



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

UGC Approved, Journal No: 48666

Volume-VII, Issue-III, January 2019, Page No. 308-315

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

The concept of ‘Meaning’- A study based on Vakyapadiya

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Abstract

‘What is meaning’? This is a topic of interest for linguists, philosophers, Computational linguists and those who deal with NLP, Artificial Intelligence etc. How does a Natural language convey efficiently the ideas from speaker to listener? This topic is studied here, based on the discussions available in Vakyapadiya, an ancient Sanskrit text. In modern linguistics ‘word meanings’ are analyzed often and the most famous theories are ‘Referential theory, Ideational theory and truth-value theory. A very significant theory suggested by Vakyapadiya in this regard is the ‘Akhandavakya sidhanta’ - the sentence is the unit of language, and sentential meaning happens as a flash of understanding in the mind.

Sentence and Sentential meaning: Bhartrhari presents the concept of Sentence Indivisibility ‘akhanda paksha’, after presenting a comprehensive discussion on many other views on sentence¹. An important message we get from these discussions is that, in actual natural language situations, ideas are transferred as whole, not in bits and pieces. Hence to understand the real high potentials of language, one must go beyond the level of analytical-grammar, and he highlights the concept of ‘Akhandavakya sidhanta’. It says that sentence is the unit of language communication. Sentence is indivisible, since the ideas are indivisible. Words are getting meaning when used in a sentence. Before we analyze ‘meaning’, we should reflect up on the two roles language posses – 1. Object of listening (Srutyate iti Sabda) २. Product produced by organ of speech (उच्यते इति वाक्).

Śabda and Vāk: Śabda can be considered as the object of ears. Vāk can be considered as the product produced by the organ of action (Vagindriya). Śabda is the cause for understanding the meaning, with respect to a listener. For any instrumental cause (nimittakaarana), there must be an operation or function for the result to be obtained. Meaning can be taken as that function of language which gives the knowledge. An ideal speaker, a member of that language community is able to recollect the heard sound corresponding to the meaning experience he had, and he is able to produce the same through his speech whenever it is necessary. It is also important to note that ‘sabda’ and ‘vak’ are different with respect to any particular individual and they do get a common place for

sharing, in the inner faculty - in the intellect, without which language does not work.

Sentence as a unit of language communication: The sentence is a whole piece of cognitive awareness. When one utters the words 'I am hungry', it is one unitary sense that he wants to convey. Intension of the speaker is unitary in nature. Though he has to express what he intends to say through a series of words, yet the 'sense' expressed has a unity. That's why Bhartrhari claims that sentence and sentence-meaning are primary and undifferentiated whole. Indivisible internal speech element is getting transformed into indivisible sentence through divisible sounds. The hearer listens to the speaker's speech in a sequential order, syllable by syllable. But he understands the unitary meaning as a flash of awareness.

Use of language, with respect to the speaker: Language is something in which all human beings/all sentient beings are engaged. The specific Sanskrit term for this is शब्दना-व्यापारः. It is the act of speaking, coding the idea using language, during which Vāk passes through different stages and reach the final stage of 'uttered sound'. Word-principle as the embodiment of linguistic potency manifests itself as phonemes / language in useⁱⁱ. The language in manifested form is the only way of expressing awareness about the objects as well as the activities of the world. Without 'word-penetrationⁱⁱⁱ', or if we withdraw this linguistic potency, then there will be neither consciousness, nor cognition nor sensation of objects. Without the application of concepts and names, objects and facts are devoid of any identity.

With respect to the speaker, the uttered sound is produced from the 'language faculty'- बुद्धिस्थशब्दः- which is present in his intellect, and this language faculty is also known as 'Sphota'. As in the case of fire originated while rubbing two wooden pieces one presupposes the presence of latent fire- energy in it, so also, the 'बुद्धिस्थशब्दः' is the cause which gets transformed into 'audible sound' Nada^{iv}.

