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The meta-grammatical role of *Paribhāṣās* in preserving the structure of Sanskrit *Vyākaraṇa*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the meta-grammatical function of *paribhāṣās* in Sanskrit grammar, focusing on their role in maintaining rule consistency, resolving conflicts, and preserving derivational precision. Drawing from primary texts like the *Mahābhāṣya* and *Paribhāṣenduśekhara*, and comparing Pāṇinian and Hemacandrian frameworks, it shows how *paribhāṣās* operate as internal regulators. Their function is extended across *Mīmāṃsā*, *Śrautasūtra*, and *Vedānta* traditions, revealing a shared hermeneutic logic. The study affirms *paribhāṣā* as a necessary meta-rule system that sustains the structural integrity of Sanskrit grammatical schools.

Introduction

Sanskrit grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) is not merely a codification of grammatical rules but a formal system guided by rigorously structured logic. At the centre of this system lies the *aṣṭādhyāyī* of pāṇini a network of approximately four thousand *sūtras* designed for maximal brevity and internal consistency. However, the *sūtras* on their own do not form a functionally autonomous system. To operationalize the *sūtras* across multiple phonological, morphological, and syntactic derivational levels a set of interpretative principles is required. These principles are called *paribhāṣās*.

Paribhāṣās are not grammatical rules in the ordinary sense. They do not generate forms or explain sound change, rather, they define how grammatical rules interact: which ones override others, under what conditions exceptions are allowed, and how scope and applicability are determined. In this sense, *paribhāṣās* are meta-rules-rules that organize and constrain the behaviour of other rules. Their role is foundational:

they preserve the structural integrity and interpretative precision of the grammatical system.

This paper investigates the meta-grammatical function of *paribhāṣās*, drawing upon primary sources such as Aṣṭādhyāyī, Mahābhāṣya, Paribhāṣenduśekhara, Hemahansaṅgraha, and the Nyāyasaṅgraha, alongside critical analyses by modern scholars such as Wujastyk, Abhyankar, and Freschi.

Meta-grammatical rules: definition and epistemic function

A meta-grammatical rule is a rule that governs other rules. In contrast to operational rules (which prescribe form, order, or derivation), meta-rules establish the conditions under which those operational rules apply, interact, or are overridden. In formal grammatical systems, this distinction is foundational: the meta-layer ensures that rule applications remain coherent across domains of conflict, exception, and ambiguity. Traditionally *paribhāṣā* has been defined taking inspiration from Patañjali, who compares *paribhāṣā* with a lamp which illuminates everything which comes under its purview (*paribhāṣā punarekdeśastha satī sarvaṃ śāstraṃ abhijvalayati pradīpavat*)¹

In the Sanskrit grammatical tradition, *paribhāṣās* serve precisely this function. While they may appear sporadically in the Vārttika of Kātyāyana and *mahābhāṣya*, their systematization is a later achievement. Vyāḍi and later Nāgeśa, in his *paribhāṣenduśekhara*, formalizes *paribhāṣā* as a class of rules that—though not productive of grammatical forms, regulate the interpretive logic of derivation.

Consider, for instance, the *paribhāṣāyena nāprāpte yo vidhir ārabhyate sa tasya bādhako bhavati*² (“A rule which starts functioning when another has not yet become applicable, overrides that rule once it becomes applicable.”). This rule is not about a specific suffix, accent, or sandhi. Rather, it explains the function of *apavāda* and governs how two or more competing rules must be resolved when they simultaneously apply. The meta status of this *paribhāṣā* lies in its ability to adjudicate between rules, not generate forms.

In the modern linguistic terminology, we can define *paribhāṣā* as a ‘discursive operator,’ whose domain is not the linguistic object itself, but the interpretive context in which that object is processed. This quality makes *paribhāṣās* indispensable in a system like Pāṇini’s

¹ see *mahābhāṣya* on sūtra *samarthaḥ padavidhiḥ* p 2.1.1

² see *paribhāṣenduśekhara* 57th *paribhāṣā*

aṣṭādhyāyī, where brevity and rule economy often lead to inherent conflicts or gaps. Without meta-rules to mediate precedence, sequence, and scope, the derivational machinery would collapse under its own compression.

