

LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY OF NYĀYA SCHOOL

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In Indian thought, the Philosophy of language did not attain the status of a fully developed independent inquiry. But that does not mean that problems concerning language were not treated. Philosophy of language formed a part of epistemology, more precisely, the *pramāṇasāstra*. Nyāya school of philosophy accepted four *pramāṇas* : *pratyakṣa*, *anumāna*, *upamāna* and *śabda*. Philosophy of language finds its due place under *śabda*.

The basic question of philosophy of language is: How does a linguistic utterance, through communication of its meaning, impart knowledge to the hearer? In this exposition, however, I would like to give a comprehensive view of Nyāya philosophy of language and concern myself with following topics : Linguistic units, the relationship between word and its meaning, comprehension of word, comprehension of sentence meaning, emergence of a unified sentence meaning, and the form of the resultant knowledge.

1. Linguistic units

Not going into the evolution of the Naiyāyika understanding of sentences and words, let us limit ourselves to the definition of the two linguistic units. The Naiyāyikas defined sentence as a cluster of words with a syntax which possessing the three properties of semantic competency, syntactic expectancy and contiguity in space and time, expresses a complete thought, a combined meaning.¹ And what are words then? Jagadīśa (c. 1600 A. D.) defined word (*pada*) as a cluster of letters and a meaning-bearing element of a sentence.²

2. Word and its meaning

There exists a relation between the word 'cow' and the object cow that

as soon as the word is grasped the other is presented to the mind. The relation between the word and the object (word and its meaning) is called *vṛtti* or designatory function which is formed by (divine or human) convention. There are two types of designatory powers : *śakti* (denotative function or primary meaning) and *lakṣaṇā* (indicative function or secondary meaning). According to some, there is also a third power of words called the suggestive power.

a) Denotative function : It is the lexical meaning of the word. It is the primary meaning of the word, that sense in which it is normally used. And words could be classified into four groups according to their denotative function. (1) *Yaugika* : A word which retains the signification which belongs to it by its etymology. Eg. *pāṭhaka* (one who reads). (2) *Rūḍha* : A word which does not derive its signification from its roots but from convention. It does not mean that it cannot have etymological meaning but that the etymological meaning does not hold here. Eg. *Ghatah* (jar). (3) *Yogarūḍha* : These words are partly derivative and partly conventional. Eg. *pankaja*. By meaning of the component parts, this word would have referred to anything born in mud, but conventionally its meaning is so fixed that it expresses only the lotus which happens to be born in mud. (4) *Yaugikarūḍha* is either derivative or conventional. These words have two meanings one by derivation and the other by convention. *Udbhid* means a 'tree' by etymology and the name of a sacrifice by convention.

Regarding the relation between word and its meaning there is a problem that has plagued philosophers: where is the denotative function of a word? A proper name say, 'Rama', has its denotative function in the individual called Rama. The problem arises mainly in connection with those terms that we call class names (*jātiśabda*). Take for example the word 'cow'. It is used to refer to many cows, black, brown, white, a cow of the past, a cow of the present, a cow of the future and stone image of a cow. Hence there arises a question, where is its denotative function? Is it in the individual cows or in the universal 'cowness'? Buddhists (individualists) say that it is in the individual while the mīmāṃsakas claim that it is in the universal. Naiyāyikas try to strike a balance by saying that the denotative function is in the individual (*vyākṛti*), universal (*jāti*) and in the form (*ākṛti*). According to this definition denotative function of 'cow' is in the cow-individual, cow-universal and also in the form or image of a cow, for example, 'the golden cow'. The word '*ākṛti*' stands for the visible mark of the universal (particular configuration like appearance, shape, colour, action, etc.).