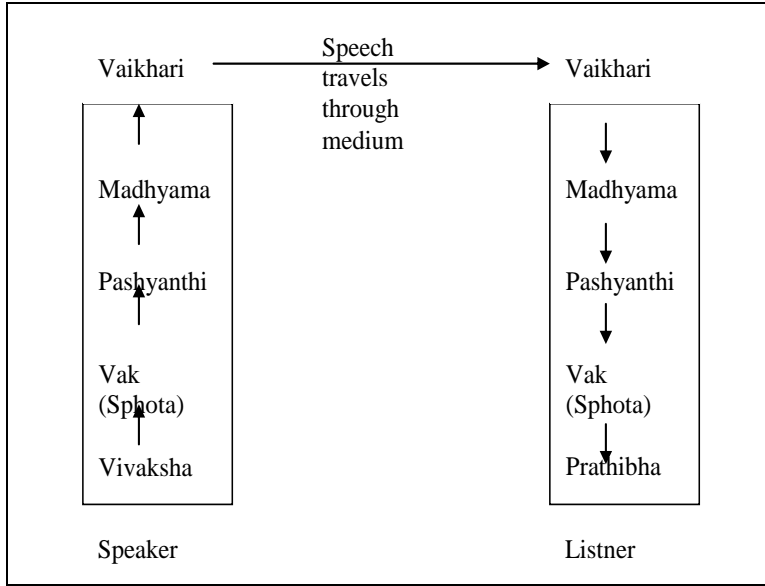
With respect to the speaker, in the pre-verbal /potential state, the idea and the words (Meaning and Language) are undifferentiated. Before the utterance, it is argued, the language along with whatever it conveys or means is like the yolk of a peacock's egg^v.

The śabdatattvam, the essence of language is like the yolk of pea-cock's egg. In the beginning it is one single unit without parts. As it grows, parts are visible. Like wise, being articulated, in to the form of an act language also obtains parts and sequences. The original 'source language' is a unity, without parts and sequences. But when transformed it seems to have parts and sequences.

Communication takes place in three steps.

1. Linguistic utterance- It involves the use of audible noise through vocal organ. Coding of idea takes place in this step.
2. The coded signal travels through a medium. It must be received by the hearer, and speech sounds must be given attention, avoiding other noises.

3. Language/sound signals pass through and transform themselves gradually through the different stages of vykhari, madhyama, pasyantietc, and it (the sound representative-Sphoṭa) bursts forth - sphoṭayati. Coding at speaker and decoding at listener happens through this process. It is represented in the following diagram.



Pratibhā as meaning^{vi}: One whole unit of language when heard, it generates an awareness in the mind of the listener. Bhartṛhari introduces 'Pratibhā' in the following verse.

विच्छेदग्रहणेऽर्थानां

प्रतिभाऽन्यैवजायते।

वाक्यार्थइतितामाहुः

पदार्थैरुपपादिताम्॥^{vii}

Due to the sequential nature of the heard sound, meaning of parts may happen in the mind, but as soon as one complete linguistic unit which satisfies singleness of purpose is reached the mind, in other words, when vākyasphoṭa is reached the mind, a sudden flash of understanding takes place. This is the meaning. This is termed as 'Pratibhā' by Bhartṛhari. If one gets some instances of referring one particular śabda with one particular applied meaning, due to abhyāsa / practice that word starts indicating that particular thing, atleast for that individual^{viii}. This Pratibhā can be felt but can not be explained to others, as the sweetness experienced while having honey or sugar cannot be explained to others. The flash of awareness is Pratibhā, this flash happens in the mind when one comprehends Śabda (external or internal). Śabda is the reason for this flash to occur^{ix}. Bhartṛhari gives an analogy of a lamp^x, showing things around it. Śabda has the power of grāhyatvam and

grāhakatvam, reveal itself and illumine the meaning too^{xi}. To perceive something, to see something, there must be enough light, and in the presence of light, the viewer must identify the object noticing its boundaries. During the instantaneous flash, cognition also takes place even without the person's careful interference.

By a few verses, Bhartṛhari suggests that meaning or Pratibhā / the sudden flash, would be revealed when the speech faculty comes into action.

