



NYĀYA THEORY OF WORD AND MEANING

Dr Purnima Agrawal

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Gargi College (University of Delhi), Sirifort Road, Delhi

Abstract:

Almost all the systems of Indian Philosophical thought except Cārvāka, Buddhists and Vaiśeṣikas accept *Śabda* or verbal testimony as a *Pramāṇa* or valid source of knowledge. *Śabda* literally means a word though in the context of the valid source of knowledge it means the knowledge of objects derived from words and sentences of an authoritative person. But words or sentences do not provide any knowledge of the world on their own. Any knowledge may be acquired from them only when one perceives and understands their 'meaning'. Hence *Śabda* or verbal testimony as a source of knowledge consists in understanding the 'meaning' of the statement of a trustworthy person. The 'meaning of a word' consists in its relation to the object which it signifies. And according to the different ways a word is related to an object, it may have different meanings. So, the auxiliary cause of Verbal Knowledge is the 'knowledge of the relation between word and its meaning' which is known as *Vṛitti* (significatory function). It is of two kinds, *Śakti* – denotative function and *Lakṣaṇā* – implication. Meanings of the words consisting a sentence can be obtained through the 'remembrance of those meanings'. Words denote their respective meanings by their *Vṛitti*, i.e., either *Śakti* or *Lakṣaṇā*. All the 'meanings of words' get syntactically related with each other by the principle called *saṃsargamaryādā*, i.e., the governing law of relation. The relation among the remembered meanings is not understood when they are individually remembered. Hence, the understanding of this relation is a new product when the sentence is understood, and so 'meaning of a word/sentence' (*Verbal Knowledge*) can be obtained through the understanding of the relation, the relation among the meanings of the words. So, on the basis of two kinds of *vṛittis*, viz., *Śakti* and *lakṣaṇā*, Viśvanātha accepts three kinds of meanings of a word, i.e., *abhidā*, *paribhāṣā*, and *lakṣaṇā*.

Keywords: Śābdabodha, vṛitti, śakti, lakṣaṇā, pada, vākya, vākyārtha.

According to Naiyāyikas the fourth means of valid knowledge is *śabda* (word). It is known as *Śābdabodha*. *Śābdabodha* as a separate *pramā* (valid knowledge) is explained as (*śabdajanyam śābdam, śābdas cāsau bodhaśca śābdabodhaḥ*) the knowledge which is generated by the causal factor *śabda*. The word '*śabda*' does not mean merely a word, but it has a technical sense, i.e., here *śabda* means 'a proposition' or 'a vākya (sentence)'. *Śābdabodha* is the understanding of the meaning of a sentence (*vākya*) - *Vākyārthajñānam Śābdajñānam*. A *Vākya* is a collection of *padas* possessing expectancy, compatibility and proximity. A *pada* is *śakta*, (*śaktam padam*), and *śakta* is paraphrased as *śaktiviśiṣṭa*, which means possessed of *śakti*. *Śakti* in Nyāya is the relation of an expressive unit or a word with its meaning. Thus, a *pada* is one that is possessed of the relation with its meaning, and it is a minimum meaningful unit. E.g., the word '*ghaṭam*' consists of two parts : '*ghaṭa*' (stem) and '*am*' (the accusative case-ending). According to the Naiyāyikas, this word consists of two *padas* because a *pada* is a minimum meaningful unit. Consequently the word, '*ghaṭam*' is called a *vākya*, or a collection of *padas* and not a *pada*. But it is a *khaṇḍavākya* (phrase or sense) and not a *mahāvākya* (a sentence in a normal sense). Thus *Śābdabodha* is the understanding of *vākyārtha*, the meaning of a vākya. A vākya is a collection of *padas*. For the Naiyāyikas, the most efficient means of *śābdabodha* is *pada* but not the vākya as a whole. Therefore, first of all the vākya is analyzed into the constituent lexical/grammatical elements, technically known as *padas*. The meaning of the *padas* consisting a vākya can be obtained through the remembrance of those meanings (*padārtha smaraṇa*). *Padas* denote their respective meanings called *padārthas* by their denotative power/potency known as *śakti*. All the *padārthas* get syntactically related with each other by the principle called *saṃsargamaryādā*, i.e., the governing law of relation. The relation, *saṃsarga sambandha* or *anvaya* among the remembered meanings is not understood when they are individually remembered.



