

Learning and language - Some classical ideas

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Ancient Greek ideas of learning

In ancient India, linguistics was a highly developed and rigorous science, at the centre of classical learning. It developed a penetrating analysis of speech and learning, as described by a linguistic philosopher called Bhartrhari, in a treatise called the Vākya-padīya.

From this treatise, there is much to be learned that might help us with our modern understanding of language and learning. But the treatise comes down to us from a traditional context that is rather different from what we are familiar with today. So it may help to start by reflecting back to some ancient Greek ideas, from which our approach to modern science has developed in the west.

In a basic sort of way, the beginnings of western science can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Parmenides. He distinguished between two ways of learning: first, the way of ‘*aletheia*’ or ‘truth’; and second, the way of ‘*doxa*’ or ‘belief’. Parmenides is quite scathing about the second way, the way of belief. He says that nothing proper can be known through it. Strictly speaking, it is the way of falsity and ignorance. In order to find truth, our habitual and customary beliefs must be rigorously examined, to remove all falsities that mere assumptions and beliefs have brought in.

In ancient Greek philosophy, the word ‘*doxa*’ did not mean just ‘belief’, but also ‘opinion’ and ‘appearance’ or ‘seeming’. The basic sense is one of opposition to true knowledge and reality. In Plato’s dialogue, the *Republic*, Socrates describes this opposition, through the famous simile of the divided line. In this simile, the line is taken to represent a continued progression of learning, from appearances to truth. The progression comes about by examining perceived appearances, so that intelligence may show what is truer and more real in them. This is a distinction between what superficially appears from what is more deeply intelligible, upon a further and more accurate consideration.

Applying this distinction to the line of progressive learning, Socrates divides it into two. So he distinguishes two kinds of learning: which are shown in figure 1 (next page), on the left side of the vertical line. The lower and inferior kind is ‘*doxa*’, which includes belief, opinion and appearance. The higher and superior kind is ‘*episteme*’, which implies a knowing and an understanding that has been refined by an intelligent examination of observed experience.

But the same distinction, between superficial appearance and truer consideration, can be further applied to each of the two kinds of learning that have now been distinguished. The result is a division of learning into four kinds, shown on the right hand

Figure 1 - The divided line: Stages of learning

<i>Episteme</i> (knowing, understanding)	<i>Noesis</i>	–	Clarifying reason, dialectic argument, philosophy	Investigating beyond assumed beliefs
	<i>Dianoia</i>	–	Formalized science, mathematics	Assumptions made explicit and systematic
<i>Doxa</i> (belief, opinion, appearance)	<i>Pistis</i>	–	Common sense, habitual faith	Sober and customary
	<i>Eikasia</i>	–	Illusion, imagination, myth	Deceptive or metaphorical

side of the vertical line in figure 1 (above). Here, four kinds of learning are distinguished:

