

The Purpose of the Language: Buddhist linguistical reflections on void, relation and meaning

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Abstract

This article explores the role of language in Buddhism, particularly as presented in the Suttas of the Pāli canon with subsequent developments, and its connection to the development of modern linguistics in Europe. The analysis delves into various aspects of Buddhist and Indian thought on language, including the terms nirutti, adhivacana, and paññatti, and their potential influence on European linguistic theory, as exemplified by Saussure's work. The article also investigates the parallels between Buddhist and Neo-Parmenidean philosophies in relation to language and ontology, highlighting their shared emphasis on unity, relation, and the interconnectedness of entities. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of understanding the centrality of language in Buddhism and its potential impact on the development of linguistic theories in the West.

Keywords: Buddhism; language; Saussure; Neo-Parmenidean philosophy; Indian linguistics

1. Introduction

The Sutta on Kaccāyana (SN 12.15) presents a worldview in which language serves as a dividing force. This particular sutta is one of many within the Buddhist tradition that address the significance of language. The content of this sutta is also the only to be explicitly mentioned by Nāgārjuna (MK 15.7). Language has been a complex problem of Buddhism since its origins. It is impossible to deal with this subject exhaustively in a single article. What I can do is, starting from this mention, which allows us to return to the Pāli canon, look for significant references to language that may have constituted elements of later thought, such as we find in MK and in the Abhidhamma. Buddhist and, more generally, Indian reflection on language, however, has not remained confined to this geographical area, but has expanded and even laid possibly the foundations of modern linguistics that emerged in Europe. In this article, I will start examining SN 22.62, which directly addresses the issue of language. However, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the centrality of language in Buddhism, it is also necessary to provide a general overview and analysis of other suttas such as SN 12.15. This analysis will also involve a review of

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the history of European linguistics, which has been significantly influenced by Indian thought, particularly the work of Saussure. It is worth noting that Kaccāyana is also the name of a renowned Buddhist author who composed a grammar of Pāli.² The grammar of Kaccāyana begins with a statement that highlights the importance of language in Buddhist philosophy:

[The Buddha thus proclaimed,] “Sense (*attha*) is perceived (*saññāto*) through sounds (*akkhara*). The Sense of all (*sabba*) language (*vacanām*) is perceived only (*eva*) through sounds. When there is an error (*vipatti*) in the phonic sounds, the meaning is confused (*dunnayatā*). Therefore (*tasmā*), the phonetic skill (*kosalla*) is helpful (*bahū-pakāram*) in [understanding] the teachings of the Suttas (*suttantesu*)”.³

Following this, the text includes an invocation to the Buddha to aid the author in creating a grammar that will facilitate a thorough comprehension of the Canon, as well as the material components referred to as ‘formal entity’ (*rūpa-dhamma*) and ‘nominal entity’ (*nāma-dhamma*). This line also “explains the importance of grammar for understanding Pāli canonical texts” (Crosby 2020: 106).

It is necessary to revisit the distinction between name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*). We now know that it is possible to draw a parallel between this binary and another concept developed within the European linguistic tradition, specifically the linguistics established by Ferdinand de Saussure.⁴

Ferdinand de Saussure was proficient in Sanskrit and familiar with the work of Pāṇini, and he even earned his doctorate for his study of the use of the genitive absolute in Sanskrit. He also served as a lecturer on Sanskrit at the University of Geneva. There is no doubt that the linguistic theories of the Indian tradition, including those found in Buddhism, were well-known within the broader philosophical tradition.⁵

The relationship between language and understanding reality has been a topic of many philosophical discussions in the Western tradition. However, the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Genevan thinker who approached the question of language from both a linguistic and philosophical perspective, cannot be overlooked. For Saussure, language is governed by a set of

² The nominal assonance is obviously fascinating, however it should be noted that the two authors are separated by a long distance, and obviously the Kaccāyana mentioned in SN 12.15 is not the same author of the famous Pāli grammar.

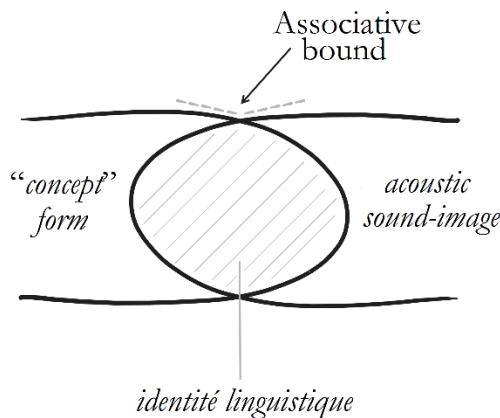
³ The source of the original text is quoted from Crosby 2020: 252, note 1 of Chapter 4: *attho akkharasaññāto. sabbavacanām attho akkhareh'eva saññāyate. akkharavipattiyañ hi atthassa dunnayatā hoti; tasmā akkharakosallam bahūpakāram puttantesu.*

⁴ Indeed, it is a fact that the very birth of linguistics as a science owes a great deal to the discovery of Sanskrit and the work of the grammarian Pāṇini. Concepts unknown before suddenly entered the European philological world thanks to Sanskrit. The Indian grammarians, particularly Pāṇini in his monumental work (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*), have developed systematic categories of linguistic analysis for the purpose of maximum understanding of their sacred language, categories that will then be adopted also by modern linguistics, such as phonetics (*śikṣā*), etymology (*nirukta*), morphology (*ryākaraṇa*).

⁵ Crosby's work revealed the use of the linguistic concept of substitution or deletion (*lopa*) within the meditative practice of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*. Deletion was a concept already present in the linguistics of Aṣṭādhyāyī to describe the non-appearance of a linguistic element (*adarśana*) in the speech (*bhāṣā*). We have an analogous concept in modern linguistics, called “zero-morpheme” (also “null morpheme”, form the original definition *signe zéro* by Saussure). For more information on this specific topic, see Crosby 2020: 123 and Ruegg 2010: 8. Later developments of linguistic theory are obviously also present in the Mahāyāna of which an exhaustive summary is present in Tzohar 2018.

fundamental principles. One of these principles is that form and sense cannot be considered separately. Given that form and sense are one and the same, Saussure (2002: 17) opposes rather form to vocal figure: “form-sense and vocal figure” (*forme-sens et figure vocale*). Linguistic phenomena must be called internal and external by virtue of their being “of consciousness” (*de conscience*) or “directly perceptible” (*directament saisissable*), respectively. Language is also characterized by a principle of incessant duality (*dualité incessante*) because a linguistic identity “implies the association of two heterogeneous elements” (p. 18).⁶ Albeit a linguist usually misunderstands forms and ideas, taking often one for the other, the real “the formal object of its study” should be precisely the very juncture point of this incessant duality, which is “the conjunction point of the two domains”.⁷

In other words, the center of linguistic interest is identity (*identité linguistique*). Now, one might think that this duality is between a physical and a psychological dimension, but Saussure rather states that “the two elements of the word resonate reciprocally in the spiritual order” (p. 19), i.e., psycho-cognitive: “not only the meaning but also the sign is a fact of pure consciousness”.⁸ This does not exclude, at least for Saussure, the physic domain totally. However, a linguistical analysis focused exclusively on physical data, can produce a phonetics or a physiology, but it cannot understand the phonological domain of language which intertwines sound (physics) and meaning (psyche).



*Fig.1: The associative principle exposed in the theory of the *kénôme* (Saussure 2002: 93). As we see, the linguistic identity is something emerging from the relation between two voids. We can compare the *kénome* concept with Agamben's considerations on phantasm (Agamben 1977: 89). The only difference between them is that the *kénome* is an empty meaning lacking an association, whereas a *phantasm* is a residual perception of a part of a linguistical identity. Both contribute to the *sème associatif*.*

⁶ Original: “implique l’association de deux élément hétérogènes”.

⁷ Original: “objet formel de son étude” [...] “le point de junction de deux domaines”.

⁸ Original: “le deux éléments du mot son réciprocement dans l’ordre spirituel” [...] “non seulement la signification mais aussi le signe est un fait de conscience pur”.

