

KNOWLEDGE AND LANGUAGE

Knowledge and language are interrelated in a variety of ways, psychological, logical, metaphysical; and there are problems of different types concerning them. We shall select here one problem for our discussion, although some other related problems also will be discussed. Our main problem is to determine the nature of knowledge which is usually called *understanding a sentence*. This understanding is a form of knowing, for to understand a sentence is nothing but to know what it means, although not necessarily its truth or falsity. We may note here, firstly, that we are solely concerned with the knowledge which one has when one hears, reads, remembers or otherwise knows a sentence, but not the knowledge which a speaker may happen to convey to others through a sentence. The speaker or writer of a sentence very often conveys mental states other than knowledge through sentences, but the hearer or the reader invariably has to know the meaning of a sentence which can of course then cause other reactions in him.¹ We shall say roughly that we are interested in determining the nature of the knowledge which a hearer of a sentence has when he understands it. The second point which we note here is that we are concerned with the literal meaning of the sentence, not with any suggested or implied meaning which it may have. Occasionally, however, we shall make statements which we intend to be true of both literal and non-literal meanings of sentences. On such occasions we shall use '(literal or non-literal)' before 'meaning'. The justification for our primary interest in literal meaning of sentences may be found in the fact that even where a sentence has non-literal meaning we *know* it only by knowing its literal meaning first.

We assume here that anyone who understands the (literal or non-literal) meaning of a sentence already knows the meaning of each of the words occurring in the sentence, i.e., knowledge of the meaning of the words occurring in a sentence is a necessary, although not a sufficient, condition of knowing the meaning of the sentence as a whole. Now this assumption implies not merely that the knowledge of meanings of words is different from the knowledge of the meanings of sentences in which they occur,

but also that the knowledge of the meaning of every word is a *precondition* of the knowledge of the meaning of sentences. This is possible only if the meaning of every word is known before the meaning of a sentence is known. This assumption, however, may seem to lead to a difficulty in the case of the so-called syncategorematic words. Words are usually classified into categorematic and syncategorematic words², according as the words can or cannot mean anything by themselves without the help of other words. So it may be supposed that they do not have any meaning at all independently of the context in which they have to occur in order to be a part of significant discourse. But this seems to be a mistake, for to say that a syncategorematic word is meaningful only in context is not to say that it is the whole context which alone has a meaning, but not the individual words which constitute the context. Every word, categorematic or syncategorematic (or acategorematic) must have a meaning, for a word is defined to be a letter or a group of letters which has a meaning. Thus, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, interjections, all have meaning just as nouns, adjectives and verbs. We have therefore, to admit that what is meant by a word cannot in every case be an entity or a substance. The grammatical distinction between the different parts of speech seems to presuppose different categories of reality. To be real³ is not necessarily to be capable of being *named*, although we may hold that there is nothing real about which we cannot speak.⁴ This might also explain why we cannot *know* the meaning of a syncategorematic word by itself or why a syncategorematic word has to be supplemented by the necessary number of categorematic words if we are to know its meaning. For if a syncategorematic word by itself means a feature of reality which is not an entity, its knowledge also will involve knowledge of some entity or the other. We presuppose here the principle that if something *is relative* then it cannot also be *known by itself*. Thus a relation can be known only if its terms are known, the meaning of a word for a relation can be known only when the word is supplemented by words meaning the terms of the relation. Take, for example, the preposition 'up'. Its meaning is given by a single word in dictionaries, but neither it nor its synonyms by themselves can produce a knowledge of their meaning in their hearer. What we assume is that

in order to know the meaning of a sentence one must know already the meaning of every word occurring in that sentence; and this assumption is consistent with the theory that we can know the meaning of syncategorematic words only when they are used in a context and that their meaning can be learnt only from their use in some context. What we deny when we make the assumption is that no one should learn the meaning of any syncategorematic word which may be occurring in a sentence *after* or at the time of, his knowing the meaning of the sentence. He may indeed hear a sentence in which unknown words occur, then he may learn the meaning of the unknown words from their occurrences in that very sentence and *then* know its meaning.