साक्षाच्छब्देनजनिताम्

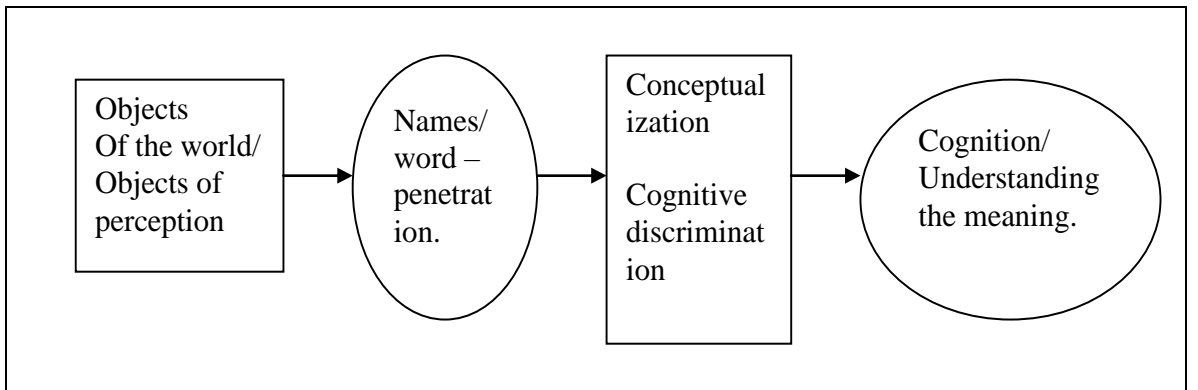
भावनानुगमेनवा।

इतिकर्तव्यतायांताम्

नकश्चिदतिवर्तते॥ V.P: 2.146

Every activity is motivated by mental meaning of thought to act. Either motivated by audible sounds, or with the mental/ self-motivation, the idea originated in the mind, make people indulge in activities. Even without the help of medium of audible sound, Śabdabhāvanā – the Linguistic faculty is the cause of having the flash of meaning. If not from the present impressions of linguistic faculty it could be from the previous impressions acquired (even from previous births). In any case, just before the flash of meaning happens, language faculty presents something with word penetration. In short, the theory of Pratibha can be stated as follows – “*Sphota prompts Pratibha in the Smriti*” where Sphota is the language unit, Pratibha is the meaning, Smriti is the storage space of memories of experiences. Pratibha is in the form of flash of awareness.

In fact Natural language is nothing but a formalization of the universe. It is represented in the diagram below:



Objects > Names (Word penetration) > Conceptualization > Cognitive discrimination > Cognition/Understanding the meaning

Pratibhā is the cause for any sentient being indulging in any activity. any action presupposes an idea to act. As soon as it gets word impregnation, it becomes cognizable^{xii}.

By these verses, Bhartṛhari stresses that, śabdadisposinability is present in every being by birth itself. For the living beings other than human beings, it is not fully developed. Even in the case of new born babies this is present, and that is the reason behind their communication with tokens other than formal language (crying, laughing etc). They cannot speak only because their speech organs are not mature enough.

No activity in a living being is possible without Pratibhā. There is nothing except Pratibhā which can be accepted as the cause of the activities seen even in the animals and birds, though they don't have a language of our kind. Bhartṛhari also suggests various levels of Pratibhā, through the following verse:-

स्वभावचरणाभ्यास-

योगादृष्टोपपादिताम्।

विशिष्टोपहितां चेति

प्रतिभाषड्विधां विदुः॥

षड्विधाप्रतिभा- स्वाभाविकीप्रतिभा, (आ)चरण / चरित -निमित्ताप्रतिभा, अभ्यासनिमित्ताप्रतिभा, योगनिमित्ताप्रतिभा, अदृष्टोपपादिताप्रतिभा, विशिष्टोपहिताप्रतिभा।

By this it seems that he suggests the difference in meaning grasped for a given language instance, among people is due to the difference in the type of Pratibhā. The meaning is a flash of awareness which happens in existing knowledge base, smṛti. It is of six types. That which is stored naturally, and activated naturally. That which is acquired due to disciplined way of life, that which is gathered in the smṛti due to frequent practice, etc.

From all the verses describing Pratibhā, it seems that, Bhartṛhari's exact import of it is that, Pratibhā is meaning. It is not only restricted to sentence meaning. Sentence is taken as the unit of language, and of course sentence meaning also is Pratibhā. When we consider a lengthier instance of language, say for example, a discourse, there may be different types of sentences, some of them having primary meaning, some of them suggestive meaning, some even ironical sentences, *stuti* in guise of *nindā* etc. Though the sentences heard by the listener are of different types, a meaning – whole meaning he comprehend in his mind, quite naturally. The flash of awareness which is prompted by language (even beyond sentential level) is justified by the theory of Pratibhā.

