

Traditional Views on Sentential meaning and its implication on
Language pedagogy

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The ancient grammarian philosopher Bhartrhari's view is that the sentential meaning is an indivisible idea, grasped in an intuitive flash, and the individual words in a sentence have no independent prominency. Whereas others held a different view emphasising the independent prominency of individual words in a sentence.

Following Bhartṛhari and maintaining the theoretical debate this paper will demonstrate that the debate is not dead, similar type of debatable issues can be acknowledged in current language study and pedagogy.

0. The three prominent theories regarding sentential meaning are Saṃghāta, Krama and Sphoṭa. The Saṃghāta is the theory of collection, the Krama theory emphasises the sequential order, the Sphoṭa is the concept of invariant universal meaning of language. The Saṃghāta and the Krama theories maintain that the sentential meaning is the aggregation of the meanings of the constituents, there is an order of occurrence of the constituents and they are related to one another. The sentential meaning is dependent on all these. In Sphoṭa an integrated total meaning as the sentential meaning has been emphasised. According to their positions of componential analysis and holistic approach they are known as khaṇḍapakṣa and akhaṇḍapakṣa respectively. The total effect creating an instant mental concept is the conviction of the akhaṇḍavādins. Whereas the khaṇḍavādins argue that words have isolated meanings, word is a pivot of a sentence and meaning is understood in context of other words not in isolation.

I would argue that the two differing view points regarding sentential meaning known as akhaṇḍa and khaṇḍa i.e., emphasis on the total meaning and emphasis on the individual words' meanings are basically related to two different areas of language study:

one with language acquisition, cognitive process and communication, the other with formal textual analysis, although the philosophical questions remain the same. The questions are- what is language, what is meaning, how meaning is conveyed and how is it understood ?

There is a vast literature on language philosophy in Sanskrit. From the differing view points of different systems and their critical expositions it is difficult to pinpoint which one is more convincing and which particular system has strong influence in Indian language pedagogy. However, the philosophical metaphysical underpinning is not the main thrust in this presentation. Elsewhere I have attempted to discuss Bhartṛhari's theory on the stages of language development. Here I will address his particular view on sentential meaning.

Bhartṛhari's philosophical position was monistic. Language according to him is SPANDA, the vibration of inner consciousness. His terminologies like bodhaka, vācya and vācaka elicit the ideas that through language we receive the world or it becomes meaningful to us, the meaning of an utterance or a speaker's intention or awareness is expressed in acceptable tangible form. He asserts that there is a single content in a sentence, that the meaning of a sentence to be taken as one entity. This is both internally and externally existent. Internally a sentence is an intact piece of 'cognitive awareness' received in a flash. Externally it is a solid linguistic unit bound by a tone.

Bhartrhari has collated different views and elaborated his psycho-philosophical theory of language refuting other views. He has drawn attention to different facets of language : tone, phone and semantics.

1. Bhartrhari's terminology ŚABDA includes both individual words and sentences as well. The actualized tangible expressions conveying meaning which we call language has mediatory function says Bhartrhari. The relation between the reference and the referent occurring through our thought process, i.e., meaning is a logical construct, VIKALPA(conceptual construct). It is the cognition of something produced by a word. So language is the mediator of the inner and the outer world. When a logical construct(meaning) and a sound/graphic construct(= form) are cognized in an intuitive flash(pratibhā), the message is conveyed, the reality or object is revealed or communication takes place. The flash of insight which causes the grasp(cognition/comprehension) is indescribable in ordinary language. PRATIBHĀ functions through individual's inner self. This applies to the animal world also, the primary cause of their behaviour is the self bound in individual animal.

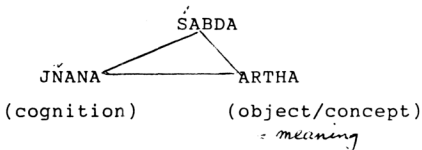
The instinctive behaviour of each species is explained as functioning through the innermost self. The flash of insight is the result of 'precepts accompanied by recollection'. It may be the result of immediate past or remote past. It is mentioned that the flash of insight comes about by six broad ways: naturally(what is understood as instinctive in modern terms), by way of activity, by constant practice, by meditation, by mere luck or unknown causes, and cultural knowledge handed down by the wise.