Our assumption therefore, denies that it is sentences which are *primarily* meaningful, and that words come to acquire whatever meaning they have only from their use in sentences. It is sometimes said that this theory of the primary meaning of sentences is justified by the epistemological theory that judgement is the unit of knowing. It is argued that just as a judgement is not built up from concepts so also a sentence is not built up from words. But this theory fails to justify the way in which we learn the meaning of sentences. When we learn a few sentences of a foreign language without knowing the meaning of the words we proceed in just the same way as we learn the meaning of the words from a dictionary. But when we know the meaning of a sentence in this way our knowledge is necessarily confined to the meanings of only those sentences which we have memorised. If, on the other hand, we learn the meanings of words and the modes of their combination first, then we can know the meanings of an unlimited number of sentences which we never heard before and hence of which we could not have memorized the meaning. The fact that even though we know the meanings of a limited number of words—indeed the number of words in a given language seems to be limited—we can yet construct and understand an unlimited number of sentences shows, in our opinion conclusively, that at least at the present stage of development of languages the meaning of sentences are derived from the meanings of words occurring in them (and their interrelations) and to know the meanings of sentences we have to know the meanings of words occurring in them.

We therefore make a radical distinction between knowledge of word-meaning and knowledge of the meaning of sentences. Let us now analyse the knowledge which we have when we hear a word and know its meaning. We examine here Mill's account of what he calls 'concrete general names' like 'man'. He says, "The word *man*, for example, denotes Peter, Jane, John, and an indefinite number of other individuals, of whom, taken as a class, it is the name. But it is applied to them, because they possess, and to signify that they possess, certain attributes".⁵ Now if the word 'man' is 'applied to' Peter etc. to signify also that he possesses humanity, then it signifies a fact, for that Peter possesses humanity is a fact and not a thing. Mill might mean by "applying the word 'man' to Peter" the sentence "Peter is a man" which can very well "signify" the fact that Peter possesses humanity. But we think we have to go further than this and say that when we know the denotation of the word 'man' we know a fact, for 'man' denotes *things possessing humanity* and when we know its denotation we cannot be said to know simply those *things*, for we have to know *those things as possessing humanity*. It is a relational complex *things possessing humanity*, which is known, not merely *the things*. We cannot say that the things alone are known when the denotation of 'man' is known, and that *as a matter of fact* the things possess humanity, but are *not known* to possess it. For to know the things as the denotation of 'man' is to *know them as denoted by 'man'* and not as denoted by any other term or as not denoted by any term at all. But to know the things as denoted by 'man' is to know them as possessing humanity.

But then the question arises : If one knows a fact when one knows the meaning of a word like 'man' then how is this knowledge to be distinguished from the knowledge of the meaning of a sentence ? Usually two different types of answers are given to this question.

- (a) A name denotes an object, an entity, while a sentence means a fact, a proposition; so when one hears a name one knows an object, when one hears a sentence one knows a fact. But this answer loses its force if one holds that when one hears a general concrete noun, one knows not an object, or a class of objects, but the fact that an object or a class of objects possesses an attribute or a

class of attributes. As a matter of fact in the meaning of a term like 'man' we can distinguish three factors :

- (i) the entities which are denoted by it,
- (ii) the attributes of these entities, which constitute its connotation, and

(iii) the relation between the attributes and the entities. This is why when one hears such a term one knows a fact, which is nothing but a relational structure involving at least one relation and its terms. This relation between the denotation and the connotation of such a term is also a part of its meaning; this is why an *abstract* term is defined as a term which means attributes *apart from their relation* to the things possessing them and is contrasted with a concrete term which therefore means attributes as related to i.e. possessed by things. "Whiteness, therefore, is the name of the colour exclusively; white is a name of all things *whatever having the colour*"⁶ and a *thing having a colour* is a fact or a proposition. As a matter of fact, we hardly know any *object*, the so-called objects are all facts. For an object like a table is a complex of parts interrelated to each other and hence is a fact. This consideration led Wittgenstein to assert in the *Tractatus* that the *object* is the absolutely simple, and that it is the object alone which can be *named*. But it is quite understandable why Wittgenstein never gave any example of objects in his sense, for nothing in this world which we know is simple in that sense. Thus according to this theory ordinary words like 'man' etc., mean facts not because they mean the relational wholes like 'things possessing humanity', but because even in denoting Peter, it would mean a fact, for Peter or any other man is a fact, and not a simple object.