Hence, the understanding of this relation is a new product when the vākya is understood, and so śābdabodha means the understanding of the relation, the relation among the meanings of the padas.

So the minimum scheme to yield śābdabodha is:

- (i) Knowledge of the *pada* (meaningful phonetic unit or grammatical elements like prātipadika, dhātu, pratyaya etc.) which is treated as the most efficient causal factor (*karaṇa*) to yield śābdabodha.
- (ii) Knowledge of the word-meaning (padārtha - referent or import of the word) which is treated as the intermediary function (dvāra) to generate śābdabodha.
- (iii) The knowledge of the relation between pada and padārtha known as sakti, is considered to be the auxiliary cause of śābdabodha.

Hence śabda or verbal testimony as a source of valid knowledge consists in understanding the meaning of the statement of a trustworthy person.

Viśvanātha in his Nyāyasiddhāntamuktāvalī says that Śābdabodha or verbal knowledge can be (achieved) attained by the knowledge of words which is its instrumental cause (*karaṇa*). It originates from the cognition itself of words, i.e., □padajñānam□□which is the instrumental cause (*karaṇa*)□□of the verbal knowledge or (śābdabodha)□□The knowledge or cognition of words (padajñānam) arises (begins) with the perception of words by the sense of hearing or from seeing the script.

So, the first step in Śābdabodha is the perception of the words of a sentence or proposition set forth by some authoritative person. In the case of a spoken sentence we have an auditory perception, and in that of a written sentence we have a visual perception of the constituent words. The tradition defines śabda as āptavākya śabdah, i.e., the sentence of an authentic speaker is called śabda, or the sentence or proposition of a credible or authoritative person. An authoritative person is 'he who speaks the truth'. Truth is an object as it exists in reality. The verbal knowledge (Śābdabodha) of truth is the representation of a thing just as it exists. A proposition which conveys such true verbal knowledge is yathārthavacana, and he who asserts such a proposition is yathārthavaktā or āpta.

Secondly, to have cognition of words, there must be an understanding of the meaning of words perceived by us (padārthadhīh). So, the operation (dwāra)□of this instrumental cause (*karaṇa*)□of śabda is the recollection of the meanings of words. And this recollection itself has to be produced by the knowledge of words. Here, Viśvanātha clarifies that the 'recollection of the meanings of words' has to be produced by the knowledge of words only. Otherwise, a person who has the knowledge of a word would have verbal knowledge, even when he has perceptual cognition of the object denoted by the word. That is to say, when a person hears a sentence and recollects the meanings of words by the knowledge of certain things which are other than the words themselves but which are related to the meanings of words, he would have verbal knowledge. E.g. if someone hears the word 'jar' and then in the next moment he sees the thing 'jar' and so he has perceptual knowledge of the meaning of the word, then he would have verbal knowledge. So, in order to avoid such a possibility/difficulty Naiyāyikas state that nly '(knowledge of) meaning of words produced by word themselves' (padajanyapadārthajñānam) and not 'remembrance of meanings of words produced by words' (padajanyapadārtha-smaraṇam) is said to be the operation/function of instrumental cause (*karaṇa*)□of śabda.

“Recollection” of the meanings of words:

When a word is uttered the letters in it appear one by one in a certain order. Each letter as it is uttered leaves behind an impression of itself in the mind of the hearer and fades away by the time the next letter is uttered with the result that there is no possibility of any of the previous letters remaining (in the ear) at any one moment (or in other words only one letter remains in the ear at any single moment). But their impressions are left behind in the mind of the hearer. As soon as the last letter is heard, the auditory organ combines it with the impressions for all the previous letters and conveys to the mind the idea of the thing denoted by that collection of letters even though all the letters except the last one are not there at that moment. After the last letter, the mind combines the impressions of the previous letters and this combination makes him *recollect* the knowledge of the entity denoted by it, which is already latent in the mind of the hearer.



Further the 'recollection of the meanings of words' should be produced by the knowledge of words with the help of the *significatory functions* (*vṛitti*) of words; otherwise, by means of words like 'jar', one can have the recollection and then there would come about the verbal knowledge of other. Because, when one hears words like 'jar' etc., since these words inhere in ether one can have recollection of ether also. This is because the knowledge of one relatum (viz. word 'jar') produces the remembrance of another relatum of the relation viz. ether. Hence one would have also the verbal knowledge also of ether.

