

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 Bhartrhari 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, verb 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 Bhartr̥hari's theory on the stages of language development. Here I will address his particular view on sentential meaning.

Bhartr̥hari'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.

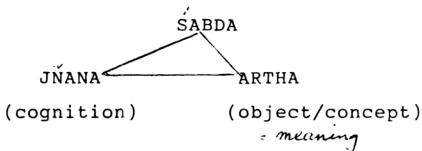
The instinctive behaviour of each species is explained as functioning through the innermost self. The flash of insight is the result of 'precepts accompanied by recollection'. It may be the result of immediate past or remote past. It is mentioned that the flash of insight comes about by six broad ways: 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