So also language, as perceived more and more clear, can give varied meanings, suggest Bhartṛhari. When he states *Abhyāsātpratibhāhetuḥ*, he implies the role of mental impression in designing the word-meaning relation. Abhyāsa, the repeated occurrences of 'co-existence' of a śabda and a referent, causes a sudden remembrance of the object on hearing the śabdathenafter. Smṛti has an important role in cognition of meaning.

Bhartṛhari's following verse suggests this idea:-

अशब्दमपरेऽर्थस्य रूपनिर्धारणं विदुः।

अर्थावभासरूपा हि शब्देभ्यो जायते स्मृतिः॥ (2-417)

In fact, when a word is used, a remembrance resembling the experience of the object appears in the mind of the speaker and in a hearer's mind as he hears it.

वक्त्रान्यथैव प्रक्रान्तो

भिन्नेषु प्रतिपत्तुषु

स्वप्रत्ययानुसारेण

शब्दार्थःप्रविभज्यते॥(2-135)

Each speaker or hearer brings his or her 'remembrance' in to verbal denotation. Therefore, verbal denotation varies both in comprehension and in expression. The meaning of words intended by the speaker will be onething and different listeners understand it differently too, for the knowledge background is different from person to person.

An object is cognized differently by different persons, and the same person may cognize the same object differently at different times^{xiii}. Bhartrhari states this by the following verse:-

Bhartrhari notices that, to the same word many meanings are attributed according to varied circumstances^{xiv}too. See the verse:-

एकस्यापि चशब्दस्य निमित्तैरव्यवस्थितैः

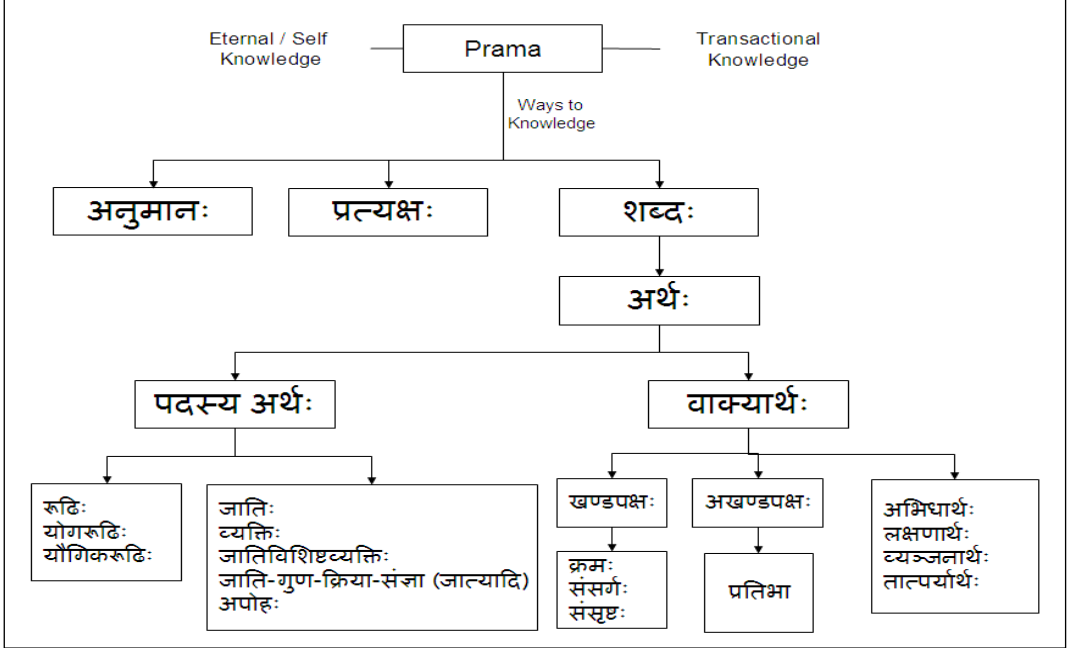
एकेन बहुभिश्चार्थो बहुधा परिकल्प्यते॥ (2-137)

Bhartrhari explains that this nature of fluidity of language does not affect the process of cognition in common speech instances. During transaction, members of a speech community grasp the exact idea, in natural situations. Therefore, he declares that a whole sentence must be the 'conveyer' of a whole meaning. In other words, a sentence must be considered as the minimum unit of language, and being part of a sentence, words appear to be connected to meanings.