Moreover, *paribhāṣās* exhibit semantic neutrality. They are not bound to lexical meaning or morphology, but to the formal behaviour of the grammar. This feature distinguishes them from post-pāṇinian commentarial clarifications or exegetical remarks in other śāstra traditions. A *paribhāṣā*, once posited, applies transversally, it is neither phoneme-specific nor root-specific. It qualifies as epistemically objective within the system it governs.

Paribhāṣās are justified not by empirical observation but by *śāstraic* necessity. That is, they emerge when the sūtras, taken on their own, yield ambiguity or contradiction. In such cases, the meta-grammatical rule provides the inferential or procedural logic to maintain system consistency. Their primary function, then, is not explanation but system-preservation.

The necessity of *paribhāṣās* in Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī

The aṣṭādhyāyī is often described as a generative grammar—a system capable of producing every correct Sanskrit word-form through the interaction of abstract rules. But this generative power rests on an intricate and fragile architecture. Because the sūtras are brief, linked, and heavily context-dependent, conflicts among them are inevitable. When multiple rules are simultaneously applicable to the same input, or when a rule's scope is ambiguous, the grammar offers no inbuilt mechanism to decide the outcome. This is the vacuum that *paribhāṣās* are designed to fill.

Consider the rule conflict between a general rule (*utsarga*) and a specific one (*apavāda*). The aṣṭādhyāyī contains no explicit instruction on what to do when both are simultaneously applicable. Mahābhāṣya resolve this by stating that specific rules override general ones.³ This is not just a priority principle, it ensures temporal and logical sequencing within derivation. But this only applies when the *bādhaka* has meaningful scope (*caritārthaviṣayatā*).⁴ If it does not, the override does not happen. This idea is also subtly implied in the Bhāṣya on *iko jhal* (P 1.2.9), where it is shown that though *ajjhanagamaṁ sani* (P 6.4.16) should be blocked by a later vowel lengthening rule (P 6.4.51),

³*samānyena utsargaḥ kartavyaḥ. tasya viśeṣaṇāpavādaḥ. mahābhāṣya*

⁴*tadapṛāptiyoḥ 'acāritārthyam hyetasya bādhaktve bījam. paribhāṣenduśekhara*

it does not happen because of lack of scope (*anavakāśatva*). Hence, *iko jhal* must be used to override it.

Another instance arises in *antaraṅga-bahiraṅga-vidhi*. This *paribhāṣā* states that rules applying to an inner operation (such as stem formation) take precedence over rules applying to an outer operation (such as case inflection). Again, this ordering is not dictated by the sūtras themselves but is imposed from the meta-level. It safeguards derivational order by ranking rule domains based on their structural immediacy. Without this, outputs would be inconsistent across comparable inputs.

The necessity of *paribhāṣās* is further confirmed by the mahābhāṣya. Patañjali frequently encounters situations where the application of one sūtra undermines or contradicts another. In such cases, rather than emend the sūtra itself, patañjali invokes an interpretative principle that reconciles the conflict. These principles, though not yet called *paribhāṣās*, serve the same function: they mediate between rules, preserve economy, and maintain internal consistency.

This explicit differentiation between a prescriptive rule (*vidhi*) and a meta-rule (*paribhāṣā*) in the Mahābhāṣya is rare but decisive. It affirms that some rules exist solely to guide interpretation, not to generate grammatical forms—a distinction that lies at the heart of the meta-grammatical domain.

Thus, in the absence of all the governing algorithm or hierarchy within the aṣṭādhyāyī itself, *paribhāṣās* supply what Dominik Wujastyk has called the system’s “second-order logic.” They transform a collection of sophisticated but disjointed rules into a functional, self-correcting machine.

Nāgeśa and the architecture of rule interaction

The contribution of Nāgeśa in the *paribhāṣenduśekhara* is not limited to cataloging interpretive rules; it is architectural. He builds a meta-grammatical superstructure over the edifice of the aṣṭādhyāyī, enabling consistent interaction among thousands of rules. His work transforms implicit interpretive tendencies into explicit and portable principles, allowing the grammar to scale across linguistic and semantic domains. For nāgeśa, *paribhāṣās* are not merely auxiliaries; they are essential instruments of grammatical governance. This is evident in his treatment of the *antaraṅga-bahiraṅga* principle, where he presents multiple conflicting scenarios and uses the *paribhāṣā* to preserve derivational stability. Rather than prioritizing rules by position or frequency, he

introduces the idea of structural intimacy: the rule closest to the morphological core takes precedence.⁵

