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A Śabda Reader: Language in Classical Indian Thought ed. by
Johannes Bronkhorst (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

A Śabda Reader: Language in Classical Indian Thought. Historical Sourcebooks in Classical Indian Thought. Translated and edited by Johannes Bronkhorst. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 360. Hardcover \$95.00, ISBN 978-0-231189-40-8.

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The whole of the premodern Indian world appears shot through with language. The analysis of language, first undertaken to preserve the sacred texts of the Brahmins, achieved such conceptual sophistication that it served as the model, directly or indirectly, for almost all traditions of systematic thought, regardless of religious affiliation. Language was implicated in all the most important philosophical debates, regarding the nature of reality and the foundations of knowledge, and became an object of philosophical debate itself. Given the enormous tangle of sources that address these issues, spanning several traditions of thought, and given their complexity, if not abstruseness, it would be difficult for anyone to produce a “historical sourcebook” on language in premodern India. That would require selecting primary sources that give non-specialist readers a sense of what, exactly, Indian thinkers talked about when they talked about language, presenting them in accessible translations that nevertheless conveyed their sophistication, and contextualizing them in a historical narrative. If anyone could do that, it would be Johannes Bronkhorst. His *Śabda Reader* goes from the *Brāhmaṇas* (mid-1st millennium BCE) to Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa and Dharmarāja (17th c. CE) and an enormous range of texts in between, representing Buddhist, Brahmanical, Jain and skeptical (*cārvāka*) positions.

The readings are organized into eight chapters: “The Brahmanical Background,” “Buddhist Thought: Sources of Inspiration,” “The Grammarian Patanjali,” “The Special Place of Sanskrit and the Veda,” “Self-Contradictory Sentences,” “Do Words Affect Cognition?,” “Words and Sentences,” and “Other Denotative Functions of the Word.” Bronkhorst motivates and contextualizes his selection of readings in a separate “Introduction” (60 pages), with sections corresponding to each chapter in the reader itself, to which all of the notes refer. Readers are referred to Bronkhorst’s 2016 book, *How the Brahmins Won*, for “fuller documentation” (p. ix) of issues discussed in the “Introduction.” The organization is not exactly chronological, but is not *not* chronological, either. Rather it follows questions that are picked up at particular moments in history and, in many cases, continue to be discussed for centuries afterwards. Hence the first chapter, concerning linguistic speculation in the Vedic tradition, begins

with the *Brāhmaṇas* and ends with Abhinavagupta. By contrast, the final two chapters, on sentence meaning and secondary meaning, presuppose many centuries of scholastic debate on the nature of language.

Although Bronkhorst frames the overarching concerns of each chapter in his introduction, he usually leaves it to the reader to figure out how the selections are related to each other, or why the selections are presented in a certain order. The introduction leads us to expect, for example, that the chapter titled “Buddhist Thought: Sources of Inspiration,” will focus on the ideas of the *Milindapañha*, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Nāgārjuna, and Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. These works fall within a certain historical frame, albeit a large one, and one that Bronkhorst does not name (we could, following Schopen, call it “the Middle Period of Indian Buddhism”). And they are unified by the insight that everyday experience is structured by our language and does not straightforwardly map onto an underlying reality—an insight which Bronkhorst also does not name (we could call it “nominalism”). In the reader, however, only 13 of the 53 pages of this chapter present Buddhist sources. Most of the remainder is taken up by a discussion of the unit of meaning, or *sphoṭa*, by Brahmanical authors, including a long and very technical passage from Jayanta’s *Nyāyamañjarī*. The transitions between readings can sometimes seem associative.