Conclusion: Language has only two roles to play- as sound heard-sabda' and as sound produced (vak) which are distinctly different with respect to any particular individual. But they do get a common place for sharing, in the inner faculty - in the intellect, without which language does not work. Since language exists as an internal entity, we can say that language is only *representing* the outer world experiences. Here words do not stand isolated, they will be always connected and part of one or the other action. Words will be connected to the action word according to their role in the action. The action, along with the properly connected participant words, in short- the sentence – becomes the unit of communication. The linguistic unit (sentence) when heard completely, a flash of awareness takes place, in the database of smriti- the stored memories of past actions. This flash of awareness is Pratibha, the meaning.

Notes:

ⁱ The following chart summarises the various indian theories on word meaning and sentential meaning



ⁱⁱमूलाधारात्प्रथममुदितो...

ⁱⁱⁱनसोऽस्ति प्रत्ययो लोकेयःशब्दानुगमादृते।

अनुविद्धमिव ज्ञानं सर्वशब्देन भासते ॥ (V.P: 1-123)

^{iv}अरणिस्थं यथा ज्योतिः प्रकाशान्तरकारणम्।

तद्वत्शब्दोऽपि बुद्धिस्थः श्रुतीनां कारणं पृथक् ॥ [V. P: 1. 46]

^vअण्डभावमिवापन्नोयः क्रतुः शब्दसंज्ञकः।

वृत्तिस्तस्य क्रियारूपा भागशो भजते क्रमम् ॥ (1-51).

^{vi} The word Pratibha is used to denote slightly different concepts. It is used to refer to Talent, Prajñā etc, but as a linguistic entity, Pratibha is meaning, it is not the mind, not prajñā, not the capacity to grasp the meaning directly.

^{vii}V.P: 2-

143 अखण्डाद्वाक्याद्बुद्ध्यापोद्धृतेभ्योस्वार्थानां विच्छेदेन ग्रहणकाले एव पदार्थमतिव्यतिरिक्ता एव काचन अखण्डवाक्यार्थविषया असत्त्वरैव उपाधिभूतैः पदार्थरूपादिता अभिव्यञ्जिता प्रतिभा जायते ॥

^{viii}Abhyāsāt pratibhāhetuḥ

^{ix}Śabdaḥ kāraṇmarthasya

^xGrāhyatvam grāhakatvam ca dve śaktī tejaso yathā

^{xi} Like a lamp, sound reveals itself and illumines the meaning too.

^{xii}यथाद्रव्यविशेषाणांपरिपाकैरयत्नजाः ॥

मदादिशक्तयोदृष्टाःप्रतिभास्तद्वतांतथा ॥

स्वरवृत्तिविकुरुतेमधौपुंस्कोकिलस्यकः ।

जन्त्वादयःकुलायादिकरणेकेनशिक्षिताः ॥

आहारप्रीत्यपद्वेषप्लवनादिक्रियासुकः ।

जात्यान्वयप्रसिद्धासुप्रयोक्तामृगपक्षिणाम् ॥ V.P:

^{xiii}एकस्मिन्नपिदृश्येर्धेदर्शनंभिद्यतेपृथक् ।

कालान्तरेणचैकोऽपितंपश्यत्यन्यथापुनः ॥[V. P. 2-136]

^{xiv}Bhartrhari quotes *Sankuka (Brihaddevata)* to mention the contextual factors affecting the meaning of an utterance, he also explains another extended list of twelve conditions in the following verses.

संसर्गोविप्रयोगश्चसाहचर्यविरोधिता ।

अर्थप्रकरणंलिङ्गंशब्दस्यान्यस्यसन्निधिः

सामर्थ्यमौचितीदेशःकालोव्यक्तिःस्वरादयः

शब्दार्थस्यानवच्छेदे विशेषस्मृतिहेतवः ॥(V. P. II-315, 316)

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