in terms of karakanam pravrttivisesaha kriya = 'a particular mode of behaviour of accessories'
- kriya is different from all the accessories which play a part, direct or indirect, in its accomplishment.
- it is not pratyaksha, it can only be inferred.
- the Mahabhashya approves that existence, the meaning of theroot 'as' (exist) is one of the transformations of bhava or satta and therefore, action. (Subramania Iyer 1969:330)

Since the above ideas of Patanjali have been further developed by Bhartrhari, we need not try to interpret them separately. However, before we proceed we shall observe that in the Brahmanical context of the composition of the Sanskrit grammar, "action" really meant ritual action. On the close relationship between the grammatical and the ritual notions, Louis Renou has noted:

The grammatical cases do not bear any designations: they are mentioned by numerical indices, prathama, etc.. This manner of designation must have come from ritual where a host of notions (days, rites, musical modes, etc.) was evoked by the ordinals. On the other hand, the functions that indicate the cases in their relation with the verbal process, the karakas (strictly, that which effectuates a verbal action) bear names of strongly individualized aspects, among which the most important is a group derived from the root kr- : karman, karana, kartr, adhikarana. Karman, "action" (equally, direct object, the object of the transitive verb) belongs to the rituals where the word, since the Rg Veda, denotes the act par excellence, that is, rite. Similarly, kartr which in both the domains is the 'agent'. Karana, according to the common use should be a more general

equivalent of karman: 'act' in the mantra, 'fact of performing' in prose; whereas the grammatical use in the sense of a '(notion of) instrument' comes from the fact that several nouns with -ana suffix carry an instrumental value….(Translated by the author from L. Renou, "Les connexions entre le rituel et la grammaire sanskrit", in J.F. Staal, 1985 edn:464-65)

That verbs primarily convey 'action' is an idea that goes back to Yaska, famous for his etymological studies called the Niruktas. In his words: bhavapradhanam akhyatam, "an action or process is the main meaning of a verb." (See, Subramania Iyer, 1969: 202)

Bhartrhari discusses various possible definitions of 'action', but what he prefers is the following:

"Whenever something, finished or unfinished is presented as something to be accomplished (i.e., sadhya), then it is called 'action' because of its having acquired the form of sequence."

(III.8.1) In addition, he stands by Patanjali's definition as per which "action is the distinctive mode of behaviour of the accessories", and seems to be rejecting another view wherein "action is that moment immediately after which the result is produced" (e.g., in 'cooking' there is a critical moment that separates the cooked state from the raw state, of rice.)

The fact that action is something which has the form of parts arranged in sequence would entail that it can not directly perceived . It can only be inferred by the mind. The relevant statements in Vakyapadiya on this are the following:

"What is called action is a collection of parts produced in a sequence and mentally conceived as one and identical with the parts which are subordinated to it (i.e., the whole)." (III.8.4)

"The parts which occur in a sequence and are partly existent and partly not so cannot enter into contact with the senses like the eyes whose objects are always the existent." (III.8.6)

Thus the action of 'cooking' which involves a number of subordinate parts is characterized by the transformation (in the case considered) of the raw rice into the cooked, i.e., soft state.

The Brahmakanda (Chapter I) of Vakyapadiyam is a treatise on the metaphysics and ontology/physics of the form and meaning aspects of language. It dwells primarily on the following relations: 1. between word in the intellect and the word spoken; 2. between sequenceless and the sequential in language; 3. between the universal and the particular; 4. between the word and the world. (See K.J. Shah. 1990, for an an excellent elucidation of these issues.)

In the philosophy of grammar that is presented in Bhartrhari's Vakyapadiyam, there are important references to the nature of word and meaning. The form of the word is the result of eternal transformations of the Sabdabrahma or the primordial word/sound.

Meaning is the particular instanciation of the activation, through an explosion or 'bursting forth' (sphota) in the intellect (pratibha) of the hearer. What is important in these views is the dynamic perspective attached to both meaning and form.

The main feature of Bhartrhari's ideas is the constancy of and the omnipresence of transformations in the universe. Both word and the world are the result of manifest transformations and/or apparent differentiations of a cosmic unity, which takes the name of sabdabrahma. (Brahman, or the Ultimate reality is of the nature of the word, i,e, sabdatattva) From a eternal point of view these transformations/differentiations are unreal and illusory. Time, as one of the properties of the unchanging cosmic unity, is the material force which produce these transformations, which are in turn perceived and cognized as activities of particular things. The sabdabrahma is initially differentiated into its mental and material media, and the time-force (kalashakti) effects both these aspects.(3)

In the domain of the world, there are essentially two kinds of transformations, effected by the power of time, namely birth or manifestation and death or hiding. More specifically, there are essentailly six kinds of transformations in the world: birth, existence, change, increase, decrease, and death. The transformations between the intellect and its verbal manifestation at least three stages. These are para (eternal), pashyanti (mental/transcendental?) and madhyama (mediatory/ phonemic?). The fourth stage or vaikhari is that of differentiated (phonetic?) speech (4).

