THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN HOLISM AND ATOMISM: INDIAN LESSONS FOR THE CONTEXT PRINCIPLE OF MEANING

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That the problem of meaning is intertwined with definite epistemological and ontological issues of any tradition is something well known. Philosophers had conceived and propagated different theories of meaning, in response to the following questions:

1) Is it the case that a word develops its meaning only in the context of a sentence?

2) To know the meaning of a word is it necessary that we consider the sentential context in which it occurs?

3) How is it that we know the meaning of a sentence as a whole once we know the meaning of its individual words?

In general response to these questions classical Indian Philosophy witnessed serious debates on theory of meaning where *context principle* was pitched against *composition principle* and *sentence holism* against *sentence atomism*. The issue that concerned them was about the significant units of language, i.e. the proper locus of meaning. A few words are in order here concerning the relationship of the context principle and what is now called as the composition principle. The composition principle says that the meaning (sense) of a whole sentence is determined (composed of) the meaning (sense) of the words out of which the sentence is composed. The context principle, on the other hand, seems to take the meaning (sense) of the sentence to be primary. In similar tones, the atomistic theory of meaning proposed that the sentence meaning as a whole is supposed to be constituted by the atoms of word meaning. The holistic theory, on the other, insists on the primacy of the sentence as a whole.

It was Bhartṛhari in the Indian context who suggested a strong affirmative answer to question (1) mentioned a while ago, and accepted its extreme consequence, namely, words have no meaning out side or isolated from the context of a sentence just like 'rat' in the word 'Socrates' has no

divisions, *connected designation* and *designation before connection*, theories proposed by Bhāṭṭas and Prābhākaras. Having criticized both, he puts forward a third alternative that we may call sentence holism[1].

In *Vākyapadīya* chapter 2 Bhartṛhari notes that regarding the notion of the sentence and meaning, there are two principal philosophical theses: one is called the indivisibility thesis (*akhaṇḍapakṣa*) and the other is the divisibility thesis (*khaṇḍapakṣa*). The first thesis is what Bhartṛhari himself maintains while the second is held by his opponents, majorly Mīmāmsakas. The debaters had two-questions before them: 1) what is a sentence & 2) what constitutes the sentence meaning?

According to sentence holism, sentences are wholes and they are the unanalyzable units of meaningful discourse. Similarly, the meanings of sentence themselves are wholes. In fact Bhartṛhari claims that they are also timeless, for destruction is usually believed to be dissolution into parts. We reach words and word meanings as parts of sentence and sentence meanings through analysis, synthesis and abstraction-a method called *āvāpodhāra*. This method is only instrumental in facilitating our language learning, a convenient way of making explicit our implicit language competence.

The words are no less abstraction than the letters are. The meaning of a word in isolation is an imaginary construct. In fact words are as much devoted of meaning as the letter or some syllables in a world. The meaning of a complete sentence is given to us as a whole block of reality. We chip this whole and correlate such abstract bits and pieces of meaning with words and particles which are also reached by such a process of bracketing apart the whole sentence. On this theory, a sentence cannot be a composite entity with words as constituent elements, and the meaning of a sentence like wise cannot be given by the allocation or computation of word- meanings individually considered.

Bhartṛhari well applies this holistic theory in his ontology too. As a matter of fact he does not of make a cleavage between language and reality. As a holistic monist he rejected atomism by saying that particulars are abstractions or a falsely broken on extracted pieces of indivisible whole. For him, words, concepts, universals are all constructs. Just as words get abstracted out of whole sentences or sentence- complexes, similarly concepts are abstracted out of concrete experience of the whole. The reality is an impartite whole which

we never cognize as such, but always under the guise of some words or word-generated concepts. For Bhartrhari having a concept and using a word are merely two sides of the same coin.

This view of Bhartṛhari is similar to W.V. Quine's insistence upon the primacy of sentence over word/term as the vehicle of meaning and he attributed this to Frege's context principle. It is significant to note that Quine in his *Word & Object* referred to the view of Indian grammarians in support of his view. Quine labels this semantic primacy of sentence as one of the five milestones of empiricism and claimed that like the Copernican revolution it shifted the center of discussion in semantics. It made obvious that the words or terms are only like grammatical particles, for the meaning of words are abstractions from the truth conditions of the sentence that contains them[2].

For both Quine and Bhartṛhari the sentence that carries meaning and significance may have parts, but such parts would not be capable of existing in isolation from the rest. In this sense, they could be just our own abstractions. This claim has certain ontological implications as well: the wholes may have parts, but these parts lose their ontic significance as soon as they lose their contextuality in the whole.

This position maintained by both Bhartṛhari and Quine represents a strong interpretation of context principle. There is also a weak interpretation of the context principle where in the sub-sentential expressions are not denied meanings of their own, though they are meant to constitute the meaning of the sentence. Apart from the strong and weak interpretations of the context principle there could also be an intermediate one. In the intermediate interpretation, the meaning, which the sub- sentential expressions have, is only the contribution, which they make to the meaning of the sentence in which they occur. Let us now evaluate these three interpretations and their corresponding representations. What is distinctive in the strong interpretation of the principle is that it invites us to understand the principle as saying that every expression, which is short of a sentence, must be defined contextually. Both Quine and Bhartṛhari, as we have noted earlier attribute to this position. This interpretation is unacceptable for multiple reasons. The major one being that this interpretation would make it utterly impossible to accommodate the composition principle. If the individual expressions, words and other sub- sentential expressions do not have any meaning of their own, there cannot be any question of deciphering

