

# Semantic Mechanism in Indian Thought: Is Bhartrihari's Sphota Theory APT to Semantic Discourse Analysis?

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## ABSTRACT

The main focus of this research paper is to delineate the Indian notion of semantics in the light of Bhartrihari's notion of semantics which is holistic in character. A study of semantics in discourse analysis using a systematic framework such as semantic unity would help to create a socio-cultural unity as well as languaculture unity identify the manner in which the features of discourse analysis are realized in languages. Furthermore, this study comprise developing the mechanism of Indian thought in discourse analysis and semantics, more specifically Bhartrihari's sphota theory of semantics facilitating interlanguaculture as well as intralanguaculture discourse analysis for the fertility of semantic theory.

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## 1. Introduction: A Preliminary Notation

In order to discuss Bhartrihari's notion of semantics, we would like to discuss briefly some important Indian thought with regard to semantics. According to the Nyaya-Vaisheshika, the basic unit of semantic is the word not the sentence. They emphasized that the link between a word and its semantic is conventional and not natural. Here we have an account of semantic theory which is contrasted to Nyaya-Vaishesika account of the semantic theory that is by Plato, he argues that the meaning of words is natural, not conventional. According to Vedantins, language consists of words and sentences. But language depends on the intention with which our language is produced. So, we establish the meaning of word or sentence through someone uttering a word or sentence and then pointing to the object it describes with the intention that we connect the term with the object. Ramanuja suggests that the intention does not describe an object; it is a subjective feature in the people that make them interested in the object. For the yoga system, the Sphota is a unit of sound or a letter series. A sound series or letter series can be analyzed as a succession of sound-units or letter units (Patanjali, 1951. p. 58).

This paper consists of two parts; part one is discussed about the double aspect of semantics through discourse analysis in Indian thought and the second part are about semantic mechanism in sphota theory and discourse analysis in the light of Bhartrihari's philosophy.

## 2. Semantics in Indian Thought: Dual-aspect Semantics (Khandapaksa&Akhandapaksa)

### Version 1

According to the Indian Thought, there are two main approaches in the study of theories of meaning. These are such as *khandapaksa* and *akhandapaksa*. *Khandapaksa* approach is emphasized by some many Indian thoughts but Prabhakara, Bhatta and Nyaya Vaisesika are so important among them. *Akhandapaksa* approach is emphasized by Bhatruhari (Kunjunni, 1963, pp. 6-9). Bhatruhari's

*akhandapaksa* approach is more important for this section because it is emphasized upon the holistic approach of the notion of semantics which is the central issue of the thesis.

Generally, we understand that *khandapaksa* consider that the sentence as a combination of words, while *akhandapaksa* consider that a sentence is an indivisible unity. In case of *khandapaksa*, Prabhakara advocates that a sentence has a unitary meaning of its own which cannot be resolved into the complex meaning of its words. Bhatta claims that the meaning of a sentence is merely the synthesis of the meanings of the separate words composing it. Similarly, Nyaya Vaisesika holds that though the sentence is a composite whole in which the individual words have definite important parts to play the meaning of the sentence is delivered by the sentence and not by the words or their meanings (Potter, 1975, pp. 209-210).

### Version 2

Significantly, the dual-aspect semantic theory suggests the language-world relationship (semantic externalism or socio-causal domain). The second fold regards to the language-mind relationship (semantic internalism or mental domain). Broadly, these are called the linguistic aspect of meaning theory and non-linguistic aspect of the meaning theory. According to a Linguistic aspect of the meaning theory, the meaning of a word is not ingrained in the word itself and also it cannot exist even outside the word. Rather, it is in relation to other words. But, in the case of objects, words bear meaning neither in the presence and absence of other words nor in relation to other words. And also words have meaning in themselves and do not have meaning in themselves at the same time because meanings are adjacent to words and at the same time meanings are not limited to words (e.g. the meaning of a word is its literal, explicit, and context-independent meaning and also it is too broad and ambiguous and also it often seems to be used to refer to any aspect of word meaning). There is no existence of a word without the prolixity of another word. So, we cannot grasp the meaning of a word without making the relationship with other words, though the meaning of a word is

not fixed in the word. A word is saturated with many meanings because of the varied contexts in which it is used. So, a word is conveyed with referential and contextual meaning and it doesn't contain meaning in itself.