For our purpose the sixth item is significant. We inherit language and convention of the society we are born in, acquire it by constant practice. Bhartrhari comments that a word meaning is subjective, because it is determined by SAMKETA (convention).¹ Here the socio-cultural implication is strongly established. It is further held that a word denotes universal meaning, but that universal cannot be comprehended without the actual reference/ factual event.² The variability of speaker's intention and hearer's comprehension has been mentioned. Individual variation and perceptual variability in time are also discussed and commented that defective, unreliable and inconsistent comprehension can not be ruled out.³

In the second canto of VAKYAPADĪYA verses 121-144 record twelve different theories current at that time. Bhartrhari's thesis of indivisibility of a sentence, indivisibility of a word, his idea of relation, his exposition on cognition and language comprehension are contained in this section. The single content/single intent issue is asserted eliciting phonetic, semantic and psychological aspects.

At this juncture let me present three diagrammatical constructs and a few terms.

A word :

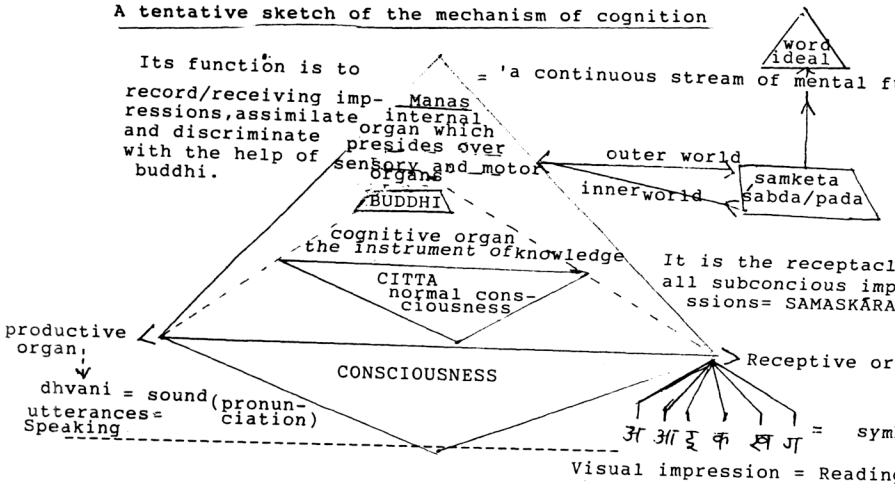


1. VAKYAPADIYA DVITIYAKANDAM

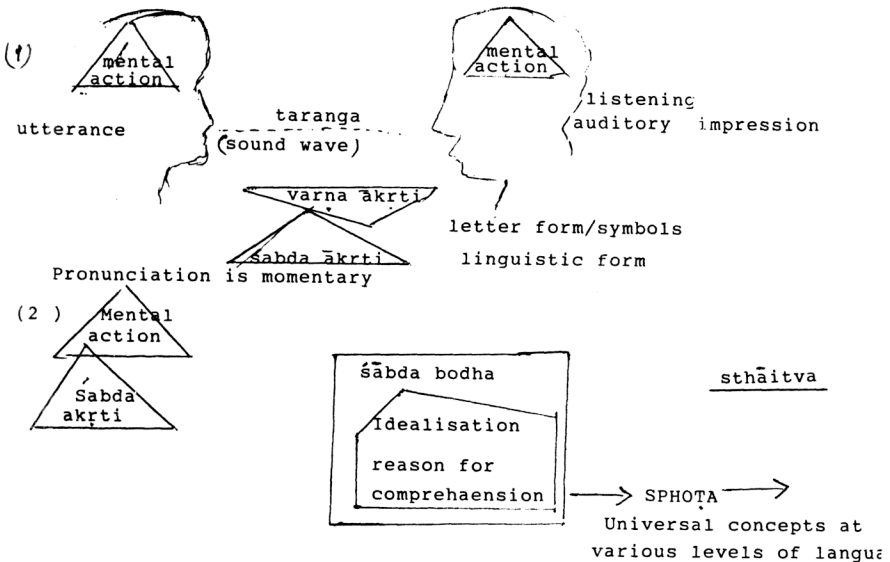
2. ,, ,, 122

3. ,, ,, 135

A tentative sketch of the mechanism of cognition



A tentative sketch of momentary action leading to comprehension



ŚABDA = name / language
 JÑANA = conceptual cognition
 PADA SPHOṬA = word essence/ (signifying a concept/meaning)
 VAKYA SPHOṬA = sentence essence
 SAMKETA = convention , object= meaning

The term Śabda is described as BODHAKA : through the Śabda (word/ concepts) which is commonly used and understood in a linguistic community the world is known, message is communicated, intention /imagination etc. are expressed and made transparent.

The term convention is explained as 'A convention is the mutual superimposition of a word and its object upon each other, which is in the nature of recollection' in Indian Psychology. It is also explained that a cognition is partless and it is produced by a word. VIKALPA is a valid cognition. Behind it the convention is playing its important role.

1.1 In every philosophical system we find discussion and exposition of language. The aims and objectives of all bhrahmanical systems were to establish the truth exemplified in the Śruti. Bhartṛhari's holistic approach exposes the monistic view. The plurality in language is the product of analytical faculty of human mind. His idea conveys that the non-verbal cognition and verbalized utterance are gradual process of revelation. He explains that the 'speech potency' (śabda bhāvana) is latent in consciousness. The sphoṭa is the invariant form of language, the variations are audible forms at relative

