A 5th-century Grammar of Contextual Meaning
Bhartṛhari on Factors of Disambiguation

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The phenomenon of ambiguity (lexical and structural) is a fundamental feature of natural languages, and figures either as something that needs to be suppressed (as in scientific or logical discourse), or as a device to be taken advantage of for rhetoric or literary purposes. Linguistic studies in the past two centuries have stressed the importance of context as a means to solve ambiguity, sometimes coming to regard it as a basic dimension of verbal communication *per se*, that could be given equal – or even superior – importance to semantic, lexical content. In the Indian linguistic tradition, context has been theorized early on by grammarians and exegetes through the conceptual pair of *artha* ("implication", hence "textual context" or "co-text") and *prakaraṇa* ("situational / non-linguistic context"), repeatedly found already in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (2nd century BC). Some seven or eight centuries after Patañjali, in the 5th century CE, the question of context in the determination of polysemic expressions (*anekārthaśabda*) has known an extraordinary development in the work of Bhartṛhari, a grammarian and philosopher famous for his refusal of compositionality in the analysis of utterances (*vākya*), which he considered to be unitary, non-analysable and non-repeatable linguistic acts. Based on an ongoing new critical edition and English translation of the second book of his *Vākyapadīya* (generally known as the *Vākyakāṇḍa*, the "Section on the Utterance"), this paper will focus on a series of stanzas of that section in which Bhartṛhari develops Patañjali's basic distinction of *artha* and *prakaraṇa* into a series of fourteen factors of disambiguation (which he calls *nimittāntara*, "external factors" for the determination of meaning). These are explained and exemplified in his extensive auto-commentary (*svavṛtti*), and again paraphrased in the second millennium in Puṇyarāja's *Vākyapadīyaṭīkā*. The linguistic relevance of this "extended" list of factors for a deep understanding of contextuality within the Indian tradition will be questioned, as well as its connection to Bhartṛhari's more well-known stance on sentence analysis and the pragmatic dimension of language. Finally, the influence of Bhartṛhari's reflection on context and multiple meaning on the later, especially poetological, tradition will be analysed, focusing on its reinterpretation by Maṃmaṭa (11th-century Kashmir), at a time when Bhartṛhari's auto-commentary had become widely unavailable, thus triggering a complete re-thinking of his list in the poets' analysis of "suggestion" (*vyañjanā*) and the figure of "double-entendre" (*śleṣa*).