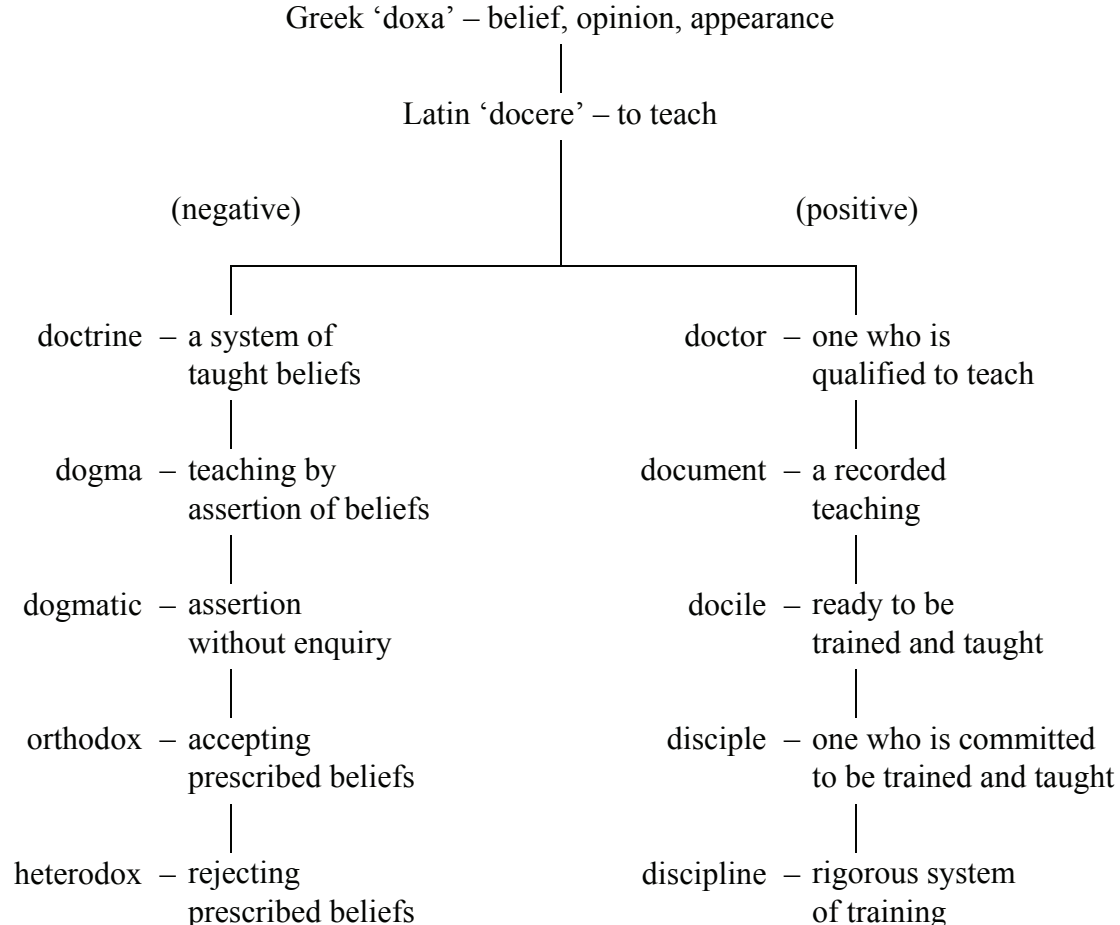
- The lowest kind of learning is ‘*eikasia*’ or ‘illusion’. This is a deceptive appearance, which seems different from what is truly shown. The deception is created by imagination, through our personal faculties of sense and mind. To correct the deception, Plato uses two methods. One is the somewhat paradoxical use of poetic metaphor, which is explicitly admitted to inspire the suggestion of a different reality from what is outwardly described. The other method is through the sober enquiry of analytic reason, which thus proceeds to higher kinds of learning.
- The second kind of learning is called ‘*pistis*’ or ‘customary faith’. This is the habitual faith of long-accepted common sense. It’s to this settled faith that people return, when they sober down from their inspiring but fanciful flights of imagination. This is a higher kind of learning, in the sense that it corrects some obvious errors of imagined fancy. But it depends on customary habits of belief that are not properly examined, and so it still remains in the realm of ‘*doxa*’ or ‘believed appearance’.
- The third kind of learning is called ‘*dianoia*’ or ‘formal science’. Here, learning is formalized by making its assumptions explicit. And reasoned argument is used to deduce conclusions. For Plato, the prime example of such science is geometry and mathematics. By making its assumptions explicit, as formal axioms or postulates, such scientific argument throws open its beliefs to actual enquiry, against the test of experience. The test is to deduce results and to investigate if they correctly show what’s actually experienced. Thus mere beliefs are left behind, and we enter the realm of ‘*episteme*’ or ‘investigated understanding’.