A language can exist only if an acoustic image is attached to an idea (*s'attache une idée*) and vice versa. For this reason, Saussure recognizes four linguistic characteristics: (1) no linguistic entity can be perceived immediately “by the sense” (*par le sens*), and therefore, (2) none of them is “simple”. In the first case, as partly for the second, the purpose is to avoid reductionism. No linguistic entity is simple because any linguistic entity is given by the associative act, “none exist outside of the idea that can be attached to them” (Saussure 2002: 20).⁹ Otherwise, if one wanted to reduce any linguistic analysis to its minimum data, the associative principle in which the meaning lies would be lost: “lui contester cette dualité ou l’oublier revient directement à lui ôter son existence linguistique, en la rejetant par exemple dans le domaine des faits physiques”. Moving on, (3) the unity resulted from the linguistic association is a complex fact (*fait complexe*) derived by two facts (*consistant dans l’union des faits*), and (4) linguistic objects are not homogeneous, and linguists must study these “couplings of heterogeneous objects (signs-ideas)”¹⁰ in order to reveal two different grammars: one for the ideas and one for the signs, both incomplete (*incomplètes*) and false (*fausses*).

These reflections on language demonstrate great insight and remain an essential part of the philosophy of language. It is worth noting, however, that Saussure’s formulation of these ideas may have been influenced by Indian philosophy: “Ferdinand de Saussure’s erudition regarding India and the underlying reflection that he seems to have had about it will reveal a linguistics thought that is partly nourished by the philosophy of speech from the Vedic and Brahmanic era” (Atlani-Voisin 2003: 80).¹¹

Saussure studied Indian linguistics and found it captivating. He saw the fundamental elements of his own linguistic theory in the Vedas and the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (p. 84-87). Also important is the ancient concept of *sphoṭa* associated with an early treatise on language, the *Vākyapadīya*. Saussure believed that *sphoṭa* was the word itself (*parole*), and that the phonetic association of sound (*dhvani*) was the quality attributed to the word as a manifestation of meaning (p. 88).

The *Aṣṭādhyāyī* uses the concept of ‘syncope’ (*lopa*) to describe the non-appearance of a linguistic element (*adarśana*) in the speech (*bhāṣā*). We observe an analogous concept in modern linguistics, called ‘zero-morpheme’ (also ‘null morpheme’, from the original definition *signe zéro* by Saussure). The concept of a zero morpheme refers to a situation in which a particular morphological aspect is not manifested in a clear phonetic or morphological form. For example, in an inflective language, which expresses its morphological aspects through suffixes, each word has a base form and a series of modifications (inflections) depending on the grammatical case the speaker wishes to convey. If, hypothetically, a word in a specific grammatical case does not exhibit any specific modification of its base form, this would be an example of a zero morpheme. Despite the absence of a phonetic modification, speakers are able to understand the intended

⁹ Original: “aucune n’existant hors de l’idée qui peut s’y attacher”.

¹⁰ Original: “accouplements d’objets hétérogènes (signe-idendées)”.

¹¹ Original: “l’érudition de Ferdinand de Saussure concernant l’Inde et la réflexion souterraine qu’il semble avoir eue à son propos révéleront une pensée linguistique nourrie, pour une part, de la philosophie de la parole de l’époque védique et brahmanique”.

grammatical case through the context of use and their implicit understanding of grammatical rules. In this case, although the base form and the inflected form of the word are the same, the linguistic interpretation of the phenomenon is to consider the inflected form as distinct due to the presence of a zero morpheme, which is cognitively present but not pronounced. This concept is represented linguistically with the symbol \emptyset , signifying the presence of an absence.

In Pāṇinian linguistic theory this works in almost the same way. Starting from the dimension of common usage (*laukikapravayoga*) of a linguistic postulate, we can see two different dimensions of language execution: a specific grammatical ideal (*sthānin*) and the actual speech-usage (*ādeśa*), so *lopa* “as a zero substitute is then opposed to *śravāṇa* by means of a full substitute-morph in actual speech” (Ruegg 2010: 8). According to Pāṇini, what is postulated or recognized as a grammatical rule (*sthānin*) doesn’t necessarily have to be represented at the level of the usage (*ādeśa*) which is conceived as a phonological substitute of the ideal (possibly ‘mental’) rule that dominates the speakers from their linguistic dimension.¹²

Maybe the concept of *lopa* is ancestor of the idea of transactional usage or level of conceptual entities and factor of analysis (*niḥsvabhāvatā* and *dharmanairātmya*). Also, the *śūnyavāda*’s concepts of *saṃvṛti* and *vyavahāra* can be considered as similar as they encompass “conceptual entities and the analytical factors which are postulated and applicable (‘*prasakta*’ so to say) in the frame either of conceptual thinking (*prapañca* and *vikalpa*) with its associated speculative views (*dṛṣṭi*), or of philosophical analysis. But in reality these entities and factors are empty of own-being; and on the *paramārtha* level they are simply not ‘realized’” (p. 9).

However, Ruegg states that the two levels of *sthānin* and *ādeśa* are not comparable to the Buddhist concepts of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* since “*śūnyatā* does not refer to any kind of entity, ultimate or conventional” (p. 10), but I don’t agree that this last consideration asserts correctly what the *dve satye* system would say. First of all, it is never asserted, in any Buddhist school of thought, that *paramārtha* is an entity. It is said that *paramārtha* represent the ‘ultimate reality’, but it is also clearly reported, by Nāgārjuna (MK 24), that the very word ‘*paramārtha*’, as any other words and conceptualized ideas, is part of the *saṃvṛti* level, which possibly also includes the *sthānin-ādeśa* dualism. Even though the word and concept of *paramārtha* is part of the *saṃvṛti* level (as the very word *saṃvṛti* is as well), and for this reason can be considered an ‘entity’, the ultimate reality itself, which is just expressed by the word *paramārtha*, is not an entity nor a concept. Also, *śūnyatā* is not comparable to any dharma since it transcends the dualism between conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) and unconditioned (*asam̄skṛta*) reality, so it’s obvious

¹² Similarly, therefore, to the mechanism of *lopa* in grammar, the Abhidhamma makes use of permutation to replace negative dhammas with positive ones. The *borān* meditative tradition adopts the same principle. It should also be noted, grammatically, that the zero-substitute can have a morphological sense only if in inter-relation with the other substitutes, that is, the other morphological forms that are pronounced instead. Without this specific inter-relation or relation of relations, the phonological absence of the morpheme would make it impossible to understand its function. As with any other linguistic aspect, meaning is acquired in the relationship, a relationship that exists between all the elements of the system. This also proves that the *śūnya* is not nihilistically understood as a void that cancels or destroys contents. It is invisible but it is still something. Saying ‘nothing is visible’ is the same as saying ‘no-thing is visible’, but saying “nothing” is visible’ means that something is visible, that something called ‘nothing’. Regarding the morphology, therefore, “Thanks to the zero, the qualities of the original place-holder *sthānin*, and subsequent place-holders in the series of procedures, continue through the process even if nothing is visible” (Crosby 2020, p.124).

that the *lopa* grammatical theory does not include something comparable to *śūnyatā* since it just deals with the *saṃvṛti* level.

1. A First Theory on Buddhist Linguistics

The first author to propose a theory that linked between Buddhist philosophy and the linguistics of De Saussure was Edward Small (1987: 447-459). His work introduces some notable ideas especially the comparison between the *nāma/rūpa* binomial with the Saussurian *signifier/signified* one, and there is good reason to argue that more in-depth research on this simple correlation could contribute significantly to linguistic studies. Furthermore, it must be noted that this theory has not been further developed, and it is indeed difficult to find traces of his work.

The “discourse on the purpose of language” (*Niruttipathasutta*) is a very interesting short sutta in SN 22.62 (*Upayavagga*). In this discourse the Buddha speaks of the faculty of language (*nirutti*), that is associated with the designation of “terminologies” (*adhivacana*) and descriptions, which are identified as “conventions” (*paññatti*). Right from the start, the Buddha connects the purpose of language with that of two peculiar functions: designation and convention.

The Buddha proposes a reflection on the linguistic-cognitive mechanisms that allow the attribution of semantic identities, which inevitably also leads him to speak of the very essence of the designated entities.