level of human language. Bhartrhari accepts individual word's reality in the pragmatic sense. The abstraction and analysis of component words in a sentence 'is a grammatical necessity'. The existence of individual words and their isolated meanings before the formation of a sentence can not be denied, the points he maintains that the meaning aspect and the sound sequence both are to be considered as single entity. When the meaning is grasped in an active communication the division, special inflection, forms etc. are not separately understood. The grasping of meaning and the sound sequence as well is a kind of complex cognition. He gives his argument that individual words change their forms according to the meaning requirement- rajan/raja-puruṣa- the intended meaning is dependent on the speaker's aim/intention. A sentence has a specific meaning and words occurring on that structural frame contribute to that purpose. A word also can mean various things in the real world. For instance the performance aspect of cooking, the act includes food stuff, heat, pot and the agent. Different tasks are combined to the accomplishment of the meaning of the verbal form. The accomplishment that matters here, so also in the sentence meaning. Bhartrhari has given several analogies, the analogy of a picture is well known. It is an example of complex cognition. In verse no. 224 Bhartrhari explains a process of action, the act of cutting a khadira tree. At first the bark, then the inside are cut then the tree fell down. The act of cutting has a sequence, but still it is a single action. In this manner several components making one sentence conveying an integrated meaning is explained. Also he mentions that plurality can be attributed to a collective action :

an act of eating by many individuals can be considered
as a single activity,

alternatively it can be assumed as a collective activity. He further asserts that the grammatical abstraction, textual analysis describe the unreality, - to indicate the truth which is indescribable the śāstra (grammar) is the meanse of realisation through discrimination. Bhartrhari has given an example of negative expression-

vṛkṣo nāsti, the negative particle nā to be treated within the context itself, otherwise it creates a logical problem. To make an existence into non-existence is conflicting, logically impossible. Therefore when the negative meaning is grasped an integrated meaning is understood, not the words in isolation, then aggregated following the grammatical analysis. Thus the aggregation of the constituents' meaning and 'designation followed by connection' both are refuted. The structural construction of a sentence following the conditions is only an acceptable way of expression. The act of communication is defined as the transference of speaker's intent to the hearer. The vācaka (expressive word') and the vācya (the expressed meaning) both exist in the minds of the hearer and the speaker in an undifferentiated state. In worldly transaction they become distinct units, one is awakened by the other, thus communication takes place.