In a given context one factor may be predominant and the other factors not so evident. It does not mean that the other factors are absent, they are not useful in the context.³ The same thing is held by the navya-naiyayikas though they word it differently: denotative function is in the individual as characterized by the universal (the form being included in the universal).⁴

b) Indicative function (*lakṣaṇā*): It is the meaning assumed by the word because of the unsuitability of its primary meaning to the context. It is intentionally used by the speaker in that way. It is explained by the example of '*gaṅgāyām ghoṣaḥ*'. It means, 'the village is on the *gaṅgā*'. *Gaṅgā* by its denotative function would mean the river, literally the 'flow of water'. The speaker would be speaking about an impossible state of affairs if it is taken in its primary meaning, for the village cannot be situated on the river! Therefore the circumstances demand that the meaning of the word *gaṅgā* be taken differently as, 'the banks of the river *gaṅgā*', due to its excessive proximity to the river. Given this meaning the sentence makes sense. Or the bus conductor calls out to his passengers, "Railway station get down". Obviously the 'railway station' is not travelling in the bus and the conductor is not asking the 'railway station' to alight from the bus! He is rather asking the 'passengers who are bound for the railway station' to get down at their destination.

c) Suggestive power: In addition to primary and secondary meaning, rhetoricians and literary critics claim that there is a third power of words called the suggestive power. For example from the sentence, '*gaṅgāyām ghoṣaḥ*', we may comprehend the natural beauty of the village by its excessive proximity to the river. This is due to the suggestive power of words, they claim. But the Naiyāyikas reject the existence of such a separate power of words on two accounts:⁵ (1) The suggestive power is resorted to only after the primary and the secondary meanings are grasped unlike the secondary meaning which is resorted to due to the unsuitability of the primary meaning in the context. (2) The suggestive power is hearer-relative and it is comprehended only by a sensitive reader. The sentence, 'The sun has set', may mean different things to different people. The thief may understand that the time has come to go out and steal. A priest on the other hand may comprehend that it is time to say his prayers and retire to rest. A lover may take it to mean that it is time to meet his beloved. For these two reasons Naiyāyikas refrain from accepting suggestive power of words.

3. Comprehension of the word

We have stated that the word has a special relation to its meaning so that whenever the word is perceived the meaning is brought to the mind of the hearer. So it becomes essential that the whole word be grasped to be able to perceive the meaning. If you can perceive the meaning without the word being fully pronounced then there will arise a problem as to the necessity of all the syllables of the word!

The word 'gauḥ' is composed of three syllables g, au and ḥ. This word should be comprehended as a whole in order to convey its meaning. But the word 'gauḥ' cannot exist as a whole since the syllables are pronounced in a sequence, one after the other. At no point of time does 'gauḥ' exist as a whole. Each sound unit is destroyed soon after they are produced. When the speech is in the first sound 'g', it cannot be in 'au' and 'ḥ'. When the speech is in 'au' the sound 'g' is destroyed and 'ḥ' is not yet produced. When the speech is in 'ḥ', the preceding syllables 'g' and 'au' are no more. How then is the word 'gauḥ' grasped as a whole, so as to convey meaning? And yet it is our linguistic experience that we grasp the meaning. How?

Naiyāyikas say that, at the utterance of the last sound the memory impressions of the preceding sounds are brought to mind and both together give rise to the cognition of the word as a whole which then gives the meaning.⁶ Grammarians say that the letters convey the *sphoṭa* (indivisible meaning-bearing symbol which manifests the meaning) and the *sphoṭa* reveals the meaning. Naiyāyikas criticized the *sphoṭa* doctrine as an unjustified postulation.⁷ Grammarians held *sphoṭa* to be something altogether different from the letters that reveal them. Naiyāyikas say that a word is composed of letters and therefore a composite fact. A composite fact (*sphoṭa*) cannot be entirely different from its constituent parts. And also it is our linguistic experience that we do not grasp anything other than the letters (as distinct from the letters).

4. Comprehension of sentence meaning

Verbal knowledge (*śābdabodha*) is the knowledge derived from the linguistic utterance. It is not same as perceptual and inferential knowledge in as much as the structure of knowledge gained from the utterance of the speaker

has a specific structure unlike the others. Moreover even the way we get the knowledge demands that it be treated separately.

