

Words Denoting Universals: Addressing Particular Cases in Bhartṛhari's *Jāṭisamuddeśa*

Bhartṛhari, a foundational figure in Indian philosophy of language active around the 5th to 6th centuries CE, is best known for his seminal *Vākyapadīya*, a work in which he develops a sophisticated theory of language, emphasizing the interplay between meaning, expression, and reality. In the third book of the *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari devotes a section—the *Jāṭisamuddeśa*—to examining whether words denote universals, understood as properties shared among particulars. However, rather than merely arguing that words express universals, the *Jāṭisamuddeśa* seeks to explore the broader implications of this view. The section is best characterized as a series of case studies, in which Bhartṛhari investigates the consequences of adopting universals as the primary bearers of meaning in specific linguistic and philosophical contexts. This approach allows him to address both ontological and linguistic issues, as the discussion of universals not only pertains to semantics but also to the description of reality itself.

In this talk, I will examine three specific cases where the theory that a word indicates a universal (*jātivāda*) is challenged. The first concerns the relationship between the suffixes *-tva* or *-tā*, which form abstract nouns (thus expressing the universal property of x being x), and qualified nouns. For instance, when we say “being the smell of the lotus flower”, does the process of abstraction apply to the noun “smell” alone, or to the entire qualified noun phrase “smell of the lotus flower”?

The second case concerns names that refer to non-existing entities, such as the “horns of a rabbit”. In the standard Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theory, such names do not instantiate any universal (there is no *śaśaśṛṅgatā*). However, in his work Bhartṛhari considers a more nuanced case: the noun *narasiṃha* (“man-lion”), which denotes something never encountered in ordinary experience but is composed of two nouns referring to existing entities. What, then, is the ontological status of the universal “being a man-lion” (*narasiṃhatā*)? Does it exist or not?

Finally, I will examine the role of grammatical number in relation to nouns, in the view that all nouns express a universal. Does the use of a specific grammatical number—singular, dual, or plural—particularize the noun, thereby challenging the *jātivāda* view? Does it never have this effect, or only under certain conditions? If the latter, what are these conditions?

By examining these cases, this presentation aims to illuminate both semantic theories in classical India and their ontological consequences.

References

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