In verse No.297 Bhartrhari tells us that the empirical knowledge is expressed through the instrumentality of words(śabda lokanibandhana Infact syntactical form,relation,situational context,logical connection with prior sentence give the meaning to words- there is no denying, but Bhartrhari's assertion is that when an utterance is made, it conveys a meaning ,that meaning is unitary(328).

2. Whether it is a word or a sentence the meaning is conveyed through the form(śabda śarīra/varṇa rūpa)_ sound and meaning together create a unity and that is language.The centrality of meaning and its unitary characteristics in uttered forms are established in Bhartrhari's thesis.

In a very recent publication 'The Word and the World' late Prof. B.K.Matilal while discussing the sphota theory of Bhartrhari has remarked "language is not the vehicle of meaning or the conveyor belt of thought. Thought anchors language and language anchors thought". (p85).

Elsewhere we find another succinct description of language given by the same author " Language describes the world with the help of concepts that are commonly understood in a linguistic community," (Perception,p316).

In the foregoing discussion we have noticed that Bhartṛhari's definition is similar to that.

We have come to the point now to enquire the arguments of the opposite camp, the khandapakṣa. To put it very briefly, that the divisibility advocates argue on the following : terms as sense units, sequence, substitutes, relation, context , verb as the nucleus, a sentence meaning is the aggregation of the constituents' meaning. The analytical procedure, componential analysis and context sensibility are the principles to be followed in deriving meaning of a sentence. Of course the psychological factors are also discussed. Their main concern was establishing their point of view regarding the Scripture (Vedas). The indivisibility principle goes against the principle of interpretation. The aspects of word formation, sentence construction following necessary conditions, multiple meaning of words, environment and context are all very important issues in language comprehension. Bhartṛhari's chief concern was language itself, the nature and function of language, the psychological basis of comprehension and production of natural language with an underlying metaphysical bearing of human psyche, in his case looking from the standpoint of Advaita Vedānta.

Now I shall summarise the counter arguments. The indivisibility camp sustains that (1) terms can not be regarded as sense units because form changes due to the requirement of the intended meaning. The compounds also have different imports.

(2) For communication in everyday life a composite unit of a sentence is a logical necessity. It could be an one word sentence.

(3) Neither the sequence nor the relation is regarded as prominent in common transaction. A sentence is a whole utterance, is to be regarded as the ultimate linguistic unit.

(4) A substantive can be a nucleus.

(5) In analysis, minute division can be made like- terms, syllable, letter, sound etc., but unless these are combined in a form meaning is not comprehended. Therefore a sentence is the ultimate unit.

(6) A sound when it is uttered, the individual production may vary still it is comprehended as the same (VP II, 20-21 the invariant *sphoṭa* concept).

(7) With the analogy of the perception of a picture the complex cognition of a sentence is referred to (VP II, 7-8).

(8) The *sphoṭa* concept can be explained as the inner "Word principle" that is, - regarded it as the 'transformation of consciousness' in an audible tangible unit. (VP II, 30).

(9) The cognitive act is indivisible, so is the intent.

(10) The contention of internal and external unitariness is further illustrated in the following way :

though letters/sounds and terms are cognized through auditory or visual organs - the meaning is naturally grasped in a flash. A homophonous word to be understood as different words when expressing different meanings, similarly when one word changes the meaning of a sentence then two sentences to be considered different. It is important to note that the meaning and utterance in a sound

sequence are the two sides of the same coin. A particular meaning is conveyed in a particular sentence and it is cognized in a single event, thus the unitaryness is established. The division is made for pragmatic purposes. So the sequential appearance(krama), the term divisions (pada) need not be highlighted. Discussing from the psychological point of view the indivisibility factor is convincingly established in verses 31- 55,70-76.

3. Returning to the opening issue I would claim that the foregoing discussion has presented some evidence for justification.

