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## A study of word-meaning relationship in the context of Indian and Western Perspective

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### Abstract:

Numerous scholars irrespective of their fields attempted to describe language, its behaviour and gave different theories but still it is very difficult to arrive a fixed and conclusive statement. Perhaps this is the reason that Bloomfield told “the statement of meaning is, therefore, the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances vary far beyond its present state”<sup>[1]</sup>. In this paper, an attempt is made to produce a comparative analysis of the relationship between word and its meaning in Indian knowledge tradition and in Western system with special reference to Bartrihari and Saussure respectively

**Keyword:** *Pada, Śabda, Artha, Skahṇḍapakṣa, Akhaṇḍapakṣa*, ‘la parole’ and ‘la langue’

### Introduction

Theory of meaning has been a special attraction among the scholars and students of linguistic school in modern days. In earlier times, European scholars were more associated with the diachronic study of language which is considered historical study of language or more accurately the study of a language through periods of time. But the interaction of European scholars with Indian knowledge tradition in late 18<sup>th</sup> century, explored new ideas and a new dimension of language study which constituted synchronic study of language. It is systematic study of a language in a specific period. They started studying the nature of language, words, meaning; how meaning is associated with words, sentences, thoughts and reality etc.

### Types of Theories of meaning in Indian Linguistic Tradition

Different philosophical schools in India from ancient times had attempted to explain language behaviour and developed different theories. Primary objective behind the development of these theories is to produce textual interpretation of a huge text like Veda. Their theories could be broadly divided into two parts i.e., *skahṇḍapakṣa* and *akhaṇḍapakṣa*. *Sakahṇḍapakṣa* takes word as a primary unit of a language. Every individual word represents an individual meaning and sentence is the accumulation of meanings denoted through words consisting sentence. But in later period, scholars had found this theory incapable to decide the meaning in some situation where extended and indicative meanings were used. Therefore, *Prabhakara Mīmāṃsā* School had developed the concept of *akhaṇḍapakṣa*. According to this concept, we get a unitary meaning on hearing a sentence. Here, both the word meaning and their mutual relation are represented by the words consisting sentence. In *akhaṇḍapakṣa* sentence is considered a single primary unit of a language. In later period, Bhātrihari, the grammarian philosopher, had given more importance to sentence and supported *akandapakṣa*. Perhaps, this is the reason that Bhātrihari, first defined sentence and then word<sup>[2]</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> P.40; Bloomfield, Leonard; *Language*; George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; London, 1933

<sup>2</sup> Tatrāpi vākyasyaivārthabodhakatvena mukhyatvāt prāñnirdeśaḥ – p.1, *ambākarīryākhyā*, *Vākyapadīyam*.

### Pada – Śabda Dicotomy

In Indian knowledge tradition, although two separate nouns are used to refer “word” i.e., *pada* [3] and *śabda* [4] interchangeably but their meanings are contradictory as we found in different contexts. For instance, in *Nāya* School of philosophy, a speaker who speaks truth or deals with actuality is considered as worthy speaker or a person of right assertion. The speech or the sentence asserted by such worthy speaker is considered as *Śabda*. Further, such *śabda* or the asserted sentence by that worthy person, is the collection of several *padas*. This *pada* has the power to convey a meaning [5]. Here, ‘*śabda*’ is considered as sentence and ‘*pada*’ is used to define word. But in *Pāṇini*’s grammar ‘*pada*’ refers to a word having suffixes such as ‘*sup*’ and ‘*tiñ*’ [6], not just a bare word. On the other hand, Patañjali, the author *Mahābhāṣya*, uses the word ‘*śabda*’ to refer word. For him a word or *śabda* is that on whose manifestation the correct knowledge of the object is produced [7] or a sound which has a decisive meaning [8]. Patañjali, in first definition, has indicated to direct relation of a word with an object. But, in the second one he presented word - meaning relationship. From these two definitions, we can claim that the word and its meaning are inter-related and the meaning cannot be conveyed without word [9]. Bhartrihari used both the term ‘*śabda*’ [10] and ‘*pada*’ [11] to refer word.

### Relation between Śabda and Artha

Now the question arises whether their relation is conventional or natural. Surprisingly, we cannot choose single answer because there are some philosophers who advocate their conventional relationship whereas other proclaim that word and meaning are naturally inter-related. *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* tells that the relationship between word and its meaning is eternal [12]. Bhartrihari had also supported this opinion. He also explained that theorists had considered word and its meaning are eternal too [13]. Perhaps they actually want to mean that the origin of the word – meaning relationship cannot be traced. The phenomenon, such as a word is used to denote a meaning, is decided by tradition which is called *lokavyavasthā* or *lokaprasiddhi* which has been followed from years. This system could not be challenged with arguments i.e., *tarka* [14]. The eternal relationship between word and its meaning is also termed as *yogyata* or capacity. Bhartrihari has rightly pointed out that as our organs are capable to perceive the respective objects, similarly a word has a capacity to express its meaning [15].