- The fourth kind of learning is called ‘*noesis*’ or ‘clarifying reason’. Here, the direction of reasoned argument is no longer to deduce results that describe observed phenomena. Instead, it is just the opposite, to turn attention back towards underlying assumptions from which the results have been deduced. Investigation is thus turned reflectively, to ask how far the assumptions are correct and to show up whatever falsity remains in them. There is thus a repeated reflection back and forth, between observed results and accepted assumptions. As the reflection is repeated, it is meant to keep showing up remaining falsity, which gets accordingly removed, in a progression towards clarity of truth. For Socrates, this is the highest kind of reason on the way to truth.

Modern and traditional ideas

So, in the end, Socrates is just as skeptical as Parmenides, about mere ‘*doxa*’ or ‘belief’. Both treat such unexamined belief as a compromise that must be transcended utterly, in order to arrive at truth. But, through the course of European history, this Greek idea of ‘*doxa*’ has come to have a much more ambivalent influence upon our modern thought. For, related to the Greek ‘*doxa*’, there is the Latin ‘*docere*’, which means to ‘teach’. And, from ‘*docere*’ come many words in modern European languages, with meanings that are not just negative, but often positive as well. In figure 2 (below), some modern English words are shown, deriving from the Greek ‘*doxa*’ and the Latin ‘*docere*’. The more negative words are grouped on the left, and on the right are those with a more positive meaning.

Figure 2 - *Belief & learning*



As these words show (both negative and positive), there is a problem with traditional learning, when viewed from a modern perspective. The trouble is that the old ways can seem inherently dogmatic, as they are seen to proceed more from assertion of authority than from an open-minded questioning. But, in this view, the old learning is not seen impartially. It's only seen one-sidedly and superficially, from an external view, without rightly taking its own view into account.

Traditional teaching was indeed authoritarian in its manner of expression. The reason was quite simple. Before the introduction of printing, students had to memorize their texts, in a largely oral system of transmitting the forms of learning. So, at first, a traditional student had to memorize things formally, and questions of meaning could only come later on.

Our modern system is quite different. Because books and other forms of knowledge are so easily available through modern media, students can be encouraged to ask questions right from the start of learning. So our modern approach is to question first and to remember accordingly.

In the traditional approach, the attitude was just the opposite. It was to memorize first, in a formal way, in preparation for a questioning that would come later on. But this doesn't mean that the essence of traditional learning was dogma, in opposition to enquiry. The essence was a systematic and scientific enquiry, just as it is for modern learning. And further, traditional enquiry was supposed to be all the more thorough and rigorous, for the long and hard preparation that led up to it.

Traditional statements often look dogmatic and mystifying, because they were expressed in a condensed way that was suitable for memorization. But, behind this authoritarian and mystical appearance, they were often meant to raise hard questions that our modern sciences have not penetrated so deeply today. As I see it, this is just what Bhartṛhari does, in his *Vākyapadīya* and its *vṛtti* commentary.

In particular, I would suggest that Bhartṛhari has something to add to our modern academic sciences of language and semiotics. These modern sciences are largely focused on symbolic systems or symbolic structures. However, I would say that there is a undermining problem here, in these modern sciences. Their notion of system or structure is somewhat mechanically conceived, in association with modern physics.

And I would go on to say that Bhartṛhari's view was not thus undermined, for he used a traditional physics that allowed for a broader and a deeper way of conceiving the phenomena of 'life' and 'mind'. Thus Bhartṛhari uses old ideas of life and mind to analyse what symbols and symbolic structures mean. He does this in particular by analysing language – which he considers in its broadest sense, to include all meaningful experience.

In Bhartṛhari's Sanskrit tradition, there are many words for 'life' and 'mind'. But, in particular, life is conceived as 'prāṇa' or 'living energy', which animates our living faculties of action in the world. And mind is conceived as 'manas', which is etymologically related to the English word 'mind'. It implies a mediating faculty – a faculty that mediates between an inmost consciousness and our objective faculties of outward sense or action in the world.

In a way, the old idea of 'prāṇa' is akin to the energy of modern physics. It conceives that material objects are only crude appearances perceived by our gross senses. Behind these crude appearances, objects are more accurately described as functioning patterns of dynamic energy.