I see a parallel between Bhartrhari's idea and the acquisition theory we understand to day :,centrality of meaning

,acquisition /production of an unit at the beginning stage,

, the cognitive act is indivisible

these make it transparent that the theoretical assumptions underlying the key concepts are similar. Modern researchers show that there is a gradual progression in language acquisition, it happens to both first language and second language acquisitions irrespective of child and adult. Acquisition is a subconscious process. There is a complex implication of psychological and sociological factors. And language is acquired by understanding messages contained in it. One of the process of natural language acquisition is listening. Bhartrhari's stress on inner realities reminds me of innate theory current in theoretical linguistics. Bhartrhari sustains grasp as a flash of insight, a kind of overflow of the inner consciousness, which exist in all living beings, it is a divine endowment, it is the ground and source of language.

3. Bhartrhari's views can be summarised as follows :

language is a part of individual's inner consciousness, speaker's intention and hearer's comprehension are cognitive episodes, and the sentential meaning is grasped in an intuitive flash; although individual elements occurring on a sentential structure contribute to the total meaning of a sentence but it has the nature of a unit.

These clearly show that Bhartrhari talks about the psychological aspect of natural language.

Knowledge is transmitted linguistically, hence is the necessity to study the cultivated language of a community. The circumstantial evidence proves that the opposite views' set of principles are quite fitting with that standpoint. Although instant grasping and immediate spontaneous response is the basis of natural communication, in case of textual comprehension (reading and comprehending the message contained in a language which is not commonly spoken as mother tongue) formal analysis of constituent structures, individual meanings of words, their sources and derivative meanings are needed to be acquired. These are learnt by instruction. In conscious learning analytical procedure is followed. At the sentence level, scanning isolating specific information, understanding the key words, phrasal expression and grammatical form function relation are customary technique for deriving meaning. Therefore it is logically established that the sentential meaning is an aggregation of the meanings of the constituents. Although comprehension occurs when the meaning is grasped, and acquisition of language is a subconscious process, ^{yet} to develop the skills for immediacy and spontaneity much effort and long training are required. It is a common experience.

3.1. The implications of the theoretical perspectives can be clearly seen in language pedagogy. The structural formal knowledge of the language(Sanskrit) has been taught with the assumption that the knowledge of the system would make one proficient in using the system. In addition to that authentic language has been exposed to the learners. The application of the analytical procedure depending on the theoretical perspective is followed in different schools of thought. But one thing is common that at the beginning learners read aloud/chant/ recite without understanding the meaning. Undoubtedly it is to facilitate pronunciation, and sensory grasp, perhaps to imply subconscious impression of the structure in terms of modern linguistics what we understand as internalisation of grammatical rules. The method attempts to develop conscious awareness gradually. As we know that in ancient India the study of language grew out of the philosophical enquiry. Language is valued as 'verbal testimony' -one of the sources or means of knowledge.

Conclusion

In concluding paragraphs I would comment that it is a matter of conjecture or perhaps demand of the historical time/norm and expectation of the society that pedagogical direction changes. Tradition or scholarship in theoretical disciplines may endure but practical application needs ^{an} adjustment. The theories suggest the dichotomy of acquisition and conscious learning, one focuses the outer world and the other the inner. It seems both are reflected in pedagogy.

The aims and objectives were imparting and receiving cultural knowledge, values, intellectual attainments and higher developmental state of affairs. Therefore the pedagogical concern was thorough mastery of the language system, paying full attention to the formal properties.

The psychological factors analysis such as association, memory sense perception, cognitive awareness, general cognitive ability, intelligent discrimination together with the philosophical dispute remain as the background knowledge of pedagogy. Both have distinct bearing on the traditional language pedagogy.

However, the aspect how meaning is created in the social life of an individual (irrespective of a child or an adult), how language is created in the process of living, in interaction such communicative aspects have received less priority in traditional teaching-learning of a cultivated language. It can not be denied that pedagogy has a time bound character.

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