Mendicants, there are three purposes of language, designation, and convention. They are uncorrupted, since such they are from the beginning. They are not being corrupted now, nor can they ever be. The wise ascetics and Brahmans do not consider them.

Unquestionably, the Buddha is speaking of language. However, there are two other elements, all characterized by the suffix *-pathā*. This suffix, which here is translated as ‘purpose’, has a much broader meaning than it has to do with the idea of ‘path’. To some extent, it is therefore ‘the way’ that must be revealed inherently in these three issues. They are, as already mentioned: language (*nirutti*), designation or reference (*adhivacana*) and convention (*paññatti*).

The term *adhivacana* seems in all respects a synonym of *paññatti*, but we know that Buddhists never leave anything to chance; therefore, the lexical choice is extremely meticulous. The term has to do with a reality that is above (*adhi*) phonation (*vacana*, a term that has to do with *vāc* which, like the Latin *vōx*, refers to the voice, the phonatory act). Therefore, the *adhivacana* is outlined as something superordinate to language, probably a functional principle thanks to which the act of *vacana* is made possible.

Lastly, the term *nirutti* is referable to the Sanskrit *nirukti* which, in this form, is used to indicate language, etymology or explanation. The origin of this term can again be traced back to *vac* accompanied by the prefix *nis-* which conveys the meaning of exteriority, “outside”, as in *nir-vāṇa* “blowing off” (once again, the first part derives from the prefix *nis-* “out” accompanied by

vā “blow”). To say *nirutti* therefore means to convey a self-explanatory idea of language, a voice that comes out (*nis-vac*), a word that expresses itself.

The text tells us that the mode of operation (or ‘path’: *patha*) of *nirutti*, *adhivacana* and *paññatti* is the same, so we could say that these three elements share a single principle, which basically is cognition.

What are these three purposes? – Well, mendicants, when the form has passed, ceased and stopped, its designation, its identity and its convention is a “was”. It is not an “is”, nor a “will be”.

It is important to discuss the meaning of the term ‘form’ (*rūpa*) as used by the Buddha. This is likely one of the most misunderstood terms in the philosophical lexicon of the Indian world. Depending on the context, it can be translated in various ways. However, there is a single semantic root that allows us to trace all the nuances of *rūpa* back to a fundamental cognitive archetype.¹³

2. Indian and Western linguistics: brief overview

If the two constituents of the sign are actually void *kenomes*, the problem is determining what is ontologically real. This dilemma is also present in Indian philosophy and finds an interesting resolution that also fascinates Saussure. In Indian grammatical tradition, the word *sphoṭa* is used for such a purpose. For Saussure, a binomial between *sphoṭa* and *dhvani* can be interpreted like this: “*sphoṭa* is the word; sound is the quality of the word” (Atlani-Voisin 2003: 88).¹⁴ Because of this relation, we can assume that the pure sound (*dhvani*) is interpreted by Saussure as literally insignificant: “the phonatory act is only significant when it is in relation to *sphoṭa*; hearing is only the place, essential indeed, of the unfolding of sounds” (*ibidem*). Ultimately, “it is the *sphoṭa* that is the word”, since it “is defined as properly linguistic”, but it is “neither material nor spiritual”, whereas *dhvani* is defined as “the individual concrete enunciation”, which is the direct phonetic execution to express a linguistic message. If the receiver does not share the same linguistic

¹³ The term *rūpa* is used initially to indicate appearance, color, or shape. In more distant applications from this prototype, it can mean ‘beauty’ (from ‘correct or beautiful form’ *surūpa*, opposite of *durūpa*), ‘nature’, ‘feature’, ‘peculiarity’, ‘circumstances’, or ‘norm’. It goes without saying, that the semantic root of this term is that of the ‘concept’ itself, i.e., that general characteristic which makes something identifiable as an entity. It is more likely to assume that *rūpa* indicates the very ‘concept’ as that which has a recognizable form as such. In this sense, *rūpa* is indeed the ‘form’, but precisely the cognitive form. By ‘cognitive form’ we therefore mean any recognizable datum, be it also an acoustic form or a tactile form, as a sensorial configuration that characterizes the perceptual datum. In Sanskrit, very similar uses are linked to a term perhaps etymologically related, that is *várpas*, used to indicate ‘form’ in a very abstract sense: ‘image’, ‘figure’, ‘aspect’, but also ‘ghost’. However, giving a static definition is impossible. Sometimes *rūpa* is configured, in the use made of it, purely as a term that designates the material form of things, or just materiality, whereas in Buddhist texts this use often fluctuates and alternates with a *rūpa* clearly used to indicate more abstract cognitive forms, perhaps as a synonym of *āyatana* (‘object of the senses’). This proto-metaphysical distinction – which in Buddhism never reaches a properly metaphysical and clear distinction between material and immaterial – is given to identify the apparent form as a sensory representation of matter as an incorporeal datum (*arūpabhava*), theoretically distinct from the bodily and tangible substratum of these appearances (*rūpabhava*) which, however, are never recognized in Buddhism as having an identity *per se*, that is, as ‘naturally’ identifiable with specific forms.

¹⁴ Original: “*sphoṭa* est la parole; le son est la qualité de la parole”.

dimension as the speaker who formulated the enunciation: “it cannot be recognized or understood except because it is necessarily linked to the fundamental sound, the true generator of meaning, the *sphoṭa*”.¹⁵

We might suppose an indirect reference to this theory in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* where Pāṇini mentioned *Sphoṭayana*, but this reference doesn’t prove he “knew anything about *Sphoṭa* doctrine” (Joshi 2007: 187). For this theory, the *sphoṭa* is an aspect of a word which characterize it as a “heard sound”, and without which the word would be a mere “spoken sound” (*dhvani*), viz., mere meaningless noise (physically articulated) whose single distinct unities (phonemes) are fixed (*avasthita*). In other words, “a chosen *śabda* can have different *Dhvanis* (that is, it can be pronounced differently), but it always has the same *Sphoṭa*” (p. 188). Later Grammarians who called themselves *Sphoṭavādins* described *sphoṭa* as element of significance that acts as a coordinator and conveyor of meaning in the units of designation that structure the utterance (p. 189).

The word *sphoṭa* is probably of onomatopoeic origin like the English *spit*. Its Sanskrit root, *sphuṭ*, carries indeed, among other meanings, that of that of “bursting” or “explosion”.¹⁶ Even though neither of these meanings is actually found in the earlier use of this term, I believe that the onomatopoeic axis *spit/sprout* describes flawlessly the archetypal meaning of *sphoṭa* and also its philosophical usages, even though, the term *sprout* would be etymologically more suitable to translate *sphoṭa*. Like a *spit*, this term indicates something sudden and quick (an explosion or an outbreak) but also, like a *sprout*, it indicates something that carries an energy load that allows for such an explosion. This energy is understood likewise in a vitalist sense, as what allows life to outbreak from the seed. Among the Indian philosophical debate on grammar, we see the Varṇavādins (supported by *Mīmāṃsā*) affirming that the phoneme is the smallest significant unit in the language, whereas The *Sphoṭavādins* assert that a meaning of a sentence can be reached only if supported by a minimum cognitive data which is *sphoṭa*. For this reason, *sphoṭa* is also “objectively real, eternal and said to operate over and above the individual words themselves” (Joshi 2007: 185). This question involves the problem to determine if a word is endowed with a semantic by its own nature (*svabhāva*) or because it is a result of convention (*saṅketa*). The first issue arising is to explain why an entity that is believed to have its own inherent nature is not immediately observable, and thus requires words that differ depending on geography, history, and culture, to designate it. The second problem is related to the substance of meaning itself.

¹⁵ Original: “La voix n'est significante que lorsqu'elle est en relation avec *sphota*, l'ouïe n'est que le lieu, essentiel il est vrai, du déroulement des sons” [...] “c'est le *sphota* qui est la parole”, since it “est défini comme proprement linguistique”, but it is “ni matériel ni spirituel”, [...] *dhvani* is “l'énonciation concrète individuelle”, [...] “ne peut être reconnu, compris que parce qu'elle est liée nécessairement au son fondamental, véritable générateur de sens, le *sphota*”.