All those arguments explained above, does not indicate that a single word would be used to denote a single meaning and cannot be used for other meanings. Therefore, Bhartrihari, in the chapter of *vākyakāṇḍa* of the text *Vākyapadīya* tells that due to the changing condition of understanding, the same person at different time and different persons understand different the meaning from the same word [16]. Hence, the meaning of the words is arbitrary (*yādr̥cchika*). But once their relation is established then their usage follows the established norms. People follow this established relation [17]. Therefore, their relation is considered as eternal or natural.

### Theories of Nyāya – Vaiśeṣika School

In *Nyāya* tradition and *Vaiśeṣika* tradition the relationship between word and meaning is considered as conventional. According to Gautama, there is no natural connection between a word and meaning. Their relation is established through convention. [18] Here Gautama represents many arguments in support of this opinion [19]. *Vaiśeṣika* philosophy supports this notion and tells that the relation between word and meaning/object is temporary/conventional [20]. Primarily, they had given two arguments to support their opinion. First, if word and its meaning is naturally related then we certainly notice the co-existence of word and the object signified. But we don’t find such relation in reality [21]. Secondly, if the relation between word and its meaning is natural then the same word should be used to refer the same meaning in everywhere. Even we also notice that different words are used to denote the same meaning or object like ‘*agni*’, ‘*vahni*’, ‘*anila*’ for fire [22].

Now the question arises if the relation between word and its meaning is conventional then who establish their relation. It is the ‘will of God’ which establish this relation. This will of God decides that this meaning should be understood from this word [23]. But there is a small difference between *Navya* – *Naiyāyikas* and *Prācīna* – *Naiyāyikas*. *Navya* – *Naiyāyikas* consider will (*śaktimātrameva*) is sufficient to establish this relation because they think, in modern words, there is no will of God.

### Theory of Ferdinand De Saussure

This concept corresponds to the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. He says that sign is the basic unit of language. It consists of two elements - signifier & signified. Their relation is not natural but imputed and arbitrary. Their connection is established through convention. But at the same time, it is impossible to change their relationship. If we compare this theory with Indian counterpart then we don’t find any fundamental difference between them. Saussure considers both of them as psychical entities. He divided signifier into two sections i.e., ‘*la parole*’ and ‘*la langue*’. Here ‘*la parole*’ means uttered sounds in actual speech and ‘*la langue*’ represents phonological pattern or the internalised form of *la parole*. Similarly, signified also has two entities i.e., meaning and the object meant. The meaning is mental concept of an object which form an image in our mind and the object is that

<sup>3</sup> p.34, *Tarkasaṃgraha*.

<sup>4</sup> p.3; *Mahābhāṣya*.

<sup>5</sup> *Āptavākyaṃ śabdah.āptastu yathārthavaktā. Vākyam padasamūhaḥ.....śaktam padam. Asmāpadādayamartho boddhavya itīśvarasamketah śaktiḥ.* – p.34; *Tarkasaṃgraha*.

<sup>6</sup> *Aṣṭādhyāyī*; 1.4.14.

<sup>7</sup> *yenocāritena sāsṇālāṅgulakakudakhuraviṣāṇinām sampratyaobhavati sa śabdah* - p.4; *Mahābhāṣya*

<sup>8</sup> *Athavā pratītapadārthako loke dhvaniḥ śabda ityucyate* – Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *Arthapravṛttitattvānām śabdā eva nibandhanam* – *Vākyapadīyam*, 1.13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. *Padakāṇḍm*.