This difficulty is avoided when it is stated that 'the recollection of the meanings of words which is produced by the knowledge of words' is to be taken in the sense that the recollection of the meanings of words is produced by the knowledge of words with the help of the *significatory function* (*vṛitti*) of words. *Significatory function* (*Vṛitti*) is a form of relation that exists between words and their meanings. It is of two kinds, 1. denotative function (*Śakti*) or 2. implication (*Lakṣaṇā*).

It is here alone (i.e. for the recollection of the meaning of the word which is produced by the knowledge of the word) that the knowledge of the *denotative function* is useful, which is the auxiliary (*sahakāṛī*) cause of the *śābdabodha*. If one does not have the knowledge of the denotative function earlier, even though he has the knowledge of the words, there would not arise the recollection of the meaning as related with the word. This is because the knowledge of word brings about the recollection of its meaning in the capacity of being the knowledge of the relatum.

Thus, the *karaṇa* or the instrumental cause of *śabda* or valid verbal knowledge is the knowledge of words (*padajñāna*) which leads to the knowledge of objects through its function or operation (*dvāra*) of recalling to our minds the meanings connected with words or sentences (*padārthadhīḥ*) with the help of the denotative function of words (*śaktidhīḥ* *sahakāriṇī*). i.e.

padajñānam tu karaṇam dvāram tatra padārthadhīḥ
 śābdabodhaḥ falam tatra śaktidhīḥ sahakāriṇī ।

Thus, the process of getting *śābdabodha* is :

1. Knowledge of words is the instrumental cause of verbal knowledge.
2. The instrumental cause (which is the knowledge of words) is the perception of words by the sense of hearing or the knowledge of words which arises from seeing the script.
3. The *operation* of the instrumental cause is the recollection of the meanings of words.
4. The operation of the instrumental cause is produced with the auxiliary cause.
5. The auxiliary cause is the knowledge of denotative function. Without the knowledge of denotative function, it is impossible to have the recollection of the meanings of words.
6. Denotative function is the relation of the word and its meaning.
7. The result of the whole of this process is verbal knowledge which is the knowledge of the relation of the meanings of words.

The relation by which a word signifies a particular thing is called *vṛitti* (significatory function). It is of two kinds: denotative function (*Śakti*) or implication (*Lakṣaṇā*). These functions are in the form of relations that exist between words and their meanings. The first is created by *saṅket* and is inseparable from the word; the second operates in the absence of the first, and, being derived from it, is entirely dependent on it. *Saṅket* is the direct relation between a word and its meaning, such that the knowledge of the word leads immediately to the knowledge of its relation to that meaning. Now *saṅket* or the direct relation between a word and its meaning may be either eternal or non-eternal. When eternal and unchanging, it is called *śakti* or denotative function or inherent potency of a word. Thus the relation between the word *jar* and the object called *jar* is a direct and eternal relation called *śakti*. *Śakti* is defined by Naiyāyikas as "the convention made by God that such and such a meaning should be understood from such and such a word". So, the meaning achieved by *śakti* is called *abhidhā* or *śakyārtha* or primary meaning.



When *saṅket* or the direct relation between a word and its meaning is non-eternal or changeable due to the usage of mankind, the meaning is called *paribhāṣā*. This is due to the will of the authorities in any science which prescribes that such and such words should mean such and such object. This is the convention established by the authorities, e.g., the words 'article' in grammar, 'premise' in logic, 'court' in law, 'category' in philosophy.

Lakṣaṇā or implication is a relation of a word with its meaning which is conveyed by the denotative function (*śakti*) of the word. It is resorted to when there is inapplicability of the primary meaning in the context. By *Lakṣaṇā* is meant the secondary meaning of a word. It is the indirect or implied meaning in which we should understand a word when its direct or primary meaning does not consist with other words or the context. A word indirectly means an object when it is related to it because of its direct relation with something else with which object is somehow associated.

Select Bibliography

1. John Vattanky, S.J., *Nyāya Philosophy of Language*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1995.
2. Jha, V.N., *Śabdakhaṇḍa* of the *Nyāyasiddhāntamuktāvalī*, *Sambhāsa*, Vol. 13, 1992.
3. Kunjuni Raja, K., *Indian theories of Meaning*, adyar Library, Madras, 1963.
4. Matilal, B.K., *Logic, Language and Reality*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1986.
5. Shastri, D.N., *Critique of Indian Realism*, Agra University, Agra, 1964.