¹⁶ Cfr. Proto-Indo-European **sper-* (“to strew”) and **spei* (“stick”), maybe both related to a proto-root **sp-* (zero grade) or **spe-* with the archetypal meaning of “outbreak”, “(out)burst” or “spread” (cfr. also terms like “spring” and other derived from the Germanic root **spreutanq*). We define this archetypal root **sp-* as an ‘element of energy or vitality that manifests itself suddenly from a previous state of rest’. In the context of its use in the philosophy of language: *sphoṭa* is that substance which acts as a coordinating element in associations, *sphoṭa* is also something vital because it gives a meaning to words, from the barren land of pure senseless phonation, *sphoṭa* makes sense germinate (see Greek *speírō*) in our cognition. We often confuse the structure we have created with the substance it is made of. The fact that the structure is not as fixed as it appears, but rather is changeable and malleable, leads us to believe that it is empty of meaning in and of itself, while its configurations are fleeting because they are potentially infinite. However, to present different and infinite configurations, we must always use the same substance that forms the structure, holds the pieces together, and causes the distinctions to appear. To understand the distinction between manifestation or configuration and essence or substance, consider Joshi’s example of the various ways the letter “A” can be represented and the meaning that all of them, regardless of their representation, convey to our cognition as a distinctive symbol (Joshi 2007: 193).

Even if we accept that certain meanings are arbitrary, we cannot explain why, through mere convention, any meaning is perceived as a signifying ‘substance’ and can be understood as such. The signified is attributed through designation, which is nominal, but it appears to obtain substance from an original meaning that has been distorted by conventionality, yet is still perceived as ‘meaning’. If we accept that meaning is also non-existent, we are faced with nihilism and cannot explain why objects are perceived by cognition.

The problems come to a possible solution with Mādhava review of two main positions on word cognition from Vājapyāyana and Vyādi, the first sustaining the generic meaning of all words and the latter opting for an individual and precise reference-meaning instead. But when it comes to analyze the single words in its constituents (phonemes) the problem becomes this: “Is cognition produced by single letters composing Sanskrit word or by their aggregation?” (p. 187). After having rejected the first hypothesis as being not tenable (because of the existence of ‘different’ words composed with different combinations of the *same* phonemes), Mādhava presents the theory of *sphoṭa* as “unifying factor” which allows the meaning to appear in the correct combination of phonemes. With this new vision, meaning is something that necessarily pre-exists designation, which makes use of combinations of minimal units. Consequently, if isolated, these units have no meaning, for they can express a meaning only when placed in the right combination. Meaning is therefore something that is revealed in the relationship.

Thus, *sphoṭa* seems to be a sort of embodied function of cognitive perception which also perdures over and after the psychological elaboration.¹⁷ The *sphoṭa* is both one and manifold (*un et multiple*). The *dhvani* is just multiple and found in the succession and manifestation of *sphoṭa* in a becoming temporality. At this point, the definition of linguistic-involved elements are (from Atlani-Voisin 2003: 89):

- Sign: “entité psychique”;
- Word (*mot*): “forme phonique”;
- *Sphoṭa*: “parameter essential de la signification”;
- *Dhvani*: “manifestation sonore”.

The role of *sphoṭa* in Saussure’s philosophy is clear, but the problem of association remains open: how can a meaning appear only in the relationship of two *kenomes*, that is, of two negatives? In Buddhist philosophy, it should be noted that not only words, but all phenomena, among which there is no distinction between physical or psychic, are subject to the same law.

Jones’ work proves how the core of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy concerns just the principles of co-existence and of mutual configurations of phenomena (*pratītyasamutpāda*), demonstrating that the negation of the self-existent, namely, ‘isolable’ phenomena (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) is not at all a nihilistic principle, also because “Nāgārjuna never denied that something exists in the final

¹⁷ The act of *parole* is “individual”, and we don’t find in it the pure *signifies*, but rather “realizations and concretizations of *signifies*” which Saussure might have called *significations* or *sens* (De Mauro 1991: 106).

analysis and thus is ultimately real ... nor did he ever state that no statement can express what is ultimately true" (Jones 2018: 43).

3. Cognition and Language

It is now clear that Saussure may have also been strongly influenced by Buddhism, a philosophy he was familiar with and had the opportunity to reflect on personally. There is evidence in his notes of his contemplation on the concept of the emptiness of the ego and his recognition of the contingency of both personal and material identities as constructed. This concept is considered to be the foundation of an important linguistic principle: "that the supposed substance is neither necessary nor desirable" (Rastier 2003: 27).¹⁸

Any form is necessarily a difference, since the very scope of a form is to declare an identity, which is defined by its difference from other identities *diversité de forme = pluralité de formes*). If a form is a difference, a certain form is a defined element in a system of distinct signs reciprocally opposed ("élément d'une alternance", Saussure 2002: 36). We cannot speak of form, idea or sign in an absolute sense. Instead, there are multiple forms, ideas, and signs reciprocally interdependent (p. 37) and outlined as pure difference (p. 42). Let's take any sign from this chain of codependency and we find this configuration:

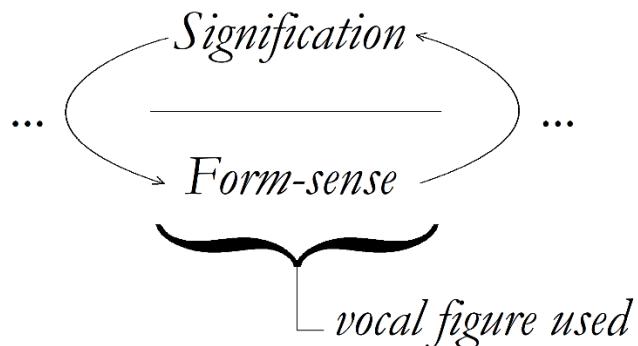


Fig.2: The system of signs. The arrows here stand for association and relation.

Since this binomial is totally psychic, Saussure defines *semiology* as a science of pure thought with no vocal sign involved ("Domain non linguistique de la pensée pure, ou sans signe vocal", p. 43). We can conceive the domain of the vocal sign only in its relationship with the system of signs (cit. "il est aussi vain de vouloir considerer l'idée hors du signe que le signe hors de l'idée", p.44).

The cognitive form is part, together with other elements, of five aggregates that constitute, in their fascicular and simultaneous perception, the acquisition of the unique cognitive datum. A constant flow of this simultaneous bundle of perceptions constitutes the cognitive experience.

¹⁸ Original: "que la prétendue substance n'est pas plus nécessaire ni souhaitable".

These five aggregates (*khandhas*) are also mentioned in the *Niruttipathasutta*. Specifically, the so-called causal substrate of formal aggregation, or of the cognitive form (*rūp'ūpādānakkhandha*), can be recognized as structured by several successive subdivisions: four elements (*dhātu*) which, more precisely, indicate the fundamental elemental properties (*mahābhūtāni*) and twenty-four secondary forms of material combination (*rupārūpāni*).¹⁹

Finally, when contrasted with *nāma* (name), “form” can be understood as a more “concrete” aspect (although the opposition between abstract and concrete is not viewed in Buddhism as a radical dualism, as it is in the Western tradition), while “name” is a mental factor of abstraction (in the sense of the reification of a cognitive datum). Therefore, when the Buddha refers to a passing of the form, it is clear that he means that a certain cognitive form appears in the perceptual sequence of an experiential subject or, more specifically, that the cognitive form has ‘ceased’ to appear (*rūpam niruddham*).

In the following passages, the exact same speech is repeated by the Buddha five times, replacing the word *rūpa* (form) with the words *vedanā* (sensation), *saññā* (semantic perception), *saṅkhārā* (mental constructs) and *viññāṇa* (consciousness or discernment) respectively.²⁰

In Buddhist texts, the mind is likened to a seed (AN I.232) or a fire (MN I.259 and so on, but never to a pot, a room, a house or a theatre. The mind is never a container of experiences or thoughts. We don't find expressions that put a mental object *in* someone's mind. There is no equivalent in Pāli to the metaphor that consciousness is a theatre and the *suttas* appear to doubt whether ‘existence’ even applies to experiences and thoughts. However, consciousness as the theatre of experience seems natural to us. Having grown up with it, I find it difficult to think of my mind any other way. (Attwood 2018: 2)

We now continue to read from the *Niruttipatha*: “When the form is born and manifests itself, its designation, its identity and its convention is a ‘being there’. It is not a ‘was’ nor a ‘will be’”.