In the classic *utsargāpavāda* framework, Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa refines the principle of exception-based overriding by grounding it in precise operational logic. He explains that a rule qualifies as an *apavāda* only when it becomes applicable (*prāpta*) before the general rule, in accordance with the *paribhāṣā*: *yena nāprāpte yo vidhir ārabhyate sa tasya bādhakaḥ*. However, Nāgeśa further clarifies that mere status as an *apavāda* does not suffice for *bādhakatva*; instead, the overriding must occur in contexts where the general rule is either inapplicable (*anavakāśa*), has already fulfilled its purpose (*acaritatva*), or is precluded by structural constraints. He emphasizes that overriding is not arbitrary but governed by the scope and sequence of derivational relevance. This insistence on contextual precision strengthens the formal predictability of the system and affirms that *paribhāṣās* operate not as labels but as functional regulators within the derivational architecture.

Importantly, nāgeśa's *paribhāṣenduśekhara* demonstrates that *paribhāṣās* must themselves be regulated. He distinguishes between *nitya* (universal) and *anitya* (context-bound) *paribhāṣās*. This meta-meta-grammatical classification shows a clear awareness of second-order consistency: that not all *paribhāṣās* operate at the same epistemic level. By doing so, he avoids a fatal regress wherein meta-rules would constantly override each other without constraint.

Nāgeśa thus recasts the interpretive logic of the *mahābhāṣya* into a systematized architecture of regulation, laying down the operating manual of the *aṣṭādhyāyī*. Without his interventions, many derivations would remain indeterminate or contradictory, particularly in the presence of multiple applicable rules.

Testing the Pāṇinian system: Wujastyk and rule immunization

The philosophical significance of *paribhāṣās* becomes sharper when viewed through the lens of modern epistemology. Dominik wujastyk (1982) brings karl popper's criterion of falsifiability into direct dialogue with the pāṇinian system. According to popper, a scientific theory must be falsifiable, it should expose itself to potential disconfirmation through testable predictions. Auxiliary hypotheses rules that explain away anomalies must themselves be independently testable, lest they immunize the theory against correction. Wujastyk applies this framework to the function of *paribhāṣās* and raises a

⁵*asiddham bahiraṅgamantarāṅge 50th. paribhāṣenduśekhara*

critical question. Do *paribhāṣās* serve as explanatory enrichments, or do they shield the grammar from falsification?

To answer this, wujastyk uses fourfold test-a *catuṣkoṭi* of sorts-for evaluating any *paribhāṣā* developed by traditional Sanskrit grammarians:

Vaiyarthya (non-redundancy): the rule must not be unnecessary.

Iṣṭārtha-jñāpana (goal-oriented disclosure): it must point to an intended grammatical result.

Svārthasiddhi (internal applicability): it should explain something within the system.

Anyatraphala (external applicability): it must be applicable to other derivational contexts beyond its original use.

The validity of a *paribhāṣā* is testable by seeing whether it resolves derivational conflicts and predicts correct outputs in cases not initially cited to justify it. If it does, it satisfies *anyatraphala*. If it only works for the example that gave rise to it and is not used elsewhere, it fails the test and functions more as an ad hoc patch than a principled meta-rule.

Wujastyk argues that many of Nāgeśa's *paribhāṣās* do pass this fourfold test, making them legitimate components of a rule-governed system. Others-especially those declared *anitya* (non-universal) by Nāgeśa himself-risk becoming epistemically inert. Their presence does not discredit the system but introduces a layer of theoretical caution, that meta-rules too must be governed by principles of economy, applicability, and reproducibility.

The debate about rule immunization also raises the broader issue of *śāstraic* conservatism. In Sanskrit grammar, rules are not easily discarded. The historical prestige of the *aṣṭādhyāyī* prohibits emendation of the *sūtras*. This hermeneutic constraint forces later grammarians to preserve form while altering function-*paribhāṣās* become the site of this intervention. They enable reinterpretation without redaction. As such, they reflect a culturally embedded solution to a logical problem: how to update a system from within.