<sup>12</sup> *autpatikastu śabdasyārthena sambandhaḥ* - *Mīmāṃsāsūtram*, 1.1.5

<sup>13</sup> See *vṛitti*, *Vākyapadīyam*, 1.23

<sup>14</sup> *na tāmllokaprasiddhatvāt kaścit tarkeṇa bādhyate* Ibid. 1.30

<sup>15</sup> *indriyānām svaviśayeṣvanādiryogyatā yathā/*

*anādirarthaḥ śabdānām sambandho yogyatā tathā//* - *Vākyapadīyam*, 3.29

<sup>16</sup> *Vākyapadīyam*, 2.136

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2.137-147

<sup>18</sup> *sāmāyikatvācchabdārthasampratyaayasya* - *Nyāyasūtra*, 2.1.56

<sup>19</sup> See *Nyāyasūtra*, 2.1.49 - 58

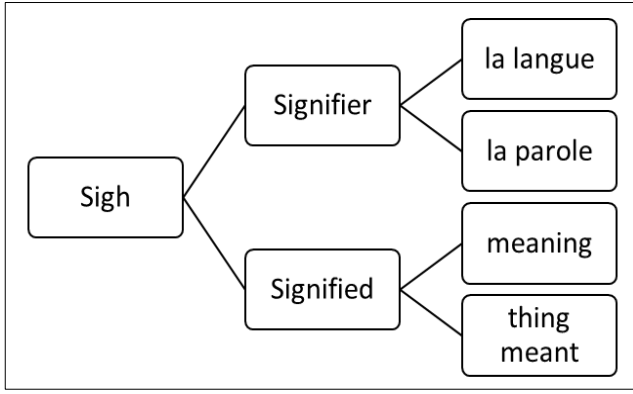
<sup>20</sup> *sāmāyikaḥ śabdārthapratyaayah* - *Vaiśeṣikasūtram*, 7.2.20

<sup>21</sup> *Nyāyasūtra*, 2.1.53

<sup>22</sup> *jātivīṣeṣe cāniyamāt* - Ibid.57

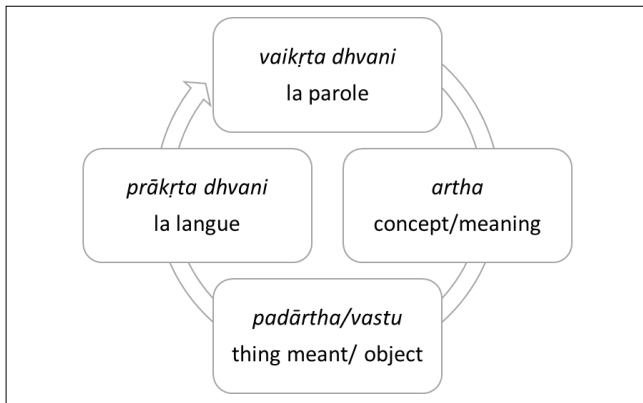
<sup>23</sup> *asmāpadādayamartho boddhavya itīśvarasamketah śaktiḥ* - *Tarkasaṃgrahaḥ*, p.34

particular thing in external world. This could be better understood through the following diagram



### Similarity with Bhartrihari's Concepts

We find similar concept in Bhartrihari's Vākyapadīya too. He also accepts that there are two elements in a functional word (*upādānaśabda*): First one is the cause of the articulated speech, which is internal and psychic or more accurately mental construct of the articulated speech (*buddhistha*) which is also referred as '*prakṛta dhvani*' and the second one is the articulated speech which is referred as '*vaikṛta dhvani*'.<sup>[24 25]</sup> Although most of the philosophical schools and grammarians have accepted the direct relationship between a word and its meaning but if we closely observe their theories then we could certainly find that this relationship is based on functional usage of word. Further, the word indirectly refers to an object of the external world through concept. The psychological form of a word which is referred as *prakṛta dhvani* by Bhartrihari generate audible sound which is referred as *vaikṛta dhvani* by Bhartrihari. On hearing of such sound, listener grasp the concept which is universal, in his mind and then he relates this concept or the object class or thought or content to object of the external world. This can be clearly expressed through a diagram.



But in some cases, like where extended meaning and indicative meaning are used then the direct relationship between word and meaning is differed.

### Conclusion

<sup>24</sup> *dvāvupādānaśabdeṣu śabdau śabdavidō viduḥ/  
eko nimittaḥ śabdānāmaparo'rthe prayujyate// - Vākyapadīyam, 1.44*

<sup>25</sup> *varṇasya grahaṇe hetuḥ prakṛto dhvanirīṣyate/  
sthītibhedanimitatvaṃ vaikṛtaḥ pratipadyate// - Vākyapadīyam, 1.77;  
with Pt. Vedanand Jha Commentaries*

All these modern linguistics theories acknowledge the fact that language is more than the audible sound or sound sequence uttered by a speaker or heard by a listener. A linguistic sign is analysed by them in its functional aspect. But Bhartrihari considers it an independent entity. He emphasized the fact that linguistic symbols are not just physical entities, but they are psychological entities too. Ferdinand De Saussure's signifier signified theory corresponds to the same concept. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan said that the *śphoṭa* is the indivisible idea with its dual form of *abda* (word) and *artha* (meaning). Bhartrihari believes that both of them i.e., word and meaning are two different aspects of the same indivisible thought (*ekasaivāmano bhedou śabdārthāvaprthak sthitou*) at philosophical point of view.

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