- (b) The second way of distinguishing between a name and a sentence is to hold that in a sentence there is assertion (of a fact) whereas in a name or a word there is no such assertion. This is different from (a) inasmuch as according to it when one understands a sentence he knows not merely a fact, but that the *fact is asserted*. It is the fun-

tion of the finite verb which every sentence must contain to make an assertion. Thus words and sentences are different from each other, for words do not, while sentences do, assert and this difference is reflected in *the knowledge of their meanings*.

Now this theory has the merit of being able to explain what difference there is in the meanings of the phrase 'the brown table' and the sentence 'the table is brown' i.e., between the attributive and the predicative uses of adjectives. The Phrase 'the brown table' means a relational complex just as much as 'the table is brown', but while in the former there is no assertion, in the latter there is assertion.

In spite of this advantage of the theory it is not satisfactory, for there can be nothing *in* the sentence which can express assertion. If someone simply utters or quotes a sentence, he does not assert anything, the finite verb in the sentence notwithstanding. This is why Frege had to introduce the sign of assertion as a sign of the *meta-language*. To make an assertion it is not enough to use a sentence, it is necessary to say *about* the sentence that it makes an assertion.

Now if a sentence thus fails to assert, how are we to distinguish between 'the brown table' and 'the table is brown'? There does not seem to be any way out of the difficulty—both the phrase and the sentence express the same fact, and this fact is what is known when the meaning of either of them is known. Let us therefore see if a *single word* like 'man' can be distinguished from a sentence so far as the knowledge of their meanings is concerned. We accept the view that when one hears the word 'man' he knows a relational whole as its meaning, e.g., 'anything possessing humanity', and to know the meaning of a sentence also is to know a relational whole.

Still we can make a distinction between the two types of knowledge in the following way. When a relation is known as a part of the meaning of a word like 'man' it is known in one way. However, when one knows a phrase like 'the brown table' or the sentence 'the table is brown' (we do not distinguish between these

two) the knowledge one gets is of a different nature although it is still of a relational whole. This is because in knowing the meaning of a sentence the relations between the meaning of words are *understood* but not known again as a meaning or a part of a meaning of a word. Whenever a sentence is uttered or written the words are arranged in a certain order, and this order of the words occurring in a sentence is also *known*. Thus when one knows a sentence one not merely knows the words occurring in it but also their *order*. Now this knowledge of the order or arrangement of the words is what produces the knowledge of the relations among the meanings of the words. What is thus indicated by the arrangement of words in a sentence may become expressed by words in another higher order sentence, but then the knowledge of the meaning of this higher order sentence is different from the knowledge of the lower order sentence because in the knowledge of the meaning of the higher order sentence we have all the structural detail of the meaning of the lower order sentence and also additional relational elements which are indicated by the order of *its* words. Thus the phrase 'the brown table', when known, produces the knowledge of the relational whole consisting of the two terms: (1) that which is brown, and (ii) the table and their relation which is identity. But if we have the sentence, "that which is brown is identical with the table" then we have the knowledge of a relational whole consisting of three terms: (i) that which is brown, (ii) the table, and (iii) identity; and their relation. Thus we see that although the knowledge of the meaning of single word like 'man' is of a relational complex and the knowledge of the meaning of a phrase like 'the brown table' or the sentence 'the table is brown' is also of a relational complex still there is a significant difference between the two types of knowledge. In the case of the word the relation that is known is meant by a word whereas the relation that is known when the meaning of a phrase or a sentence is known is not meant by a word but has to be understood from the *order* of the words. Although there is thus a difference between the knowledge of the meaning of a word and the knowledge of the meaning of a phrase or a sentence, there is no such difference between the knowledge of the meaning of a phrase and the knowledge of the meaning of a sentence. This however is not to deny that there is a grammatical distinction between a phrase and a

sentence. But this grammatical distinction is not reflected in the knowledge of the meaning of a phrase or of a sentence for the finite verb which distinguishes a sentence grammatically from a phrase fails to produce a knowledge different in type from the knowledge produced by the phrase.

We now summarise the points that we have tried to make :

- (1) The knowledge of the meaning of a sentence presupposes the knowledge of the meaning of every word occurring in the sentence.
- (2) The knowledge of the meaning of a phrase is not different in kind from the knowledge of the meaning of a sentence.
- (3) The knowledge of the meaning of a word like 'man' is knowledge of a relational complex i.e., a fact.
- (4) Yet this type of knowledge is different from the type of knowledge of the meaning of a sentence, for relations among the meaning of words in a sentence are indicated by the *order* of words and are to be understood, whereas the relation known as a part of the meaning of word is meant by the word.

