
[94] ***Language and the constitution of objectivity in Abhidharma Buddhist philosophy: A semiotic view on “apperception” (saṃjñā) and “nominal designation” (prajñapti)***

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From the perspective of a philosophy of grammar (Köller 1988), concepts are abstract notions intended to help us simplify our grasp of objects in order to make possible processes of thought and logical operations. In keeping with its analytic deconstruction of macroscopic objects (and subjects) into streams of dharmic events, i.e. minimal units of phenomenological experience (dharmas), Buddhism teaches us that objects are “a mode of thinking, not the way things are” (Jenkins 2013). Similarly, the notion of a concept as a “device for making something understood” seems to be linked to the benefits of conceptualisation for discussing the matter in language (Warder 1971). And yet, even though “mental constructs” (vikalpa) like name, class-essence, quality, action etc. help to make our awareness verbally communicable, only perception that is “free from conceptual construction” (nirvikalpaka) is the “paradigmatic perception” for Buddhists (Chatterjee 2006). In the Treasury of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam/ AKBh) by Vasubandhu (4-5th cent.) we learn that “Ideas [saṃjñā] consist of the grasping of characteristics [nimitta]” (14c-d, Ed. Poussin/ Tr. Pruden 1988). Taking its start from the key notion of saṃjñā (Pā. saññā), variously translated as “apperception” or “(conceptual) identification” (cf. Potter 1996), this paper is going to explore how Abhidharma theories as well as later Buddhist philosophical positions explain the construction of a unitary stable object with regard to the creation of a linguistic referent, i.e. an entity that “exists in name only” (prajñaptisat). As stated in AKBh 1.20, such composite objects of ordinary experience as a pile of wheat or the person (pudgala) “have only a nominal existence” because in contrast to “real entities” (dravyatas) they lack “intrinsic nature” (svabhāva) (cf. Cox 2004) and thus “analytical ultimacy” (Williams 1980). The notion of saṃjñā as a “synthetic mode of apprehension” (Coseru 2012) is illustrated by the impermanent synthesis to be found e.g. in a jar, which when smashed leaves us with colour-shape and tactile sense-data (Hattori 1988). Taking a detailed look at the notion that “reductionist analysis can yield ontological primitives” (Arnold 2005), the idea is to work out just how the various linguistic, logical, ontological and epistemological parameters (cf. Gudmunson 1977) are seen to contribute to the constitution of objectivity in (various approaches that further develop) Abhidharma Buddhist philosophy.