But, in another way there is an essential difference between modern physics and the old idea of ‘prāṇa’. For, in modern physics, the functioning of energy is purely mechanical. Its patterns of energy are mechanically described, through mathematical quantities that are measured by externally constructed instruments. But, in the old idea of ‘prāṇa’, the functioning of energy has also a living component that is organically described. This organic description includes qualitative purposes and intentions and meanings – which have to be reflectively interpreted, through living faculties that are reflected back into a consciousness that they express.

Such an interpretation is essential to our experience of language. In any living speech, the speaker’s meaning is expressed from consciousness in outward words, which are then understood by a listener. To understand what has been said, the listener must take the spoken words back into consciousness, through an interpretation that reflects into a common meaning that the words express for both the speaker and the listener.

Speech thus involves an energy that is not just mechanically structural, but is organically alive. This is a *living* energy, which inherently expresses an underlying consciousness, in purposes and meanings that are understood by going back reflectively to what has been expressed. It’s through this living energy that speech expresses meaning and that learning is handed down, in traditions that remain alive.

Living tradition

In both the *Vākyapadīya* and its *vṛtti* commentary,¹ Bhartṛhari makes it plain that a living tradition does not consist of formal rules and structures or outward texts in themselves. In order to express a living knowledge, all structured forms and outward texts depend upon an intelligence that is expressed in the living power of meaningful symbols and words. What keeps a tradition alive is not just the forms and the texts, but a living practice of selecting and interpreting the forms and texts, so that each generation comes afresh to living knowledge. Here are some short passages to this effect, with rather free translations shown beside them:

1.137

śabdānām eva sā śaktis
tarko yaḥ puruṣ’-āśrayaḥ.

All arguments and inference
depend upon intelligence.
They’re nothing but the power of words.

śabd’-ānugato nyāyo
’nāgameṣv anibandhanaḥ.

Where formal logic blindly follows
words expressed in outward speech,
it’s just a verbal mimicking
that ties no concrete meaning down.
It cannot record anything.
Such logic is not found in texts
of genuine authority.

1.140

sarv’ odr̥ṣṭa phalān arthān
āgamāt pratipadyate.
viparītaṁ ca sarvatra

It’s commonly acknowledged that
unseen effects may be achieved
by chanting from the sacred texts.

śakyate vaktum āgame.

But it is always possible
to say conflicting things about
what's in the texts and what they mean.

1.140 vṛtti (last sentence)

tasmād āgamaṁ kiñcit
pramāṇī-kṛtya vyavasthite
tasmin yā kācid upapattir
ucyamānā pratipattāv
upodbalakatvaṁ labhate.

Therefore, some sacred text is made
authentic, and a settled standpoint
is established. There, whatever
reason finds fit and proper,
confirmation is obtained.

1.141

sādhutva-jñāna-viṣayā
s' aiṣā vyākaraṇa-smṛtiḥ.

Linguistics is a discipline
whose aim is knowledge, clarified
from errors of mistaken use.

avicchedena śiṣṭānām
idaṁ smṛti-nibandhanam.

It is recorded through an
uncut continuity – of learning
that is called to mind, by those
who've learned it well and hand it down.

1.141 vṛtti (last sentence)

smṛto hy arthaḥ
param̐paryād avicchedena
punaḥ punar nibandhyate,
prasidha-samācārāyām
smṛtāv anibandhana-śabdāyām
śiṣṭa-samācār'-āviccheden'
aiva smaryate.

From each generation to the next, the
intent remembered is reconstituted, over
and over again, in an unbroken succession.
In an established tradition of common
practice that has not been recorded in words,
only the unbroken practice of those who
succeed in learning is remembered.

Levels of language

In order to describe the expression of meaning in words and symbols, Bhartṛhari conceives it as floating overlay (upaplava) upon an underlying knowledge.

1.86

bhed'-ānukāro
jñānasya vācāś c'
opaplavo dhruvaḥ.