In the case of semantic contextualism, we can understand the single meaning of a word in a single context or sundry meanings of the same word in different contexts. So, there can have multifarious meanings for a single word by many users of the same word in various contexts. But the sundry meanings are obtainable to those who know the context in which the single word is used. It is an act of futility to intend to use any word by any human being independent of its context because a word attains meanings only in contexts. Thus, the meaning of a word does not lie in itself, but in the context in which it is used. The meaning of the utilized word is understood or misunderstood based on the clarity of the context in which it is used.

## 2.1 Language, Social World, and Context: A Semantic Mechanism

Language cannot be separated from the social world and context. If philosophy is a stab to grasp the world around us, and if it is in terms of our language that we apprehend the world, then an understanding of how our language works would be almost the first step in studying philosophy. Therefore, it may be the case that we apprehend the world in terms of our language and semantics, and perhaps this would imply that our thinking about the world necessarily involves the use of language and context (Matilal, 2001, p. 3). The main focus of this section is to delineate the notion of semantics with regard to two main approaches such as *khandapaksa* and *akhandapaksa* but it more emphasizes upon *akhandapaksa*.

Language functions as a cultural means of conveyance of Indian civilization for allowing us to understand what the Indians themselves think. A body of folks involving a community builds up methods of meaning through which it enunciates its cultural identity. So, such methods of meaning are ways of classifying the world. In this case, to understand another culture is to understand another method of meaning (actually, here, 'meaning' is not the only means to comprehend another culture, there are also some other ways). Therefore, discourse analysis is requiring grasping a culture in the broad sense. Obviously, it is also a fundamental cultural phenomenon within the context of the patterns of meaning to which they belong.

With regard to the objectives of the thesis, here the case is that if we emphasize up on the linguistic aspect of meaning then, there is the problem for the non-linguistic aspect of meaning. Because, through the linguistic aspect of meaning, it is very difficult to specific to that culture, and meaning exist where the outsider would not expect to find it. Moreover, the meaning is not fixed it can be changed thus, subject to change and interpretation. In fact, the meaning is created by people interpreting within the forms of meaning precise to a culture. If there are no fixed meanings, then the interpretable form change as meaning changes. In this case, for the meaning of a sentence of one language one can translate into another language in different ways. But there is also a problem of

meaning, actually, how can you claim that the translation is providing us correct meaning of the sentence. According to W. V. O. Quine, none of these translations can claim to be corrected for they all are respectively defensible. For example, 'gavagai', is translated as 'rabbit' by an imaginary ground of linguistics. But how do we know that 'gavagai' cannot be applied to rabbits, but to undetached rabbit parts? For Quine, this is a version of meaning that is indeterminacy of meaning. Here, translation is a form of what he calls the inscrutability of reference. The meaning of a sentence is intimately connected with whether it is true or false. One may even argue that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know the conditions under which it is true. With regard to Quine's Inscrutability of reference, we can claim that if there is one way of connecting words with objects which gives an account of truth conditions of sentences, then there will be endless ways. This means we can get different thought from a different sentence to represent it. Reference, then, becomes a theoretical construct to explain how parts of sentences contribute to their truth conditions, but there is no unique relationship between single external objects and words which is the relation of reference. This links up with a kind of holism, stressed different aspects of the mind have to fit together into large patterns, and these patterns involve normative elements. No belief can exist without being surrounded by a whole galaxy of beliefs, and these beliefs fit together according to the rules of certain logic in as much as people try to get as consistent a picture of the world as possible. But if someone deviates from the normative pattern too much, you have reason to say that this person does not hold that belief at all. Moreover, words have semantic properties, that is to say, they do refer to things in the world. But the meaning of most words depends systematically on their relations to other words in sentences. Indeterminacy of meaning and translation may thus arise because someone means different things by the words than someone else, or means the same things but holds different beliefs. And even if the facts should happen to lead to a unique way of working matters out, you have indeterminacy in the form of the inscrutability of reference. It should be pointed out that this indeterminacy of meaning and translation applies not only to translation from inter-languages but also from intra-languages. Since meaning is a property which relates words and the world, there is for words to mean within a social context, accordingly, subject to negotiation within the limits of the social context. In some way, when people share a language, they share some pictures of a common world. Communication to a great extent depends on the same things being salient, but these things may be interpreted in different ways since meaning is a negotiable entity. At the same time meaning is determined by the community in as much as there is a common language only to the extent that there is a common method of interpretation within a community (Kahrs, 1998, pp. 1-8).