Visva-Bharati,
Shantiniketan (West Bangal)

S. Bhattacharya

NOTES

1. The mere sound or sight of a sentence uttered or printed may sometimes produce mental and even physical changes. We are not concerned with this possibility here.

2. Some add a third type 'acategorematic' to the usual two mentioned and discussed here.

3. As the word 'real' is ambiguous, we indicate here the type of things we denote by it. We do not mean the absolutely real or the ultimately real like Śamkara's Brahman or Spinoza's Substance. For our purpose 'real' means everything of which the empirical world is composed. Those who use 'real' to mean the ultimately real often end up by denying that we can talk about the real.

4. On this theory the controversy between nominalism and realism has to be understood in a different way. The usual interpretation is that the nominalist admits only particulars as real *because* he gets rid of names denoting abstract entities from his language by the simple grammatical device of treating the so-called nouns as, say, adverbs in his language. Now if this were the only, or even the essential, point of difference between a nominalist and a realist, then, on our theory, we cannot conclude that the world of the nominalist is not as rich as the world of the realist. What the nominalist succeeds by his device of treating names of certain types of entities as syncategorematic words is merely to deny that the reals meant by these words are *entities* or *substances*, but not they are real. As it is not obvious that to be real is to be an entity or a substance, so also it is not obvious that they to deny that a word is a name of an entity is to deny that the word means any reality. Thus the controversy between the nominalist and the realist seems to boil down to the controversy about the way of *classifying* the reals—whether everything real should be an entity and hence denotable by a name (realism) or not—but not about the number of reals.

5. J. S. Mill : A System of Logic. Book I Chapter II.
(Italics ours.)

6. J. S. Mill : Ibid. Book I, Chapter II, 4.

पुणे विद्यापीठ

पुणे विद्यापीठाची प्रकाशने

	किंमत
	रु. पैसे
(१) प्राचीन मराठी कोरीव लेख (१९६३)—शं. गो. तुळपुळे	५०-००
(२) रससिद्धान्त का सामाजिक मूल्यांकन (१९७४) —दुर्गा दीक्षित	१५-००
(३) आधुनिक वैद्यकशास्त्राचा इतिहास (१९७२) —आ. श्री. परांजपे	३५-००
(४) भारतीय तत्त्वज्ञानाची रूपरेषा (१९६९)—भा. ग. केतकर	२२-००
(५) मराठी शाहीर व शाहिरी वाङ्मय (१९७४) —य. न. केळकर	७-००
(६) वाङ्मयीन विद्वत्ता (१९७६)—डु. का. संत	१२-००
(७) रवीन्द्र त्रिदल (१९७५)—गोपीनाथ तळवलकर	५-००
(८) रानडेप्रणीत सामाजिक सुधारणेची तत्त्वमीमांसां (१९७३) —गं. बा. सरदार	७-००
(९) स्वातंत्र्याचा अद्यतन संदर्भ (१९७६)—अच्युतराव पटवर्धन	२-५०
(१०) "Ajanta"—A Cultural study (1973) —M. K. Dhavalikar	75-00
(११) "Kothapur"—A study in Urban Geography (1974)—P. T. Malshe	40-00
(१२) The Anatomy of the Garden Lizard (1974) —S. Y. Paranjape	25-00
(१३) God as the Supreme Value (1974) —Leela D. Gole	20-00
(१४) India As Socio-Linguistic Area (1972) —by P. B. Pandit	12-00
(१५) Prakrit Language and Literature (1975) —A. N. Upadhye	8-00
(१६) In Search of God (1969)—N. G. Damle	3-50
(१७) The Law of Karma (1974) —G. W. Kaveeshwar	4-50

वरील सर्व व विद्यापीठाची इतर प्रकाशने पुस्तक-विक्रेते, शैक्षणिक संस्था आणि विविध ग्रंथालये यांना ३३ ते ६० टक्के कमिशन देऊन, प्रकाशन विभागात विक्रीसाठी उपलब्ध आहेत. तरी या संधीचा फायदा सर्वांनी घ्यावा.