The show of seeming differences,
displayed in knowledge and in speech,
is always just an overlay
of affectation floating by.

kram'-opasṛṣṭa-rūpā vāg

Thus, speech is overlaid by forms
that are produced successively,
affected by successive change.

jñānaṁ jñeya-vyapāśrayam.

And knowledge then seems to depend
on objects that are to be known.

1.86 *vṛtti*, quoting an *āgama* stanza

jñeyena na vinā jñānaṁ vyavahāre 'vatiṣṭhate.	Without an object to be known, pure knowledge does not enter use.
n' ālabdha-kramayā vācā kaścīd artho 'bhidhīyate.	Unless succession is obtained, speech cannot aim at anything for anyone to think about.

Here, as knowledge is described to enter into use, there are three elements:

1. There are differentiated objects. These are called 'jñeya', which means that they are 'to be known'.
2. There is a process of knowing, which aims at particular objects that are to be known. This process is called 'krama' or succession. It is a succession of knowing states, through which speech and thought can aim at each particular object.
3. Beneath the succession of knowing states, there is knowledge in itself. That knowledge in itself is the essence of language (or 'śabda-tattva'). It is pure consciousness, unmixed with the changing states and the differentiated objects that overlay it.

Figure 3 - Seen, seeing and see-er

Object (jñeya)	Something to be known	Differentiated in external space	Seen (dṛśya)
Process of knowing (krama)	Succession of knowing states	Changing in mental time	Seeing (darśana)
Knowledge itself (śabda-tattva)	Objectless consciousness	Undifferentiated and unchanging	See-er (draṣṭṛ)

In short, (as summarized in figure 3 above) there is a triad of three things: a differentiated object to be known, a successive process of knowing, and a consciousness that knows. In advaita philosophy, this triad is called 'dṛśya-darśana-draṣṭṛ' or 'the seen, the seeing and the see-er'. Through this simple analysis, Bhartṛhari makes his famous distinction between three levels of speech: *vaikharī*, *madhyamā* and *paśyantī*.

These three levels are described in some *āgama* stanzas from the *vṛtti* commentary on the *Vākyapadīya*, 1.142. Four of these stanzas are quoted and explained, in the subsequent four subsections of this talk.

1. Elaborated structure

sthāneṣu vidhṛte vāyau kṛta-varṇa-parigrahā	Arranged in their respective places, different elements of speech are carried, spoken, in the air.
vaikharī vāk prayoktṛṇām prāṇa-vṛtti-nibandhanā	That forms <i>elaborated</i> speech. It's a recording, carried out

through acts of living energy
that functions forth from those who speak.

This first stanza describes ‘*vaikharī vāk*’ or ‘*elaborated speech*’. The elaboration takes place through an articulation of spoken elements (phonemes, syllables etc.), which are carried in ‘*vāyu*’ or ‘air’.

However, that ‘*air*’ is not just physical. As ‘*vāyu*’, it is the fourth of five cosmic elements,² in our experience of the physical and mental world. It is the ‘atmospheric’ element of qualitative conditioning: which can be ‘felt, but not seen’. It conditions space and time, with a pervading climate of influencing qualities that are intuitively felt, through inner judgement and evaluation. These qualities are not seen as gross objects, through outward sense and intellect. Instead, they are more subtly felt, as their conditioning surrounds and pervades the grosser objects of the world. It is through this climate, of physical and mental conditioning, that speech gets articulated, into complex structures.

Moreover, as words are spoken, they express a living meaning, in the structures that they form. This expression is conceived through the Sanskrit word ‘*prāṇa*’. Physically, the word is associated with the flow of breath in our bodies. As air is breathed, in and out, it refreshes our living functions. And it gets vibrated from within, producing sounds that show a living consciousness, expressed in various changing forms and names and qualities of speech. *Prāṇa* is the energy of this expression. It is not a physical energy that acts from one object to another. Instead, it is a *living energy* that rises up from consciousness, which it expresses in the flow of meaningful activity.