In this passage we find once again the temporal formula that alternates an *atti* (there is) to an *ahosi* (it has become, was, has passed) to a *bhavissati* (will be). We know that ‘form’ is understood in this extremely broad sense of ‘concept’ which relies on an entity that lacks precise definition in its designation. Yet, in this passage the Buddha speaks of an arising of the form, and with it, of the designation (*paññatti*).

The Buddha often refers to ‘form’ in a general sense, as an indefinite entity from which the nominal segmentation derives semantic fields. Therefore, what is referred to as ‘form’ is not pure form, but rather the name-of-the-form that evokes an idea of form upon cognitive appearance.

¹⁹ We can recognize in these elements of secondary derivation precisely the primary cognitive perceptions: *cakkhu, sota, ghāna, jivhā, kāya, rūpa, sadda, gandha, rasa, itthindriya, purisindriya, jīvitindriya, hadaya-vatthu, kāya-viññatti, vacī-viññatti, ākāsa-dhātu, (rūpassa) lahutā mudutā kammaññatā, upacaya santati jaratā aniccatā, kabaññikār'āhāra*.

²⁰ It should also be mentioned that the concept of *viññāṇa* cannot be understood simply as a cognitive function, but in certain areas it has been identified with the very condition that allows the person (*purisa*) to act, as explained for example in the Dīghanikāya (Wijesekera 1964). Clearly the attainment of the state of *nibbāna* necessarily follows an extinction (*nirujjhati*) of the manifestations of *viññāṇa*.

When, after the Buddha's death, philosophical developments led to the analyses of the Abhidhamma, the dualism between a thing and the name-of-the-thing became a central focus of Buddhist philosophical debate. This may be due to the implicit distinction between *nāma* and *rūpa* found in the canon.

Karunadasa (1996) attributes to the theory of dhamma in the Abhidhamma precisely an origin based on the earliest reflections around the *nāma* and *rūpa* found in the ancient canon.

These are the three purposes of language, designation and conventionality. They are uncorrupted, since such they are from the beginning. They are not being corrupted now, nor will they ever be. The wise ascetics and Brahmans do not consider them.

Even those wandering ascetics of the past, Vassa and Bhañña of Ukkalā, who taught the doctrine of non-cause, non-action and nihilism, did not imagine that these three purposes of language should be criticized or rejected.

For what reason? – For fear of accusation, criticism and condemnation.

In this last section of the *Niruttipatha*, the Buddha introduces a crucial concept of nihilism: *natthikavādā*, that is the doctrine (*vāda*) that speaks (-*ika*) of what 'is not' (*natthi*, from *na atthi*, *n'atthi*), a term that in Sanskrit would roughly correspond to *nāstikavāda*.

Each cognitive process involves an initial phase of decomposing the perceived entity and subsequently reorganizing the world, previously divided into elements, into perceptible cognitive 'groups'. The sign is the cognitive entity that encompasses prototypical factors initially segmented by the external world as perceived. The original all-pervading (*parama*) sense (*attha*) is indiscriminate and, as such, is not yet discernible through cognitive forms (*rūpa*).

4. Influence on the Abhidhamma

It is plausible that the subsequent Abhidhammic distinction – sometimes confused with an underlying pluralism – between different and 'many' *dhammas* is nothing more than the recognition of a possible manifestation multiplicity of a single reality. The Abhidhamma itself is the philosophical school that establishes the distinction between the perception of reality as a single all-pervading sense (*paramattha*) or as a plurality of relatively organized entities (*sammuti*). These entities, in fact, can only be the *dhammas*, whose plurality and apparent distinction hides a single indiscriminate reality, a single being, from which each entity draws its meaning. This reason would justify an apparent contradiction in the Abhidhamma for which it would seem possible to find an affirmation of 'reality of nature' (*sabhāva*) of the *dhammās*.²¹ However, "the commentaries define *dhammas* as *sabhāvas*", but Gethin replies that "this is not a statement about their ontological status and that *sabhāva* should not be translated as 'inherent existence', but is merely a gloss stating that *dhammas* are 'particular natures' or 'particular qualities'" (Gethin 2004: 534).

²¹ The term *dhamma*, in the use made of it in Buddhist literature, is not totally comparable to the Vedic *dharman*, associated to ritual orthopraxis. In Buddhism, a more functional value is attributed to the *dhammas* as 'maintained' (*dhāriyanti*) by causal factors.

All that is deprived of its substance following the designation is the object. The term *attha* (Sanskrit *artha*) derives from the Proto-Indo-Iranian root *hártham (< Proto-Indo-European *h₁ert), which generically indicates matter, a precise object or, interestingly, a *purpose*. The purpose is what our thinking tends towards, therefore there could be no better metaphor for understanding the appearance of an attribution.

In such a context, the idea of *attha* closely intersects with that of *nirutta* (Sanskrit: *nirukta*), since the 'explanation' or 'interpretation' is actually a vehicle for a sense. In the Vedic context, *nirukta* also indicates the philological attention that must allow a correct interpretation of the text. This intent is the way in which language acts: to give structure to a world of focused elements, identifiable by their 'name' and their recognizable 'form', referring to the idealized prototypical model of cognitive form.

Edward Small's work does not mainly refer to the Buddhist tradition, since the binomial *nāma/rūpa* is found in numerous other schools of Indian philosophy, including its earliest attestations in the *Upaniṣads*.

In this remarkable work, Small suggests parallels between European linguistics, especially that referable to Saussure, Eco and Pierce, and then describes how the binomial *nāma/rūpa* is structured in Buddhism. The conclusions mention some basic assumptions of Saussurian linguistics but leave everything in suspense, except for the wish to design a science of the use of signs in society that Saussure also desired to establish.

A fundamental dichotomy of linguistics is in fact the one that Saussure notes between language as present in the psychology of speakers and discourse which instead pertains to the concrete possibilities of execution of language.²² Given the ambiguity of these terms in English I will refer to the French originals: *langue* and *parole*. The most important definition that Saussure gives concerns the way in which language defines the boundaries of its meanings.

Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words – is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. (Saussure 2011: 111-112)

Language intervenes in this nebula of indistinct meaning by setting boundaries within which it assigns a concept connected to an acoustic image. The fact that all things in the world are devoid of intrinsic identity (*anattā*) but are rather interdependent elements that need each other to be

²² This encompasses both the phonetic archetypes that exist in an imaginary phonological apparatus which contains a set of perfect models of all the sounds that a specific linguistic system chooses to utilize, and the set of morphological rules that make it up. Obviously, all this applies to ideal and abstract cognitive patterns, but within the scope of how a phoneme is actually pronounced, there can be several variations (unique phones or phonic pronunciations). Nevertheless, they all fall within an acceptable range of a given phoneme. When the phonic performance strays out of this range, it moves to the edge of another phoneme.

able to define themselves – and without this belonging to a system they would be devoid of intrinsic essence – is a concept identical to that of *system* in Saussure's linguistics: all the elements of a system support each other and have no sense extracted and isolated from this network. The nature of the sign is, by definition of Saussure himself, “arbitrary”.

5. Saussure and India: Points of Intersection

From our analysis of the relationship between Saussure and India, it has become apparent that reflections on linguistic entities often necessitate ontological considerations. In this section, we will connect Saussure's reflections to Buddhist ones through Parmenides' thought, using a text written by Rastier who has pointed out the important role of the Eleatic philosopher in Saussure's linguistic thought. With regard to Buddhism, I will highlight the many similarities between these two forms of thought, despite the geographical distance.