the meaning of a whole sentence in a step-by-step construction from the meanings of words. Michel Dummett points out that quite contrary to how Quine interprets Frege, he in fact was not prepared to give up the composition principle in toto[3]. In the Indian scenario Mīmāmsaka atomists have maintained identical positions. The atomistic views of the two Mīmāmsaka sub schools, Bhāṭṭa & Prābhākara recognized that the sentence is a composite entity composed of elements which we call words, particles etc. These elements are meaningful units of expression. The hearer grasps the meaning of a sentence provided he has what we may call linguistic competence, that is, knowledge of the meanings of words and particles as well as of how that particular language works. On this view, it will be unreasonable to take sentences as the smallest meaningful units, for sentences are virtually countless and we certainly cannot learn a language by learning those countless sentences, and their meanings. It is only by learning a few finite numbers of words and seeing how that language works that we gain the linguistic competence described above.

Though both Bhāṭṭas & Prābhākaras reject Bhartṛhari's idealistic position, there is an internal difference between them that led to a great controversy lasted for several centuries. The controversy arises while addressing these issues: 1) how does the competent hearer recognizes sentence meaning as a whole from hearing in bits& pieces, the constituent words in sequence? Does he first cognize or recognize the meaning of each constituent word and then join these bits and pieces of meaning together to cognize a connected whole - the sentence meaning? If your answer is yes, then we are talking from the Bhāṭṭa position. This means, designation by words first, then the designata are connected to form a unity (*abhihitānvaya vāda*). Alternatively the Prabhakaras say that a person recognizes the meaning of the whole sentence by hearing simply the constituent words put together syntactically: connected designation (*anvitābhidhānavāda*). In *abhihitānvayavāda* to recognize the meaning of a sentence, we as hearers must first obtain these self-subsistent building blocks, and then cement these blocks to obtain the connected meaning of the sentences. This implies that the distinction between word-meanings and sentence-meaning is one of building blocks and building itself[4]. Here Bhāṭṭas can be seen as opting for a weak interpretation of context principle and moving close to the intuition which prompted the modern composition principle.

The weak interpretation of the context principle has the merit of being

quite uncontroversial. Who will deny that the best way and in the case of some expressions the only way, in which we can ascertain the meaning of sub-sentential expressions is by observing how they are used in sentences to say something? But Dummett points out that Frege would not have subscribed to this *weak interpretation* either since what Frege might have had in mind when he advocated the context principle is not just a matter of discovering the meaning of an individual expression, it is also something about the individual expression having the meaning it has. The weak interpretation, therefore, is too weak to bring out the full significance of the Fregean principle.

Having rejected both strong and weak interpretations we are left with only the intermediate interpretations which tells us that the meaning of a sub-sentential expression is nothing but its contribution to the meaning of the sentence in which it occur. This is almost identical with what *anvitābhidhāna* holds. *Anvitābhidhāna* maintains that there is no intervening event such as that of our getting hold first of the so called word-meanings as building blocks, between our knowledge of the works and our knowledge of the meaning of the sentences made of such words. This has the implication that the meanings of the words are not, in some sense context free independent objects. Whatever a word designates, it is always related or connected (*anvita*) with the designation of other words in the sentence. Note that this position of Prabhakaras comes very close to context principle in a leveled fashion, accommodating at the same time composition principle well within it.

Dummett interprets Frege as one subscribing to this intermediate interpretation of the context principle. He points out that the main function of language is to use it for saying something and we cannot say anything in the strict sense of the word 'say' with out the use of whole sentences. It is only by use of whole sentences that we can make moves in language. Sub-sentential expressions, by forming parts of sentences help us in the matter of saying what we want to say. Thus the meaning of sub-sentential expressions consists in the contribution which they make to the meaning of the sentences.

Very much like Prābhākaras, Frege reconciled the context principle with the composition principle. He accomplished this feat in the following manner: In the order of explanation, the sense of a sentence is primary, but in the order of recognition the sense of a word is primary. He explains it thus: In

so far as the knowledge of what a particular significant stretch of discourse means is concerned knowledge of the sense of individual words must precede any knowledge of the sentence as a whole, the reason being that the sense of the sentence it self is determined/made up of the senses of the words which constitute the sentence[5].

But on the other hand, it is the sense of the sentence, which must be regarded as primary in the order of explanation of the sense of any significant stretch of discourse, since it is only by means of sentence that we may perform a linguistic act - that we can say anything. The possession of sense by a word or complex expression short of a sentence cannot consist in anything else but its being governed by a general rule which partially specifies the sense of sentences containing it. Dummett is aware that this way of understanding the relationship of the sense of sentences and the sense of words can be defended only if we could give an account of what it is for a sentence to have sense without any reference to the sentence being formed out of meaningful words. Hence he adds up that the general notion of the sense possessed by a sentence must be capable of being explained without reference to the notion of the senses of constituent words. This is possible via the conception of truth conditions: to grasp the sense of a sentence is, in general, to know the conditions under which that sentence is true and the conditions under which it is false.

This way Dummett explains well how Frege reconciles both context & composition principles in his theory of meaning. This reconciliation however is not possible in Indian context since formal logic does not find a place in Indian Inferential theories.

Notes and references

1. *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari, chapter II.

2. *Word and Object*, W.V. Quine.

3. *Seas of Language*, M. Dummett.

4. *Indian Theories of Meaning*, Kunjunni raja.

5. *"Thought" Philosophical Logic*, P.F.Strawson(ed.)