What wujastyk's critique reveals, therefore, is not a flaw in the system but its sophistication. *Paribhāṣās* do not immunize the grammar arbitrarily; the best of them generalizes well, behave predictably, and restore coherence to a densely compacted grammatical system.

***Paribhāṣā* in the Pāṇinian and Haima grammatical traditions: a textual contrast**

Both the Pāṇinian and Haima systems deploy interpretive meta-rules to resolve rule conflicts, regulate derivational precedence, and ensure internal coherence. However, the conception, classification, and function of these meta-rules-called *paribhāṣās* in the pāṇinian tradition and *nyāyas* in the haima tradition-diverge significantly.

In the pāṇinian school, *paribhāṣās* evolved gradually through exegetical need and were systematized only later by Vyāḍi, Puruṣottama, Sīradeva and Nāgeśa. They are often justified through *jñāpaka* (implicit indicators).

By contrast, in the haima system as preserved by Hemahansagaṇi in the Nyāyasaṅgraha, *nyāyas* are integral to the Hemcandra grammar. They are directly enumerated as part of Hemacandra's grammatical system. These 57 *nyāyas* are explicitly taught under the commentary to the sūtra ‘*samarthaḥ padavidhiḥ* (H 4.1.2)’ and serve as built-in rule-governing tools.

A precise example of difference between two system is the treatment of *antaraṅga* and *bahiraṅga* operations. In nāgeśa’s interpretation, the *paribhāṣāasiddham bahiraṅgam antaraṅge* applies when the inner operation (based on fewer or more intrinsic causes) invalidates the outer operation. He treats this as a *balābalasūtra* and explicitly includes it in the section on relative rule strength.⁶ Nāgeśa argues that this rule alone suffices even in cases of simultaneously applicable operations (*samakālaprāpta*), and thus denies the need for a second rule like *antaraṅgam bahiraṅgāt*.

In contrast, the Haima system maintains both *asiddham bahiraṅgam antaraṅge* (n 1.20) and *antaraṅgam bahiraṅgāt* (n 1.42) as distinct *nyāyas*. Hemahansagaṇi defines *antaraṅga* as operations that are dependent on the base form or that occur earlier or require fewer causes, and *bahiraṅga* as those dependent on affixes or more complex external conditions. He argues that (n 1.20) applies when the *bahiraṅga* rule has already taken effect and must be retrospectively nullified, while (n 1.42) is necessary when both operations are simultaneously applicable and the *antaraṅga* must proactively override the *bahiraṅga*.⁷

⁶ nandighoshavijaya p. 25

⁷ nandighoshavijaya p 61-63

This difference in treatment exemplifies the broader contrast: the pāṇinian system emphasizes minimal rule sets and retroactive interpretation, while the Haima tradition prefers explicit functional separation, even at the cost of redundancy. Furthermore, where pāṇini relies on post-sūtra commentary and usage to establish *paribhāṣās*, hemacandra's tradition embeds them directly in the formal instructional sequence.

This divergence can also be seen in their respective taxonomies. Nāgeśa classifies *paribhāṣās* into categories like *śāstratvasampādaka*, *bādhābīja* and *śeṣārthakathana* but the *paribhāṣās* of first two categories often overlaps based on function. Hemahansagaṇi, however, does not categorise *paribhāṣā* based on its function rather on a systematic approach of how they appear. He creates four categories: the first category has fifty-seven *paribhāṣās* borrowed directly from hemcandra grammar, second category includes sixty-five *paribhāṣās* taken from *br̥hatvṛtti* and *nyāsa*. In the third category he has listed eighteen *paribhāṣās* which can be called as *nyāyasiddha*. Fourth category has only one *paribhāṣā* which justifies the usage accepted by poet and other grammatical system, it can be called similar to *ārṣa prayog* of pāṇinian tradition.

Thus, while both systems agree on the necessity of interpretive rules for resolving grammatical conflicts, they diverge fundamentally in how those rules are integrated, defined, and justified.

Paribhāṣā beyond grammar: mīmāṃsā, śrauta, and vedānta contexts
Although the concept of *paribhāṣā* is most closely associated with the domain of sanskrit grammar, its interpretive structure and regulatory function are found across multiple *śāstric* systems. Traditions such as mīmāṃsā, the śrautasūtras, and vedānta employ functionally equivalent meta-rules to stabilize meaning, resolve contradiction, and establish internal hierarchy. These rules are not always labelled *paribhāṣā*, but they serve an identical epistemic role.