The Parmenidean Being described in *fr.8* is like a perfect sphere, identical in all of its parts. This peculiar shape with its flawless roundness might have survived in Saussure's semiotics, at least in its graphic representation: “the graphical figure of the sign undoubtedly owes its roundness to the concept [described by Parmenides] – which itself represents that of Being” (Rastier 2003: 30).²³ But, albeit for Parmenides this monad is somehow perfect and incorruptible – unlike the *dóxai*, namely, its determinations which represent only a partial and incorrect view of its possible totality – Saussure decides to divide and break the sphere in two parts, for he conceives the Being as oscillating between a symbolic and a diabolic principle. Sign is a bifacial entity made of a concept and acoustic image. These two are void *kenomes*, phantasms without identity in themselves.²⁴ What makes the meaning appear is their association (*sýn-bállō*, *sýmbolon*). This association, however, is only conventional: one of the innumerable possibilities. Therefore, a sign can easily dissolve its bond between signifier and signified, revealing its ephemeral nature. This is the opposite of symbolic concordance, and it is the other side of the oscillation, which is the *diábolos* (from *dia-bállō*). Any sign has both these properties. The sign appears only in the oscillation (*epamphoterízein*). It cannot be only symbolic or just diabolic, otherwise a sign would not appear. This oscillation is identified as a form of “*obliquité*” (p. 31). This also lead Rastier to think about the classic ontological problem that stands between a unitary Being (*l'Être empirique ou transcendant*) and its infinite possible configurations, including the manifold languages thinkable (*l'infinie variété des occurrences linguistiques*) or, the entities (*les étants*).

It is surprising that the same problem discussed as a central argument in Early Buddhism is also present in Parmenides' statements. For Parmenides, names are created by humans, but they are only an illusion of the real world, even if they are not perceived as such: “The names that mortal men institute, although false and deceptive, are not mere fancies or illusions of the mind. They are accounts of the one real world, to the existence of which men's beliefs are at times committed” (Woodbury 1958: 149). The question is straightforward: ‘what-is-not’ cannot be

²³ Original: “la figure graphique du signe a sans doute hérité sa rotundité du concept – qui elle-même représentait celle de l'Être”.

²⁴ A *kenome* as pure absence is impossible, since a *kenome* is still perceived, and therefore addressed, as “absence”. A *kenome* is rather the ‘presence of an absence’, a phantasm which is manifest as a lack of something that, even in its absence, leaves something of itself as still perceptible, identifiable. This problem has been carefully exposed by Agamben (1977: 40).

spoken or even understood. Our words and expressions (including the concept of ‘what-is-not’) exist, and as a result, they appear. We confuse the existing idea of non-existence with the impossible possibility of ‘that-which-is’ becoming ‘that-which-is-not’. As a result, our thinking is partial and imperfect, not referring to something nonexistent but rather misconstruing ‘what-is’ as ‘what-is-not’. The illusory world exists as a part of the entirety conceived through thought, and therefore appears as diverse and incoherent. To conceive the real world, Parmenides says, we must focus on the fact that anything we perceive is an “it-is”, and thus we conceive any entity as “that-which-is” (p. 153). This means, according to Parmenides, that the mind is not totally incapable to apprehend truth. The mind can understand reality because it is not extraneous to it. Mind can shape the determinations of the world because it is an inseparable part of Being, thus it contains essentially the whole Being itself. Parmenides’ *fr.3* where it is said “indeed the very same thinking is the Being itself” (*tò gàr aytò noeîn estín te kai eînai*) is comparable to Buddhist SN 1.62 statement: “cognition is the only entity that controls everything” (*cittassa ekadhammassa, sabbeva vasamanvagū*). However, we must also remember what Woodbury says (1958: 157): we cannot intend “thinking” or “mind” (*noeîn*) in the same way we intend it today. In fact, in fifth-century Greek, *noeîn* serves both “mean” and “think”. Additionally, Parmenides can use *noeîn* also as “the name of the world”. The use of this verb, as Conger points out, can be explained as having also the meaning of “becoming aware” of something for “what it is” (Conger 1952: 120). Furthermore, there are two possible interpretations of this fragment. If we read, as Plotinus does, “*estín*”, Being coincides with thinking. Otherwise, if we read it “*éstin*” it results that Being is one and the same with what is “possible to think” (p. 121).

Vlastos also deals with this problem and assumes that the identity of the Being-thinking and the manifested beings-entities is implicated in what expressed in *fr.3*, namely that thinking is the Being itself. Vlastos expresses this as the convergence of subject and object of perception (Vlastos 1946: 68). This obviously calls for an analogy with Buddhist meditative state of *samādhi*. Since subject and object are the same, it follows that their supposed division operated by the act of thinking is just an internal partition of one single Being who thinks of itself in terms of two/many parts: one perceived (object), and one who actively performs perception (subject). Beyond this illusory division of consciousness, Being is *pân homoion*, viz. “equal in all its parts”, “self-contained”, “all-alike”. How can this kind of Being be at the same time a theater of manifold internal representations all of which are ‘different’ while remaining ‘the same’ inseparable thing?

Buddhism reprimand unaware people for being ‘unawake’ in contrast with the ‘awakened’ state of Buddhahood, but we should remember that Heraclitus and also Parmenides used a similar expression: “sleep-walkers” or even “eye sightless” (p. 69). We can resume the key points of Parmenidean philosophy as follows:

1. Nothing can become other than itself. As inseparable parts/determinations of the all-alike Being, any “form is unalterably itself” (p. 70);
2. Any possible determination of the Being is encompassed in the Whole Being itself: “both fire and its opposite are present in the soul” (*ibidem*).
3. Duality (fire-light/darkness) is both real and unreal. It is real to the extent that is part of ‘what-is’ in its configurations; but it is also unreal since these configurations are such

because of mind generating opinions (*dokoŷnta*), nominal designations (*onomázein*) and does not testify for the wholeness of Being.

Any of these points can be easily adapted also to Buddhist thought (Brown 1999: 273). This is a problem also found in Buddhist discourses, from the dualism outlined in MN 121 between the oneness (*ekattam*) nature of the otherness/forest (*araññasaññam*) and the plurality of the dualistically-organized world (*loka*) or village (*gāma*), to the conception of double truth (*dve satye*) of the Madhyamaka system. In this case, the dualism between a mundane and an absolute truth (*lokasañvṛti* vs. *paramārtha*) is only apparent. Only one truth exists, but it is perceived as manifold or as a unitary whole depending on our grade of awareness.

6. Name and Form: Signifier and Signified

I have said that according to the theory proposed in this article, the binomial *nāma/rūpa* of ancient Buddhist philosophy would perfectly correspond to the Saussurian idea of the Sign as a two-sided entity *signifier/signified*. As far as *nāma* is concerned, the correspondence seems obvious: the name is by its very definition a signifier, and the attribution of identity always proceeds through the assignment of a name. The indefinite object becomes defined as soon as it receives its nominal signifier 'tree', 'river', 'mountain' and so on. The meaning is 'formal' as we speak of idealized, cognitive forms.²⁵

The five aggregates of the Early Buddhist tradition, *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra*, *viññāna*, are clearly a *cognitive chain* used for *meaning recognition*. We can say that Buddhist psychology considers the lexeme (*samaññā*) that identifies a perceptible sign (*saññā*) as a signification (*sankhā*) – which is in turn the result of the relationship between signifier-*nāma* and signified-*rūpa* – nothing more than a convention (*vohāro*) forming part of a common conception (*paññatti*), that would not exist without this conventional agreement. This complex system of cognitive reiteration is defined as 'semiotic-significant-proliferation' (*papañcasasaññāsankhā*). Since this discourse is also valid for subjects (*puggala*), it follows that beings (*satta*) are nothing but interaction of a complex system of factors (*suddhasaṅkhārapuñja*). In the *Sammādiṭṭhisutta* (MN 9) we read:

A noble disciple understands what names and forms are, what is their origin, their cessation, and what practices lead to their cessation.

But what are the name and the form? What is their origin, their cessation and the practice that leads to their cessation? – Sensation, cognition, intention, contact and attention. This is the name. The four primary elements, and the form derived from the four primary elements. This is the form. Such is the name, and such is the form.

This [unity] is called name-and-form. Name and form originate from consciousness. Name and form cease when discernment ceases. The practice leading to the cessation of name and form is simply the noble eightfold path.