Important to Bhartrhari's philosophy of the word, is his assumption of a 'word in the intellect' which is the 'cause' of the spoken word. Probably, he believes that the word in the intellect is undifferentiated, therefore sequenceless, in contrast to the spoken word. The meaning of the spoken word could be an object 'which is connected to some action' (cf. Shah, 1990:81). Thus Bhartrhari seems to assert that the action referred to by the word — which is itself an activity — will have the 'fitness' when it corresponds to the word in the intellect which could be an (isomorphic) schema of the action in the world.

It is difficult to say that whether Bhartrhari's notion of sphota coincided with the word in the intellect, or with the spontaneous 'bursting forth' of recognition of meaning. Probably, both have a role in meaning grasping. If this hypothesis is correct then we can think of the word-in-the-intellect aspect of sphota as a kind of mental (transcendental) schema, though as Kant would say, "hidden deep within our soul" and the flash-like understanding akin to the "spontaneous synthesis" supposed by Kant. The latter connection has, in fact, been suggested by Murti (see relevant citation in Coward, 1980:67).(5)

Comparing Bhartrhari's and Wittgenstein's theories of meaning and understanding, contemporary philsopher, K.J. Shah makes a very relevant observation that their difference lies in the fact that the former stresses on 'understanding in a flash' and the latter on 'understanding as the mastery of a technique'. The 'technique' approach I reckon, would go well with most analytical (philosophical) tendencies as well as with the 'generative' trends in linguistics. In this case, as Shah rightly points out, "in the explanation of the meaning of a word the internal component is irrelevant". The absence of an innate semantic component may not be in the best interest of the generative grammars and its various offshoots.

When Bhartrhari insists that a new-born child possesses innate knowledge, he does not see this knowledge in terms of some semantic or other universals that can be inventoried. The innate knowledge is thought of as some sort of 'action-schemas'. the idea seems to be that just as the infant has the ability to breathe, or to make the simplest of movements (which no one has taught it), similarly it is the possessor of a thread of (the eternal) knowledge. (cf. Subramania Iyer, 1969:103)

The relation between the word in the intellect and the spoken word is not construed as the relation between the internal and the external, but as the

one between fixed and static on the one side side and the mobile and the dynamic on the other. A comparison is made with the apparent movement of a static thing in when reflected in moving water. There is also a (more telling) comparison with the structure of sensation (i.e., sense-perceiving organs) and the perceived objects:

"Just as the form of the self (i.e., the senses) is involved in the perception/ cognition of objects, so the meaning form is involved in the recognition of the word." (partially improvised translation) (Vakyapadiya, I.50)

In Bhartrhari's view, only the sentence can completely express 'reality', and not the word which may denote objects. Moreover, "reality is expressible only in the form 'it exists' which means that a word in order to express a reality has to be compounded with a verb, namely 'exists'."

Therefore, "a verb has to be part of a sentence… If the verb is mentioned as expressing an action to be conveyed, nouns are required to effect the action." (Pillai, xxxiii). The verb constitutes the essential and minimal content of a sentence. (ibid., xxxiv)

Sentence-meanings which are primarily in the nature of an action are also relative to the speaking subject:

"The grammarian … makes a distinction between word-meanings which mention an object, and the meaning of the sentence which is primarily an action, effected by men through objects." (ibid., xxxiii)

For the grammarian, reality is understood only through speech (language) and it is understood only in the form it is presented by speech (word/language). But language cannot describe the intrinsic nature of things, although we know things only in the form in which words describe them. (ibid., xxxiii)

Bhartrhari rejects the existence of meanings of individual words. Individual word-meaning is an illusion, according to him. Only the undifferentiated sentence-meaning is real. The sentence-meaning is not a concatenation of word-meanings as argued by the Mimamsaka philosophers, but to be understood in terms of a complex cognition. Bhartrhari compares this complex cognition with that of the cognition of a picture (citrajnana). "A cognition which embraces many objects at the same time is a complex cognition. As a cognition, it is one but because of the many objects which figure in it, one sees plurality in it, though it is indivisible." (Subramania Iyer, 1969: 186, 187)

Following his top-down approach, Bhartrhari considers the sentence-meaning to be primary, and the word-meaning the result of rather artificial analysis. The relationship between sentence-meaning and word-meaning is compared to the relationship between a holistic picture and its component-parts:

"Just as an unified perception of composite (picture) can be analyzed (into the preoccupation of component parts) depending upon which part is required to be perceived so likewise is the understanding of the meaning of the sentence."

and,

"Just as a single homogeneous picture is described through various features as being blue (green, etc.) as a result of its being perceived in different ways, similarly the sentence which is single and does not possess expectancy is described in terms of words which possess mutual expectancy." (Vakyapadiyam, Tr. K. R. Pillai, 1971:38)

Besides the analogy to picture, more interesting comparison with the structure of fabric has been made by Mandana Misra, a latter-day follower of Bhartrhari. In discussing the holistic perception of meaning in the sphota way, Mandana points out that "when we perceive a cloth our cognition is of the cloth as a whole and is quite distinct from the various threads and colours involved" (See Coward, H.C., 1980:13).

We shall summarize Bhartrhari's views on the sentence and its meaning in the following manner. The sentence represents/reveals at least a fragment of the eternal activity in the universe, presented from the point of view of the speaker. The verb highlights the specific character of this activity, expressed in terms of the accessories/ means and their qualities. When a thing is expressed as something to be accomplished, it is sadhya, but when it is expressed as accomplished, it is siddha. The means involved in the accomplishment of an action are the sadhanas. The recognition of the sentence-meaning takes place by way of the vakya sphota implying a somewhat gestalt-like comprehension.

We shall present Subramania Iyer's commentary:

"The complete meaning expressed by a sentence is a complex thing in which some process of action occupies the central position and is

associated with its accessories and their qualifications, all amalgamated into an indivisible whole." (1969:200)

And,

"…the indivisible sentence is the unit of communication and its meaning is understood in a flash (pratibha). This meaning is also something indivisible, a complex cognition in which the central element is an action or process with its accessories closely associated with it." (ibid, p. 201)

Bhartrhari's conception of the case relations (karakas) can be understood in the following terms:

A sentence represents/reveals the accomplishment of an action. 'Means'/ accessory (sadhana) is the power (shakti) of a thing to accomplish actions. (Vakyapadiyam, III. 7.1) The difference in the powers of objects is relative to the form that speakers (subjectively) impose on them (III. 7.6). Each object that is involved in any action in any and at any time is seen as having a particular means or power for that time (III.7.12). The particular help rendered to the action is expressed by the case-markers. (III.7.13). Karaka (literally, an 'actant'; this is a term used by Lucien Tesni*re and his followers to refer to a very similar notion) is that which helps in the accomplishment of an action by assuming different forms (thus karaka is different from both hetu (cause) and lakshana (sign) which are relatively more world-based). It is said that in any one object, there can be six different powers that lead to action. These powers are universal, and

though they appear to be unlimited, can only be six in number. (III. 7.35-36). These six powers correspond to the six karakas.

Karta (agent) is the basis of all the varied activities (because power is one, nut appears to be divided into six kinds according to circumstances. There are six more 'karakas' including sesa, or the 'rest'. These are: karma, karana, adhikarana, sampradana, apadana and sesa (which includes sambodhana) (III. 7.37-44).

The object (karma) 'that which is most desired to be attained' is of 3 kinds: product (nirvartya) {He made jar out of mud}; modification/conversion (vikarya) { He converted wood into ashes}; and destination (prapya). {He saw a tree (here the object doesn't change)} (III.7.47-51).

Whenever, after the activity of something, the action is meant to be conveyed as accomplished, then that thing is said to be the instrument (karana)(III.7.90). Thus, the instrument is a more immediate participant in an action than the agent itself.

The factor in the act of which is sought to be reached by the thing given is called sampradana when he does not prohibit the giver, or request him, or gives his consent. (III.7.129)

A starting point (apadana) is of 3 kinds: that in relation to which a movement is mentioned; that in relation to which the verb expresses the movement only partly; and that in relation to which some movement is required. (III.7.136)

That which helps in the accomplishment of the action by holding it indirectly through the agent is called adhikarana (abode). The contact is the same whether the abode be sesame seed, the sky or mat, etc.. But the service

rendered differs according to as the objects are in contact through samyoga (conjunction) or through samvaya (inherence). (III.7.148-149)

In addition to the six karakas listed above — which are the same as those given by Panini, Bhartrhari discusses a possible set of cases under the name of Sesa (the rest or the extras). Sesa does not represent a karaka relation but may involve or be preceded by one of the karaka relations. Under this category, Bhartrhari discusses the possessive case, where the relation of possession is supposed to be preceded by some sort of action, e.g., 'king's man' implies an action on the part of the king which has led to the establishment of a master-servant relationship. Further, in expressions like 'branch of the tree' and 'father's son', the relations like the part and whole, and procreator and offspring are 'the results of previous actions not mentioned in the sentences, actions in which these objects were accessories. That previous status lingers somewhat in the present status and that is why the present status is looked upon as a kind of karaka, though its relation with the action expressed in the sentence is rather remote.' (K.A.S. Iyer, 1969:325)