In the mīmāṃsā tradition, such rules are typically called *nyāya*, though they fulfil the same structural function. For instance, the rule that *śruti* is the sole authority for knowing dharma (*codanālakṣaṇo'rtho dharmah*) operates as a foundational meta-rule that excludes non-scriptural sources from normative authority. Likewise, the principle in Śabarbhāṣya '*antaraṅgabahiraṅgayoś cāntaraṅgaṃ balīyah*' means that when two sacrificial things are in conflict, priority should be given to

the one which is more closely connected to the substance being offered. This is same as the grammatical *paribhāṣā antarāṅgam bahiraṅgāt*.⁸

These rules are not descriptive; they are normative constraints that define how textual injunctions are to be read and prioritized. In doing so, they perform a role identical to *paribhāṣās* in grammar: they resolve conflict, restrict scope, and maintain system-wide consistency. The śrauta tradition, though rarely presenting *paribhāṣās* explicitly, operates on an embedded structure of procedural meta-rules. These are often inferred from recurring ritual patterns rather than directly codified. For example, when multiple mantras or offerings appear to conflict, ritual manuals establish precedence based not on textual order but on a rule hierarchy derived from ritual logic. Substitution, silence, and default action are governed by implicit *paribhāṣā*-like principles that are functionally equivalent to grammatical *balābala paribhāṣās*. While the terminology differs, the structural dependence on rule-over-rule reasoning remains constant.

In the Vedāntic tradition, particularly in the Vedānta-*Paribhāṣā*, the term *paribhāṣā* refers not to grammatical interpretive devices but to doctrinal principles that regulate epistemic operations. Such rules govern the functioning and prioritization of *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge) within the system. For instance, a central principle holds that valid cognition must be *abādhita*, not subsequently sublated and this establishes the epistemic superiority of direct, immediate knowledge (*aparokṣa*), especially in the realization of brahman. These *paribhāṣās* do not generate new knowledge but restrict and clarify how different *pramāṇas* apply, maintaining internal consistency within the system of Vedānta.⁹

Across these diverse domains-ritual, exegesis, epistemology, the presence of *paribhāṣā* like structures affirms a shared *śāstric* commitment to formal coherence. Whether managing the interaction of affix rules in the aṣṭādhyāyī or the authority of textual statements in vedic hermeneutics, these systems depend on second-order reasoning. *Paribhāṣā*, in this broader sense, is not unique to grammar but is a generalizable principle of rule-governed knowledge.

Conclusion

The structural integrity of sanskrit grammar does not arise from its rules alone, but from the meta-rules that govern how those rules interact. *Paribhāṣās*, in both their grammatical and cross-disciplinary

⁸freschi p 9-10

⁹pellegrini p 606

forms, perform this regulatory function. They do not generate grammatical forms but determine the conditions under which generative rules apply, override, or remain dormant. As such, they form the essential infrastructure of grammatical reasoning.

In the pāṇinian tradition, *paribhāṣās* evolved through interpretive necessity and were later consolidated to address structural conflicts and derivational ambiguity. Their function is embedded not in linguistic production, but in maintaining system coherence. In the haima tradition, by contrast, *nyāyas* are integral to the system from the outset. Most of them, if not all, are structurally embedded within the instructional apparatus of the Hemchandra grammar.

Paribhāṣās are the decisive instruments of meta-grammatical control. They define the hierarchy of rules, mediate between syntactic and semantic domains, and enforce procedural discipline.

Beyond grammar, *paribhāṣās* or their functional equivalents-operate in scriptural exegesis, ritual performance, and philosophical logic. In these contexts, they regulate meaning, resolve contradiction, and prioritize epistemic authority. Their recurrence across *śāstra* traditions suggests that the logic of *paribhāṣā* is not limited to language but extends to the very structure of *śāstric* thought.

A system without *paribhāṣās* may possess rules, but it lacks grammar in the strict sense: the capacity to apply those rules in a consistent and justifiable order. Thus, *paribhāṣās* do not merely support grammatical precision-they make it possible. They are the unseen architecture of order, the logic that holds the edifice of Sanskrit grammar together.

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