²⁵ The most suitable term to describe this phenomenon is that of *idealized cognitive model* (ICM) developed for the studies on the theory of the cognitive prototype by psychologist Eleanor Rosch.

We have observed that the term *rūpa* can appear both as an indefinite substance waiting to be designated, and also as an aspect of an already designated formality. In other words, *rūpa* is like the Saussurian nebula.

In its opposition to *attha*, the form appears as the identity of the indefinite, while *attha* is the ‘aim’ to which the cognitive apparatus tends: the defined ‘thing’, the attributed ‘sense’, which however belongs to that same pre-conceived sense.

We must ask ourselves if at this point there is a possibility to connect the paths of the five aggregates with those of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*. In fact, both have common elements: specifically, the two final elements of the aggregate factors are the second and third phase of the conditioned production chain.

It seems clear that the five aggregates indicate a mechanism of internal interpenetration, in which the element that comes later in the discussion is the one that ‘includes’ the previous ones. In this context, in the cognitive phases, the *viññāṇa* element includes in itself *saṅkhāra*, *saññā*, *vedanā* and *rūpa*.

If *viññāṇa* therefore indicates a discretion, it is clear that to be such it must pre-include the elements mentioned above. The sensation contains in itself only the data of the form, which it processes sensorially. Designation, i.e., semantic cognition, contains within itself the emotional datum of sensation, without which the associative act (*sam-janati*) could not be performed.

It is now possible to connect the chain structure of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* – which starts with the influence of the *avijjā* on the cognitive constructs (*saṅkhāra*) to initiate the process of discernment (*viññāṇa*) – with the concentric process of the *pañcakkhandha* that reach the *viññāṇa* as a result of the co-occurrence of the four previous instances.

In the concentric conception of the aggregates, the cognitive constructs (*saṅkhāra*) are the result of the previous experience of semantic apperception (*saññā*) which therefore contains the sensation (and with it, the image of the form), but in the concatenating vision of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* we start directly from the *saṅkhāra*, describing them as the result of ignorance (*a-vijjā*). The *avijjā* therefore includes the sensation-of-the-form (*rūpañca vedanāca*) and the semantic sphere (*saññā*) presented in the vision of the *khandhas*. At this point we can see the connection between the two systems coherently. In fact, it is to *viññāṇa* that the action of the linguistic sign *nāmarūpa* is subordinated, which is nothing more than an anticipating instance of cognition.

Certainly, I do not want to deny here that to a certain extent Buddhism admits the existence of a material dimension from which contact (*phassa*) arises. It is clear that Buddhism does not distinguish between internal and external dimension, and indeed considers this split between subject and object as the main cause of *dukkha*. It is not sufficient to cause contact between an organ of cognition and an object so that it can be perceived: if in fact the cognitive norms that allow us to discern have not been previously introjected, no object will be *recognized*, and

cognition proceeds only by recognition of *identity*. The meaning of the binomial *nāmarūpa* is therefore this: a given nominal signifier (*nāma*) is associated with an idealized cognitive form (*rūpa*). For words it is the same thing: the sounds of language have no meaning for the listener if the listener has not previously memorized that each sound-form has a precise meaning. For example, in MN 139 we read an interesting discourse from the Buddha on the relativity of language and on how the dialects and pronunciations of words change as geographic areas and regions vary, although the meaning of an object is apparently the same.

7. A Possible Solution

The problems we have seen exposed in the *Niruttipatha* link together the philosophy of cognition and language, making it essential to determine what is 'real' from an ontological point of view. The Neo-Parmenidean philosophy in this sense is the one that comes closest to the same problems encountered by Buddhism in this investigation of reality. From the point of view of Severino's Neo-Parmenidism, we could say that "Severino intends to lift duality in the unity and, thus, to achieve the authentic unity; but, from another point of view, he intends to maintain the determinateness and, thus, the relation, which represents a unification, not a unity, because it relies on the duality of the related terms, by virtue of which it maintains its determinateness" (Stella et al. 2020, 69). A final comprehensive theory unifying the two systems would state that:

1. Truth is one, so the Being is one, which manifests itself in multiple aspects. The multiple aspects of truth (entities for Severino) are identities distinct from each other.
2. Despite their identity, they are not independent, nor are they isolable or separable from the Whole which they are part of, because it is in their belonging to the Whole that things exist and appear. The relation between entities causes them to appear. They are not separable and are therefore not self-existent as such.
3. Each entity, different from the others, has within itself the totality of all the other entities. It is not the opposition that defines the entity, but the fact that each entity is itself the Whole Being (fractal-holographic principle).

In a surprising philosophical convergence with Severino, Brown explains how Buddhism has been unjustly identified as nihilist, where nowhere is it stated that an entity can perish "into nonexistence", as this misunderstanding lies in the "confusion of an entity with an identity" (Brown 1999: 264). Thus, just as Severino denies that "things come out of nothing and fall back into nothing" (Severino 1982), Brown states that in Buddhism "an entity does not arise from nothing nor does it perish into nothing, but is a transition from one baseline state to the next" (Brown 1999: 264).

This investigation involved a reconsideration of Abhidhammic philosophy, which presents a reinterpretation of the world that is different from that of Early Buddhism, but may also be viewed as a potential misperception. The nihilistic nothingness under discussion here is not simply understood as the absence of a perceived object, but rather as the idea of its complete destruction and cessation of existence: the *nihil absolutum*, the 'absolutely nothing', which is

also, for a Greek way of thinking, the absolute annihilation of the Being (*tò mēdamōs ón*). This vision of the annihilation of things seems not to be part of Early Buddhism, which adheres rather to a complex dynamic of transformation of appearance, without interpreting the disappearance of things as their annihilation, but focusing rather on the human inability to recognize that the truth it is wider than the world built through various systems of knowledge, and therefore suffers from the perceived disappearance of things.²⁶

Summary and Conclusion

For Saussure, the binomial sound/idea or also vocal/mental is just “the easy and insidious way to conceive it” (la façon facile et pernicieuse de la concevoir). Therefore, the real dualism is between the vocal phenomenon “as such” (*comme tel*) and the same vocal phenomenon understood as a sign. In other words, dualism as an opposition between psyche and matter is rejected since the linguistic dualism is mainly mental.

There is a first domain, interior, psychic, where the sign exists as much as the meaning, one indissolubly linked to the other: there is a second, exterior, where there is nothing left but the “sign”, but at this moment, the sign reduced to a succession of sound waves deserves only the name of vocal figure. [...] *Identities* in this domain are fixed by the relationship between meaning and sign, or by the relationship between signs themselves, which is no different.²⁷

In this context, the usual semiotic tradition of Aristotelian convention is dismantled. Dualism cannot be a useful paradigm to describe reality, least of all semiotics: “just as the signified does not represent the object, the signifier does not represent the signified” (Rastier 2003: 28).²⁸

As De Mauro points out, it is possible to trace back a *semantic theory* in Saussure’s linguistics as a distinction between *form* and *substance* (De Mauro 1991: 105). We can understand the *actes de parole* leading them back to a clear semantic content, but only if we admit a potential infinite

²⁶ As Allen writes, Parmenides seems to affirm that the Being is both unitary and infinite. The only problem with this statement is the meaning of ‘division’ of the Being. Indeed, the Being is described as ‘infinitely divisible’. Nonetheless, if this division implies a total separation of the divided part from the whole, Severino’s accusations against Parmenides would be right. However, we will see that this is not the case. In Parmenides’ philosophy, we distinguish two kinds of infinity, one extensive, and one numerical: “Unity is proved to have infinitely many dense parts, and infinitely many successive parts” (Allen 1974: 698). Another important aspect is the “distinction between Being and the being of something” (p.701). We could speak indeed of ‘being-of-unity’ as distinct from Unity itself. In the absolute doesn’t appear the whole. What appears is just the form of the whole, which is part of the whole, but it is not its entirety. Severino calls this the “concrete content of the whole”. Since this concrete content does not appear, we are somehow victims of a contradiction, for which what is not the Whole is signified as ‘whole’. Without knowing, Severino implicitly agrees with Buddhism, when he affirms that this contradiction would be removed if we were to be omniscient (Severino 1982: 173). The holographic principle partakes the simultaneous existence of manifoldness in unity and vice-versa. The whole is a unity which contains the manifold, and any part of the whole is at the same time a part and the entire whole itself. For Parmenides “Being is distributed to all of the many things which are, from the smallest to the greatest; for Being is not lacking to anything which is” (p.716).