There are some factors which are essential for verbal knowledge. The hearer, to have knowledge from the utterance of the speaker, should be linguistically competent member of the same linguistic community as the speaker. Then speaker's linguistic utterance will trigger off a process in the hearer which can be given by I+V--R, where 'I' is the instrumental cause, which in this case is the knowledge of the words (auditory perception), 'V' is the *vyāpāra* (the intermediate cause) or the operation to which the instrument (*karaṇa*) is subjected by the agent, which in this case is the recollection of the meaning of the words and 'R' is the resultant verbal knowledge from the utterance.⁸ Secondly, the hearer should have knowledge of the meaning of the words which the speaker utters. Only then the resultant verbal knowledge will occur.

Hearing from a man who speaks a language which I do not know (eg. French) can I have verbal knowledge? Obviously not, because I do not know the French words and their significance. Even in one's own tongue, if a pundit uses technical terms, he will not comprehend the meaning, because he does not know the meanings of those words. So if the hearer is not familiar with the words and their denotations he cannot have verbal knowledge from the utterance. *Vṛtti* is the connection between the word and its meaning. An awareness of it is called *vṛttijñāna*. The general nomological rule says that wherever such a cognition of the connection between the two items is present, a cognition of one, will generate the remembrance of the other. Hence, if words are cognized, the meanings are presented to the mind of the hearer.⁹ *Vṛttijñāna* is therefore noted as an auxiliary factor.

There are other auxiliary factors which an expression should possess, of which the hearer should be aware, which play an important role in the production of verbal knowledge. They are *āsatti*, *ākāṅkṣā*, *yogyatā* and perhaps also *tātparya*.

Āsatti or physical proximity" It refers to the spatio-temporally uninterrupted sequence of words in an expression. 'John is dead' written on three different pages or uttered at an interval of an hour each, or interrupted by irrelevant words (Eg. John French a is minister dead) would not generate verbal knowledge.

Ākāṅkṣā or syntactic expectancy: It refers to the desire on the part of the hearer to know the other words or their meaning to complete the sentence meaning. The utterance, 'please bring' will leave the hearer wondering as to what is to be brought, because the very 'bring' expects an object to complete its sense.

Naiyāyikas distinguish between psychological *ākāṅkṣā* and syntactical *ākāṅkṣā*. They define (syntactical) *ākāṅkṣā* as the "interdependence of the lexical items (nominal and verbal stems) and the grammatic elements (nominal and verbal suffixes) as well as the interdependence of certain grammatical categories (verbs, agents, instruments, etc.) among themselves."¹⁰ Eg. In the sentence, *ghaṭam ānaya*, nominal stem *ghaṭa* needs to be associated with the accusative ending - *am* (*karmatvam*) to express the meaning of the accusative. This is syntactic expectancy with a word, between the word base and the suffix. *Gaṅgeśa* defined syntactic expectancy as "the accompaniment of one string X with another string Y in such a way that X would not generate cognition of the meaning, unless accompanied by Y".¹¹ There is syntactic expectancy between word A and Word B, if the utterance of A cannot contribute to the knowledge of the sentence meaning without being in combination with the word B. Psychological *ākāṅkṣā*, can be illustrated with an example: 'Please give me a paper'. This sentence is complete. The hearer might still ask 'what paper do you want? What colour and what size?' This is over and above the complete meaning of the complete sentence. And for this reason, naiyāyikas restrict themselves to the syntactical *ākāṅkṣā*.

We do meet a lot of grammatically incorrect expressions, not possessing *ākāṅkṣā* (eg. a language learner's first exercise in composition) of which we seem to understand the meaning. In this case, do we have *śābdabodha*? If we answer in the affirmative, then, *ākāṅkṣā* does not seem necessary for verbal knowledge. Naiyāyikas say that we do not have *śābdabodha* directly from that sort of an utterance. The incorrect expressions remind us (due to similarity and dissimilarity and of the hearer's familiarity with the language) of the correct expressions, which then generate the required knowledge. This knowledge should be distinguished from *śābdabodha* as it did not arise directly from the words of the utterance.