Like the energy of modern physics, *prāṇa* acts through subtle vibrations in the conditioning of space and time; and objects are thus interconnected patterns of its dynamic activity. But *prāṇa* is an energy that’s understood biologically, through considerations of living purpose, meaning and value that are specifically excluded from modern physics. Where modern physics is applied externally, through calculation and engineering, the living energy of *prāṇa* is investigated reflectively, through education and intensive discipline.

As words express their meaning, they record a knowledge that continues from the past. This ‘*recording*’ is called ‘*nibandhana*’. Literally, it means ‘tying back’ or ‘tying down’. ‘*Nibandhana*’ is what ties words to the concrete meaning that supports them. It is the grounding of words, in the underlying knowledge that they record.

Here, it is not conceived that a passing knowledge is made to last, by tying it down to material records like written documents. In fact, the conception is just the opposite. Where knowledge is genuine, it is inherently alive and unchanging, in itself. Material records are inherently dead and decaying. They come to life only when their meaning is interpreted afresh, by living speakers, on the basis of a living energy whose functioning grounds words in lasting knowledge.

This is the root meaning of the English word ‘record’. The prefix ‘re-’ means ‘back’; and ‘cord’ comes from the Latin ‘cor’, which means ‘heart’. Thus, the word ‘record’ implies a return to heart, and hence a recalling and a fresh visiting of knowledge that continues in the heart. Material records are only a degraded and decaying means of that living recall.

2. Mediating mind

kevalam buddhy upādānā
krama-rūp' -ānupātini

Mind in itself is made of forms
that follow on successively,
replacing what has gone before.

prāṇ' -āvṛttim atikramya
madhyamā vāk pravartate

The functioning of living energy
is thereby left behind,
as *mediating* speech goes on
with its continued functioning.

This second stanza describes '*madhyamā vāk*' or '*mediating speech*'. The mediation takes place through mind, and it is of two kinds.

One kind of mediation is called '*krama*' or '*succession*'. Here, mind is a process that takes place in time, mediating between the past and the future. At each moment of time, a state of mind appears, replacing previous states. Each state displays a momentary form of mind, which has been formed by transformation from the past, in a continuing process of perception, thought and feeling. The mind is thus a passing stream of apparent forms, each form a momentary display of the entire process.

But, as these forms succeed each other in our minds, meaning is expressed in them, through our living functioning. That functioning is called '*vṛtti*' or '*turning*'. It is of course the functioning of prāṇa's living energy. It functions by turning back and forth: between the objects mind perceives, and the consciousness that knows the changing stream of perception in the mind. Here, there is a revolving cycle: as consciousness is expressed in the mind's perception of objects, and as each perception is assimilated back through mind into consciousness again.

By thus going out to perceived objects and then reflecting back within, the mind keeps mediating between a world of changing things and a consciousness that carries on beneath. This is another kind of mediation, which does not stay in passing time. Instead, it repeatedly returns into a timeless consciousness: which knows all changes from beneath.

Each time a perception is absorbed into that consciousness, there is a timeless interval, where mind subsides and disappears. There, mind's living energy has come to rest. Its time-bound functioning is left behind, before new states of mind appear. That's how the mind proceeds from state to state. It keeps going on beyond, to where it is dissolved, transcending its own time-affected functioning.

3. Seeing in itself

avibhāgā tu paśyantī
sarvataḥ saṁhṛta-kramā

But *seeing* is that partless essence
always present, everywhere.
In it, succession is absorbed.

svarūpa-jyotir ev' āntaḥ
sūkṣmā vāg anapāyinī

There's only light in its true nature,
as it is itself, within.
That is a subtle speaking where
no disappearance can be found.

This third stanza describes '*paśyantī*' or '*seeing*'. That seeing is not a changing action of body, sense or mind. Instead, it is a changeless presence, staying present everywhere, through all experiences. As different appearances succeed each other in our

minds, it is their common principle of consciousness, which witnesses them all. Its witnessing takes each of them into itself, where all succession is absorbed.