Bronkhorst claims to have attempted “to resist the temptation of cherry-picking, i.e., of choosing topics on the basis of their similarity to or relevance for modern language philosophy” (p. ix). It is certainly true that he draws no comparisons to other philosophical traditions, and has resisted labels (such as “nominalism,” noted above) that might have made it easier to understand ideas as philosophical positions rather than, say, “dogmas” (pp. 23, 37) imposed on them by their religious commitments. The cost of this approach is that sometimes it is not clear what, if anything, is philosophically interesting about the selections he has provided. Even specialist readers might be baffled as to what is really at stake in the discussion of the “main qualificand” (p. 60) of a sentence. When the technical language of the particular traditions is pared away, it appears that authors are grappling with the question of what the meaning of a sentence actually is (or what exactly is the object of a cognition derived from a sentence). The range of views on this topic is broadly comparable to competing views as to whether the meaning of a sentence is a proposition, a state of affairs, or something else. I personally would therefore have appreciated a greater effort to make these selections relevant to non-specialist readers, especially but not exclusively those who are philosophically literate. At a time when philosophy programs are finally “having a look” at Indian philosophy, we want to be able to present students and colleagues with translations that will inspire their curiosity and excitement. Bronkhorst’s book certainly does this, and will certainly find its way onto course syllabi and

graduate reading lists, but he could have endeavored to meet non-specialist readers a little closer to half way.

Does Bronkhorst succeed in *not* cherrypicking? I trust Bronkhorst's judgment more than almost anyone else's when it comes to identifying the major positions and arguments about language in the *longue durée* of Indian thought. But it is still a judgment, and it is very much Bronkhorst's. Those who have read *Language and Reality* (2011 [1999]) will not be surprised to see the "correspondence principle," the idea that "the words of a true statement correspond to the items that make up the situation described" (p. 22), appearing throughout the book. I am skeptical about the evidence for and consequences of such a principle. Did Vātsyāyana really think that the existence of a Sanskrit word guaranteed the existence of its referent (p. 164)? The position would perhaps be less ridiculous than it sounds if we were to think about an incipient distinction between sense and reference: what it means for a word to have a meaning at all is for it to have a "sense," but this does not guarantee that every word must necessarily have at least one "referent" that really exists (or existed) in the world. One might argue, as the Mīmāṃsakas did, that referents are individuals that instantiate the sense, which is a universal (or a class, as I would say), and classes cannot exist without such individuals. As Bronkhorst's translations (pp. 148–152) show, however, Vātsyāyana had different ideas about how individuals and classes relate to each other in the context of word-meanings. Thus while the distinction between sense and reference might belong to "modern language philosophy," to which Bronkhorst avoids referring, it may nevertheless have helped to clarify what Vātsyāyana's position actually was.

An entire chapter is devoted to sentences that appear to violate the correspondence principle, like "the potter makes the pot." Bronkhorst calls these "self-contradictory sentences." Of course the problem of origination, of how something that did not previously exist (e.g. a pot) could come into existence, is central to several traditions of Indian philosophy. One would not normally describe such sentences as "self-contradictory," however, since the contradiction only arises between propositions (viz. "the pot exists" and "the pot does not exist") that are extracted from them on the basis of a strict interpretation of a questionable principle. Contradiction and contrariety as such, discussed by such authors as Mahimabhaṭṭa, would have been interesting topics to include in the *Reader*.

Bronkhorst excels at demonstrating the shared investment in metaphysical questions in early historic India and the ways in which language was involved in answering them: the relationship of parts to wholes, of universals to particulars, of causes to effects, and of phenomenal reality to what really exists. It is, however, not always easy to follow the arguments presented in the selections. In some cases, as with Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* in section 4.2 ("Sentences as a Source of Knowledge," pp. 172–196), this is because Bronkhorst has assembled an anthology of quotations drawn from throughout

the work, which allows the reader to quickly gain a sense of Bhartṛhari’s overall project, but at the cost of reducing his arguments to aphorisms. In other cases, Bronkhorst has reproduced the arguments at some length, but without giving the reader the tools to understand them. The same section begins with the six criteria that Mīmāṃsakas had formulated for determining which element is subordinate to which in a ritual performance (*vinīyoga-pramāṇas*). Bronkhorst explains them, in the introduction, as criteria that allow for an “unambiguous and direct interpretation” (p. 35) of specific passages in the Veda, but readers will need to know—especially in the absence of a section devoted to Mīmāṃsā *per se*—what such an interpretation is *for* in the first place, namely, the production of a fully determinate “blueprint” for ritual action. Otherwise it is difficult to understand precisely what Śaṅkara and Maṇḍana, whose works are presented next, disagree with in the Mīmāṃsā project. Here I felt the absence of a brief discussion, if not a translation, of the *codanāsūtra* (1.1.2) and its commentaries, the *locus classicus* of Mīmāṃsā’s claim that the language of the Veda is fundamentally oriented toward action.