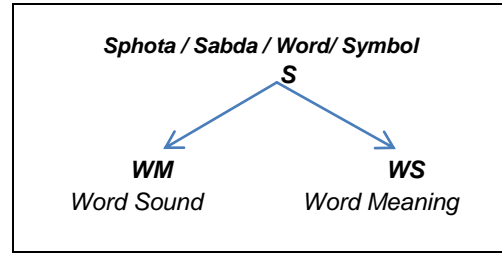
## 3. Bhatrhari's notion of Semantics: An analysis and Appraisal

The philosopher of grammar Bhartrhari has propounded the doctrine of *Sphota* in a methodical manner. He claims that word *Sphota* is without parts (the *Akhandavakyartha-Sphota*). The cause of the word *sphota* is Brahman. He declared the notion of *sphota* in the first part of his *Vakyapadiya* - *Anandinidhanam Brahma sabdatattvam yadaksaram vivartate*

*rtha bhavena prakriya jagato yatah* (Bhartrhari, 1971). Bhartrhari's philosophy is known as Sabdadvaita philosophy or Sabdabrahman. His meaning theory is known as the Sphota theory. In a metaphysical sense, Sabdabrahman or transcendental language principle on Sphota is one in reality but reveals itself as many. For Bhartrhari, the basic nature of the Brahman is a word and this Sabdabrahman is the cause of the world. Bhartrhari claims that there are two types of a word such as *nimittaka* and *pratydyaka*. *Dhvani* is *nimittaka* whereas *Sphota* is *pratydyaka*.

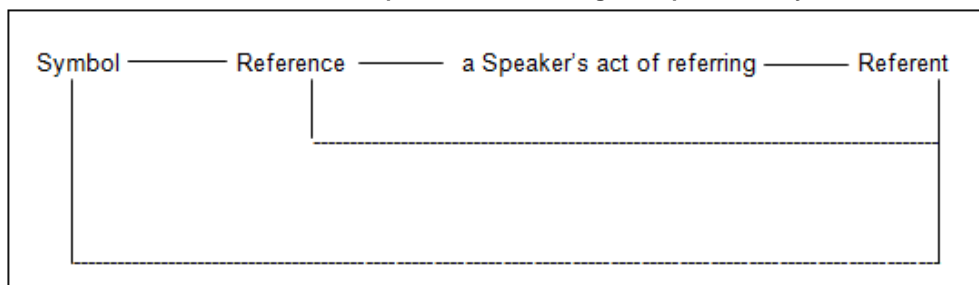
The term *Sphota* is derived from the root *sphut* which means 'to burst' or 'to bloom'. It is used to contain the process of manifesting ideas. Therefore it is defined a *sphutati* *ptakasate artho smaditi sphotah vacaka* it is *yavad* (ibid, p. 4). *Sphota* is the amalgamated notion with its dual form of *sabda*, word, and *artha*, meaning (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 674). According to his notion of *Sphota* theory, words or sentences can be pondered under two facets, as sound patterns and meaning-bearing symbols. In this case to describe the concept of *Sphota* theory clearly, let us now briefly restate its definition in a simple diagram:

Table 1: A simple Semantic Triangle of Sphota Theory



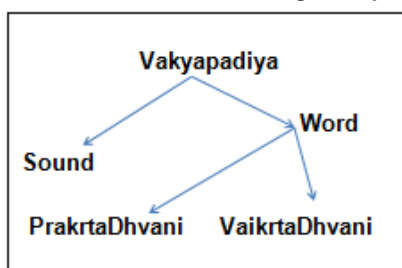
It's a kind of semantic triangle by Bhartruhari which is something different from the Ogden-and-Richard's semantic triangle. Ogden-and-Richard argues that the meaning and thing predetermined are illustrious. According to Indian grammarians, there is differentiate concerning the permanent word on the one hand and the ephemeral or actualized word as it is uttered in speech, (*prakrtadhvani* and *vaikrtadhvani*). The speech situation can be represented as a rectangle rather than a triangle.