Yogyatā or semantic competence: It is the mutual agreement of the meanings of the component parts of the sentence.¹² 'Drink bananas' and 'pigs fly' do not have *yogyatā* because the meanings of 'drink & bananas' and 'pigs & fly' do not fit although grammatically both the expressions are correct. In short this is the fitness condition. 'He sprinkles with fire' shows a sort of ontological impossibility because by its definition 'fire' is not as object that we sprinkle with. 'This mother is a barren woman' on the other hand shows a logical impossibility: motherhood and barrenness. Nyāya school filters these two impossibilities under *yogyatā*. But one can contend that 'he sprinkles with fire' and 'green ideas sleep furiously' are used in riddles and poems as metaphors. We understand their meanings too. Does it mean that they generate *śābdabodha*? Fitness condition or *yogyatā*, *naiyayikas* hold, is applicable only to the actual world. In the realm of fiction and fantasy such a test will not be needed.¹³

Where does the domain of *ākāṅkṣā* end and that of *yogyatā* begin? Why is the requirement of a liquid for sprinkling a matter of *yogyatā* and not of *ākāṅkṣā*? Navya-naiyayikas resolved the issue by saying that the concept *yogyatā* be restricted to the lack of verbal contradiction (contradiction of words) or logical impossibility as expressed in 'what is without fire has fire'. Water as an instrument of sprinkling would be included in this view in the domain of *ākāṅkṣā*. B. K. Matilal is of the same opinion that the *ākāṅkṣā* is to be connected with syntax and grammaticality and *yogyatā* with semantics.¹⁴

Tātparya or intention of the speaker: One cannot possibly make an entry into the mind of the speaker to know his intention. If it was possible the communication would have become superfluous! The intention of the speaker is not a causal factor for verbal knowledge for it is possible to have *śābdabodha* even from the utterance of parrots and water marks made on a stone by the waves. But in an utterance involving homonyms (words having more than one meaning) or homophones (a word having the same sound as another but of different meaning), the intention of the speaker acquired through an intelligent guess from the context is a necessity to solve the ambiguity.¹⁵ The word *saindhava* has two meanings 'salt' and 'horse'. '*Saindhavam ānaya*', if uttered while the man is at meals, in all probability he wants some salt and not a horse.

5. Unified sentence meaning

The meaning that emerges from 'niloghṭaḥ' is 'the jar is blue' or 'the jar is identical with that which is blue' or 'the jar is qualified by that which is blue'. How does this meaning emerge? In other words, from the meaning of the individual words of the sentence, how do we come to know the sentence meaning as a whole?

There are two views concerning this. Bhartrhari's view is called sentence-holism. He held that the sentence as well as their meanings are unanalysable units, indivisible *sphoṭa* (*vākyasphoṭa*). The whole sentence reveals a *sphoṭa* which in turn communicate to the hearer its meaning in a flash of understanding (*pratibhā*). The other view is called atomism, held by Mīmāṃsa and Nyāya schools. Atomism is a theory which holds that the sentence is a composite entity composed of words, particles, etc. These elements are meaningful units of expression. According to Naiyāyikas, the sentence-meaning is conveyed by *samsarga*. It is translated as 'mutual linkage of word meanings', 'association of word meanings'¹⁶ and 'syntactical connection'.¹⁷ Their position is called *samsargamaryāda*. In 'Harir vihaḡaṃ paśyati' each word conveys its designatory meaning. Further more, 'bird' is related to the chief qualificand, 'Hari' by the accusative ending used in the word base 'vihaga-' (*vihaḡaṃ*). 'Hari' is related to 'seeing' by his mental effort which is represented by the verbal suffix '-ti' added to the verbal base 'paś-' (*paśyati*). By these relations of the words the connected sentence meaning is made possible.

6. Form of the resultant knowledge

Naiyāyikas classify *śābdabodha* under *savikalpajñāna* which is translated by Matilal as qualificative cognition.¹⁸ The qualificative cognitions are always expressible in the qualificand-qualifier model. Eg. *rakṭam puṣṭam* (the red flower). Here the qualificand is the flower and the qualifier is the red colour. Using the expression Q (xy) for 'x is qualified by y', where x is the qualificand and y is the qualifier, the *śābdabodha* derived from the above sentence can be represented by Q (ce) (1) Where c and e are the flower and red colour respectively. It can be read as a flower is qualified by red colour'. The Indian logicians further analysed the concept 'flower' as 'a flower individual qualified