Bronkhorst’s translations convey the sophistication and insight of the sources. Because everyone uses language, it is easy to imagine that discourse about words, sentences, meaning, communication, and expression takes place within the realm of common sense. In Sanskrit, however, these terms were almost always used with razor-sharp precision. Bronkhorst’s translation for individual terms, documented in a Sanskrit-to-English glossary, are admirably clear and consistent. The selections themselves differ dramatically in their clarity and accessibility. The selections from Bhartṛhari, Kumārila, and Vasubandhu are, as anyone familiar with their Sanskrit style would expect, a pleasure to read; so too, contrary to my expectation, are the selections from Gaṅgeśa.

The more technical selections, as is often the case, tend to be overly literal, both in their use of English calques of Sanskrit words (“fruit” instead of “result” for *phalam*, etc.) and in their tendency to more faithfully reproduce syntactic structure than the structure of the argument. To give an example, Vācaspati writes in the *Tattvabindu*: *la-bhya-te ca sa-ma-bhi-vyāhārānyathā-nu-pa-p-attyā pa-dā-nām a-nvitā-rtha-pa-rānām svā-bhi-dhe-yā-rtha-rū-pa-sa-ma-ve-tā-nvi-tā-va-sthā-pra-tyā-ya-naṃ la-kṣa-ṇa-yā*. Bronkhorst translates (pp. 247–248): “It is through metaphorical expression (*lakṣaṇayā*) that the connected (*anvita-*) state of affairs that inheres in the meanings expressed by words is communicated by words whose meanings are connected, because their joint occurrence makes no sense otherwise.” I would have translated the same passage: “Because it would otherwise make no sense for the words to be used together, the words end up pointing to relational (*anvita*) meanings through secondary signification (*lakṣaṇayā*), and thus conveying a relational (*anvita-*) state of affairs that is a composite of the proper meanings expressed (*svābhidheyārtha-*) by the individual words.” The non-specialist reader needs to

know that words, in Vācaspati's view, primarily express their proper meanings alone—meanings which are non-relational—and can only express relational meanings through secondary signification (which is not “metaphorical expression”), which operates if and only if primary signification fails.

Very occasionally the translations are wrong or misleading. A *karma* is a “patient,” not an “object” (p. 279 and *passim*), at least not if a *kartr* is an “agent.” *Svasiddhyarthatayā* is not “the meaning established by itself” but a secondary meaning “intended to establish itself,” i.e., the primary meaning. *Lakṣaṇā* is sometimes rightly translated as “secondary signification” (p. 269) but sometimes wrongly as “metaphor” (see above). *Svarūpa* is not the “own form” of a word in Śālikanātha, but a technical term referring to a word's “proper meaning” (p. 233). “Syntactic agreement” is indeed associated with *sāmānadhikarāṇya*, but that is not what it means (rather “coreferentiality”), and not what is at stake on p. 183. I appreciate the attempt to translate Sanskrit titles, but they are not always unobjectionable (*Śrībhāṣya* should not be *Commentary of Affluence*, but rather *Holy Commentary*, on p. 181).

To Bronkhorst's credit I have found it difficult to think of major issues surrounding language that are not discussed in the book, or important authors who are not represented. One major omission is Prabhākara, whom I consider to have ushered in a revolution in linguistic thought, but this is remedied by extensive selections from his follower Śālikanātha in Chapter Seven. Dīnnāga does appear, but the selections are brief and do not adequately present his theory of exclusion (which is however presented in the introduction, pp. 52–53). Dharmakīrti and his followers are absent, despite having offered the most detailed defense of the “conventionality” of the relation between words and their meanings, partly based on Dīnnāga's ideas—a position that is underrepresented in the *Reader*, relative to the position that the relation between words and their meaning is fixed.

A Śabda Reader showcases the centrality of language in Indian thought across a truly staggering range of intellectual traditions. The diversity of its selections, in terms of style and length, is one of its strengths, and it will certainly inspire its readers, whatever their level of expertise, to deepen and broaden their encounter with Indian thought about language.