To describe it in itself, it is called '*svarūpa-jyoti*' or the '*true nature of light*'. 'Jyoti' means 'light' and 'svarūpa' means 'true nature'. A 'rūpa' is an apparent form, modified by changeable perception. 'Sva-' is a prefix that means 'inherent' or 'one's own'. So the svarūpa of something is its inherent essence, beneath the changing forms that modify its appearances from different points of view. When something is known from within, as it is in itself, there its svarūpa is realized. That is not a looking from outside, taking one of many points of view in the external world. Instead, it is a knowing in identity. It requires that one stands identical with what is known.

So, when seeing is described as the svarūpa of light, it is a seeing that knows itself, from within, as self-illuminating light. And it is realized by reflecting back to it, as one's own knowing self, from where all mind and world are illuminated.

From there, it speaks unceasingly, as it is expressed through all experience of the physical and mental world. That speaking is called '*sūkṣma vāk*' or '*subtle speech*'. It is too subtle to be heard through outward faculties of sense and mind, whose attention is distracted by the noisy clamour of apparent change and its competing differences. That subtle speaking thus remains unheard and unperceived, by our outward faculties. From outside, it seems dark and silent; even though its nature is pure light, which sees everything and keeps on speaking everywhere.

4. *Beyond all differences*

prāpt'-oparāga-rūpā sā
viplavair anuṣaṅgibhiḥ

It reaches its conditioned form
by mixing it, with a variety
of differing disturbances
that seem to float on it.

vaikharī sattva-mātr' eva
guṇair na vyavakīryate

But that, which seems elaborated,
is pure being in itself.
It is untouched, quite unaffected
by its show of qualities.

Here, there is a description of what came to be called '*parā*' or '*beyond*'. In Bhartrhari's *Vākyapadīya* and its *vṛtti* commentary, this term '*parā*' is not used to denote a fourth level of speech. Bhartrhari says that speech is threefold; and he treats the third level of paśyantī as ultimate. It's later on in the tradition that the name '*parā*' appears, referring to a fourth level. As a result, there came to be a fourfold division of levels, which was used extensively, in connection with Shaivite theology. Then, paśyantī was treated in a slightly degraded way: not as consciousness itself, but as the silent witnessing through which consciousness illuminates and inspires the changing world.

In this fourth stanza (quoted from the *vṛtti* commentary), consciousness is described as unconditioned, beyond the conditioned differences that are superimposed upon it. This superimposition is called '*viplava*'. 'Plava' means 'floating', and the prefix 'vi-' implies 'distinction' and 'difference'. So viplava is a *floating overlay of difference and disturbing change*.

As consciousness appears, it seems thus mixed with a floating overlay, which confuses our understanding. To correct the confusion, consciousness must be distinguished from all the changing and conditioned things that are perceived through

mind. When the distinction is complete, consciousness turns out to be pure being, completely unaffected by the limited appearances that are superimposed by partial mind and senses.

That *pure being* is called ‘*sattva-mātra*’. It is the one reality of everything that’s known, throughout the entire universe. Thus, by distinguishing consciousness as that which knows, it turns out to be identical with all reality, where all distinctions are dissolved. By fully separating that which knows from what is known, the duality between them is completed, and a non-dual unity is realized.

Descriptions of the world

Thus, from Bhartṛhari’s view of language, there arises a fourfold division of levels in our descriptions of the world. In this analysis, the deepest level is an undifferentiated ground, which is taken to be purely subjective and completely impersonal. The other three levels arise from it, thus expressing it through mind and body, in the differentiated world. The ground and its three levels of expression are schematically shown in figure 4 below.