Sambodhana or vocative is discussed separately:

Merely turning the attention of somebody already there towards oneself has been declared to be the nature of the vocative case (sambodhana). It is indeed, one whose attention has been attracted that is employed in some action. (III.7.163)

Notes:

- A recent commentator, Johannes Bronkhorst (1992) expresses similar sentiments while being conscious of the reclamation of the semantic ideas in the Indian linguistic tradition:

- *"The semantic aspect of Panini's grammar … is a relatively neglected topic. Yet it is not without importance. It has become clear in recent years that meanings are the input of Panini's grammar … That is to say, Panini's grammar produces correct utterances on the basis of a set of meanings. These meanings give rise to grammatical elements – morphemes if you like – which undergo further transformations until, in the end, they are all joined up to form a sentence." (p. 455)*

- The structure of Vakyapadiyam, is as follows:

- *Chapter I deals with very general, though rather metaphysical issues concerning language. It refers to the linguistic basis of the universe. Some commentators have called this chapter, the Brahmakanda. Chapter II deals with philosophy of grammar, the relation between sentences and words, between sequenceless and sequential between the universal and the particular, and between form and meaning. This chapter has been referred to as the Vakyakanda. Some commentators think that Bhartrhari concluded his work with the last stanza 485 of this chapter.*

  Chapter III, running into two parts, discusses the properties of words, such as jati (Universal/Class), dravya (substance), Bhuyodravya (another class of substance), sambandha (Relation), guna (quality), dik (position/direction, or even space?), sadhana (Means/Accessories in action), kriya (Action), kala (Time), purusha (Person), samkhya (Number), upagraha (Aspect), linga (gender), and vrtti (complex word-formations each of which are made up of meaningful elements and giving an integrated meaning somewhat different from those of the parts) . This chapter is referred to by some as the Padakanda. It

is also known as Prakirna, or Miscellany. (See K.R. Pillai's translation (1971:xv-xvi) for the controversy concerning this chapter). Do the titles appearing in this chapter have a partial, though striking similarity with Aristotle's Categories?

- On the differentiating power of time, Bhartrhari says the following:
- *"Time differentiates action and number differentiates everything. It is time, differentiated (though one) which has been declared to be the cause of the origin, existence and destruction of objects which go through these states." (p. 36)*

  "Due to association with particular times, realization takes place. So it (Time) becomes the cause of the operation of powers. The regulation of birth or manifestation depends upon the operation of powers. The sustenance of an object of is also regulated because that also depends upon the eternal (time)." (p. 38)

  "At every stage the activity of Time is discernible. Time is the very soul of the universe. Hence it is identified with activity itself."

  "By it (Time), differentiated through its associates, the increase and decrease of all objects are distinctly observed as transformations." (p. 39)

  "Conditioned by action, Time attains the states of past, future and present, divided into eleven forms." (p. 46) (From The Vakyapadiya of Bhartrhari, Chapter III-ii, (Tr.) by K.A. Subramania Iyer.)

- Shah translates these stages as: the seeing one (pashyanti), the middle one (madhyama), and the elaborated (vaikhari) Subramania Iyer is of the view that the three kandas of Vakyapadiya, namely, Brahmakanda, Vakyakanda and Padakanda parallels the pashyanti, madhyama and vaikhari. The path in both cases is from the undifferentiated to the differentiated.

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- We shall give below a passage from Wilhelm Humboldt (died 1835), a prominent Kantian, a Sanskritist, and a philosopher of language of the modern era, which shows an astonishing affinity with the verb-centred linguistics of the Indian grammarians; "The verb … differs in a sharply determinate way from the noun, and from other parts of speech that might possibly occur in a simple sentence, in that to it alone is assigned the act of synthetic positing as a grammatical function. Like the declined noun, it arose through such an act, in the fusion of its elements with the stem, but has also received this form in order to have the office and capacity of itself again performing this act with regard to the sentence. Between it and other words of the simple sentence there is therefore a difference which forbids us to count it along with them in the same category. All other words of the sentence are like dead matter lying there for combination; the verb alone is the centre, containing and disseminating life (emphasis added). Through one and the same synthetic act, it conjoins, by being, the predicate with the subject, yet in such a way that being which passes, with an energetic predicate, into an action, becomes attributed to the subject itself, so that what is thought as merely capable of conjunction becomes, in reality a state or process…The thought,… departs, through the verb, from its abode and steps into reality." (Humboldt, 1988 edn.:185)

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