²⁷ Cit. Saussure 2002: 21. Original: “Il y a un premier domaine, intérieur, psychique, où existe le signe autant que la signification, l’un indissolublement lié à l’autre : il y en a un second, extérieur, où n’existe plus que le « signe », mais à cet instant le signe réduit à une succession d’ondes sonores ne mérite pour que le nom de figure vocale. [...] Les identités dans ce domaine sont fixées par le rapport de la signification et du signe, ou par le rapport des signes entre eux, ce qui est non différent”.

²⁸ Original: “pas plus que le signifié ne représente l’objet, le signifiant ne représente le signifié”.

variety in the possible meanings and phonic expressions, we can understand how they are systematized in a series of unified forms associating the manifold *paroles*. Such schemes or forms “permit to group and arrange in standardized classes both the phonic productions and senses, understanding them as realizations of schemes or forms. To such schemes or forms, after much hesitation, Saussure gave, during the third course of general linguistics, the names of *signifiant* [signifier], for the external, and *signifié* [signified] for the internal plane of the content” (*ibidem*).

The fundamental issue of the void that separates a single element from its function persists due to the fact that everything is given in relation to one another. It is only through the association of two or more entities that the linguistic phenomenon arises, but a single, isolated, and unassociated entity is empty and ephemeral, like a phantasm. This definition is particularly relevant for those familiar with Buddhist philosophy.

The Abhidhamma defends the principle of identity of the dhammas by which it affirms the impossibility that a dhamma becomes other than what it is (*na ca sabhāvo aññathā hoti*), but then the affirmation of the possibility that a dhamma is annihilated (*bhaṅgakkhaṇa*) appears contradictory with the previous one as it would become that which is not, that is, a nothing.²⁹

Reality would be lived entirely on an imaginary plane, and not in the relation between the objective and the imaginary plane (the same dualism between the objective and the imaginary is included in the imaginary plane). This doubling also occurs in the relation between category and quality. For the Abhidhamma, the form is changeable (*rūpa – ruppana*) and the entities are self-existent (*dhamma – sabhāva*). Since an entity also indicates a characteristic of an object that can be understood as an entity itself, the Abhidhamma draws a distinction between *nipphanna* and *anipphanna*, that is, between ‘concretely-produced’ and ‘non-concretely-produced’.

While the *nipphannas* are authentic *sabhāva-rūpa* or *salakkhaṇa-rūpa*, they would be (here’s another split) ‘material matter’ (*rūparūpa*) which can be understood by the insight process (*sammāsana*), but which is subject to a production cycle (*uppāda*), stasis (*ṭhiti*) and dissolution (*bhaṅga*). The *anipphannas* are not ‘real’ dhammas, although the convention (*rūlihiyā*) leads us to call them *rūpa-dhammas*. The reader will perfectly understand well how this form of progressive analysis of the Abhidhamma, far from revealing the archetype of all things, dug into a fractal, producing ever greater conceptual and cognitive divisions, forgetting the fundamental principle of Early Buddhism, which he had already foreseen this double-imaginary nature in the Satipaṭṭhāna (MN 10). The meditator realizes that the body ‘appears’ (*atthi kāyo*) when he meditates on the image of the double imaginary of a body in the body (*kāye kāyānupassī viharati*), therefore the truth is neither in the body nor in the other body “that is in the body”. These images of the body that contain each other are the imaginary plane, the material body and the mental body are both images, but with the awareness here that the meditator reveals the true body, which is precisely in that being (*atthi*).

²⁹ The apparent variations of the dhamma are only positional variations (*bhāvavigamana*), but the Abhidhamma states that an alteration (*bhāvaññathā*) of the dhamma itself would correspond to its destruction. This is possibly where the Abhidhamma diverges from Early Buddhism, for which the dhammas are only configurations of the sole reality, but just in the context of nominal conception they can be seen as destructible, unlike what-is (*yathābhūtam*).

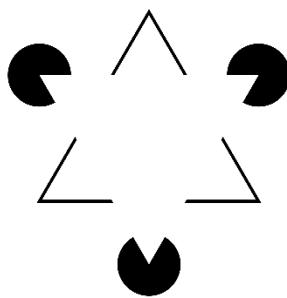


Fig. 3: An example of Gestalt perception. Although the triangle image is not present, our cognition anticipates its vision (Kanizsa's triangle)

Is it possible to find an objective reality by freeing ourselves from the influence of our perceptions? With the Gestalt we begin to find some considerations closer to Buddhism. If we take the illusion of the Kanizsa triangle for example, we realize that its functioning can only be explained by admitting the cognitive instances of our linguistic system. Just and only if the incorporation of the 'triangle' sign is given in advance, this can act as a cognitive prejudice: an expectation that influences the final perception of the drawing. Semantics anticipates cognitions. The Kanizsa's triangle is seen because there are cognitive assumptions that make us assume that there must be there what we call 'triangle'.

This theory has significant implications for contemporary studies due to its recognition of the relationship between linguistics and Buddhist philosophy, as well as its positioning of Buddhism as a central element within the Indian philosophical tradition that addresses language. This recognition can greatly contribute to the revival of cross-cultural dialogue between linguistics and traditional Buddhist wisdom.

Further implications of this theory would directly affect the way in which Buddhist studies address textual inquiry, as the etymological analysis of the technical terms used would be relevant for the purpose of understanding what the authors of the text intended to communicate (this is the case of terms like *saññā* and *viññāna*).

To use Saussure's words: "nothing *is*, at least not absolutely (in the linguistic domain). No term, even if assumed to be perfectly correct, is applicable outside of a specific sphere" (Saussure 2002: 81).³⁰ It should be noted that in this expression Saussure seems to point towards a rigid nihilism, but we know that such an option would be impossible and must therefore be attributed to a misunderstanding of the Indian texts by Saussure.

In his writings Saussure formulates a consideration on points of view which resembles impressively a Buddhist analysis. Given that (1) "the *object* in linguistics does not exist purely to begin with; it is not determined in itself", and (2) "to name an object is nothing other than to

³⁰ Original: "rien n'est, du moins rien n'est absolument (dans le domaine linguistique). Aucun terme, en le supposant parfaitement juste, n'est applicable hors d'une sphère déterminée".

invoke a determined point of view A”, therefore, (3) we cannot reasonably understand anything without a prejudice, which is a point A, by estranging our vision from A to B, because in that case we would get stuck just in another point of view: “it is because one has once again succumbed to the illusion of linguistic beings leading an independent existence” (p. 23).³¹ The Buddhist equivalence of these statements is found in these concepts: (1) *anattā* or lack of *sabhaava*, (2) the notion of *ditthi* – which Fuller (2005) have carefully recognized as involving both “opinions” (*micchā-ditthi*) and “language” (*micchā-vācā*) –, and (3) the notion of *suñña* or *paticca* that, as we have demonstrated in this article, are equivalent.

In summary, this article has briefly explored how the issue of language, which interweaves ontology and philosophy of mind, is a transversal theme in both European and Indian philosophy, both in terms of mutual influences and shared themes that suggest a potential common origin. Nonetheless, these problems remain fundamentally important in modernity, and the advantages of a cross-cultural philosophy include bringing attention to this debate for the benefit of future advancements that consider multifaceted perspectives.

³¹ Original: (1) “*l'objet en linguistique n'existe pas pour commencer, n'est pas déterminé en lui-même*”, (2) “*nommer un objet, ce n'est pas autre chose que d'invoquer un point de vue A détermine*”, (3) “*c'est qu'on a cédé une fois de plus à l'illusion des êtres linguistiques menant une existence indépendante*” (p. 23).

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System of abbreviations used

DN : *Dīghanikāya*

MN : *Majjhimanikāya*

SN : *Samyuttanikāya*

AN : *Ānguttaranikāya*

Ud : *Udāna*

MK : *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*