Figure 4 - Levels of expression

Vaikhari (‘elaborated’)	Symbolic structures	Gross manifestation	World of objects	Space
Madhyamā (‘in between’)	Succession of knowing states	Manifesting process	Transform- ing mind	Time
Paśyantī (‘seeing’)	Continued witnessing	Unmanifest potential	Quiet insight	Causality
Parā (‘beyond’)		Non-dual consciousness		

Vaikhari is the outward surface of our descriptions. Here, our descriptions are elaborated structures of objective symbols, crudely showing us a grossly manifested world of objects. As differentiated symbols are related into structures, they show a similarly structured world of differentiated objects, co-existing with each other through described relationships in external space.

Madhyamā is the mediating process of conception, through which our descriptive structures form and carry out their functioning. Here, states of knowing come and go, succeeding one another in a manifesting process that keeps forming and transforming our conceptions and descriptions of observed phenomena. As our states of conceiving change, they enable us to learn from experience, in the course of unfolding time.

Paśyantī is a continued witnessing that carries on through changing states, thus enabling our experience of learning to progress through time. This witnessing continues at the depth of mind, beneath the changing and distracting appearances at the surface of attention. Beneath appearances, this depth contains an unmanifest potential, of latent samskāras, or seeds of conditioning that carry on from past experiences and happenings. The depth of mind thus seems to be a hidden and ‘unconscious’ causal-

ity, by which the past affects the present and the future, as our changing personalities experience the apparent world. But in this seeming ‘unconsciousness’, there is the silent seeing of a quiet insight, from which our transforming minds conceive the world that they describe.

Parā is a non-dual consciousness, beyond all differences of seeming world. In that consciousness, there is no duality between what knows and what is known. For it turns out that the seeming ‘unconscious’ at the depth of mind is not unconscious in itself. It lacks a seeming ‘consciousness of objects’, but it is self-illuminating in itself. Its silent seeing is thus consciousness alone, shining by itself, unmixed with any of the partial and misleading appearances that we call ‘objects’. That pure consciousness is all reality, the complete and uncompromised reality of anything that’s ever truly known.

But what could be the use of such an analysis? How could it be applied, so as to achieve our various objectives in the world? Bhartṛhari makes it plain that the application is not technological. It is not meant for developing some technological power to achieve prescribed objectives. Instead, the application is through education. It is meant for a reflective questioning that clarifies our understanding of what we observe and know.

Thus, in Bhartṛhari’s view, the study of language is essentially an educational science, which belongs to what Parmenides called the way of ‘aletheia’ or ‘truth’. In the end, such an educational science does not work technologically, through prescriptions based upon the accepted assumptions of ‘doxa’ or ‘belief’. Instead it works through a questioning and clarifying examination that investigates its way reflectively, towards a clear knowing that the ancient Greeks called ‘nous’ or ‘noesis’.

At the beginning of the *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari gives us a clear definition of linguistics, as an educational science of this kind.

1.13

artha-pravṛtti-tattvānām
śabdā eva nibandhanam.

All tying down of truths perceived,
in objects and their functioning,
consists of words expressed in speech.

tattv’ āvabodhaḥ
śabdānām n’ āsti
vyākaraṇ’-ādṛte.

But we don’t clearly recognize
the truth of words, in due respect
to the analysis of speech.

1.14

tad dvāram apavargasya
vāñ-malānām cikitsitam.
pavitram sarva-vidyānām
adhividyam prakāśate.

Linguistics is a passageway
to freedom in all disciplines.
Wherever learning is concerned,
linguistics there appears: as that
investigative therapy
which may be used to clear away
the taints of speech in what is said.

Notes:

¹ Traditionally, the *vṛtti* commentary is said to have been written by Bhartṛhari himself. As is usual in such cases, it is a matter of dispute among scholars whether to accept this tradition or not.

² The five elements are: 'pṛthivī' or 'earth' (gross matter, separated into objects), 'āpas' or 'water' (transforming energy, which flows in dynamic patterns of activity), 'tejas' or 'fire' (illuminating information, throwing light through meaningful representations), 'vāyu' or 'air' (qualitative conditioning, which influences tendencies of character), and 'ākāśa' or 'ether' (connecting continuity, which settles conflicts and harmonizes differences).