Table 2: A simple Semantic Rectangle of Sphota Theory



It must be emphasized that in the case of Bhartrhari the *sphota* is an indivisible and changeless unity. But in the communication process, it is represented as in the diagram with two aspects. There are called internal aspect and external aspect of *sphota*. The internal aspect of *sphota* is the expressive word meaning which resides in all being. But the external aspect of *sphota* is perceived by our sense organs. According to Bhartrhari's *sphota* theory, the notion of *vaikrtadhvani* is perceived unitarily. For example, if you want to talk about an impression, you should begin with the *sphota* and then you should utter it and yields different sounds. At that moment the hearer perceives the *vaikrtadhvani* and eventually perceives its unity (*Sphota*) and the word meaning, which integrally exists in the self of the auditor which discloses the meaning. A diagram shows the division of word and sound by Bhartrhari's as follows:

Table 3: A Bhartrhari's Semantic Triangle of Sphota Theory



Bhartrhari distinguishes between two aspects of expressions viz; the *prakrtadhvani* and the *vaikrtadhvani* which belong to the *sphota* theory that denotes to the expression as a single unit conveying a meaning. *Vaikrtadhvani* is the actual sounds of the words uttered which reveal in the *Prakrtadhvani* which is permanent and that is the abstract from the various *vaikrtadhvani*, it is considered as the linguistically normal form devoid of the personal variations which are linguistically relevant. However, according to *sphota* theory, the word located in the mind of the speaker and listener is taken as an integral symbol. It is revealed by the sounds but sounds are only manifesting agencies and they have no function other than that of revealing the symbol. Bhartrhari says that *sphota* is the object of cognition takes place, even though each letter in the word or a sentence has the capacity of revealing the *sphota*. Every one of them is necessary because the complete and distinct manifestation of the word is effected only with the perception of the last letter. For example, Shimi utters a sound **Ra** with the intention of saying **Rajiba** (*a lotus*), when she utters the next syllable **ji**, we have another clue and word can more clearly be conjectured, so it narrows the field for all the words that do not begin with **Raji** are excluded, still the word is not quite clear. We do not know whether she is going to say **Rajinikanth** or **Rajiba**. When the last sound **ba** is also uttered, the word is known fully and clearly. Thus the function of the letters in a word is to build up the higher unit.

The liaison between word and meaning is a key factor for the notion of Sphota. Without the notion of meaning the notion of Sphota is not possible and Sphota generates the meaning graspable. The meaning is grasped upon hearing the last letter of a word. That meaning is completely different from various letters which compose it. It is a principle over and above the letters forming the word and not at all a mere collection of them. Each phoneme of a word reveals Sphota, the first one vaguely, the second one more clearly and so on until the last sound is produced. The last letter of the word reveals it in all its clarity, completeness and distinctness. Sphota is indivisible in itself. It expresses itself in its dual form of word and meaning.

### 3.1 Sphota Theory of Meaning as a Holistic Theory of Meaning

The sphota theory is one of the most crucial contributions of India to the principal problem of semantics in discourse analysis. According to the sphota theory, the meaning of a word or a sentence is an indivisible unit whole (the *Akhandavakyartha-Sphota*). In the case of discourse analysis, here both the speaker and hearer are identical to each other, so, there is the possibility of verbal communication between them. Here, we are talking about the indivisible unity of sentences. Actually, what constitutes the unity of a word or a sentence? I mean, separate words or sentences cannot generate meaning at all. Is it the necessary case here? Or does each word in a sentence have a separate meaning by itself or do they have meaning as amalgamated together? Or does each separate sentences generate meaning or do they have meaning as amalgamated together (I mean do they related to some other sentences which belong to it)? Actually, according to the Indian semantic analysis especially, in the doctrine of sphota, meanings are attached to words or sentences and the same time meanings are not confined to words or sentences. In this sense, we can claim that for semantic analysis, sphota theory usages the method of the dual-aspect semantics (semantic internalism or semantic atomism and semantic externalism or semantic holism).

According to Bhartrhari's notion of semantics, the sphota theory emerged with two basic ideas namely, (i) that language or sabda is basically a unitary phenomenon, and (ii) that meaning is in implicit in the symbol which manifests it as its

inner contents. Language has both internal and external structures: the external structure manifests the internal structure. For Bhartrhari, the internal structure is the same as the internal content which is the sphota having no determinate structure of its own. The notion of sphota is a unitary meaning content which is dependent on the use of language and it manifests linguistic expression only when utterances are produced expressing meaning. So, Bhartrhari claims that the semantic-content (linguistic meaning + context = semantic content) expresses itself in language and sphota manifests in various ways without losing its unitary and holistic nature. With regard to the notion of sphota, Bhartrhari provides two fundamental explanations; firstly, he says that meaning-content is itself a metaphysical and transcendental reality which does not change even though the many changes take place in the external structures of expressions. And secondly, he claims that meaning is a formal and logical entity which does not get network with the means of expression which is some particular languages. Here, we have a fundamental question is that in this particular case, how the semantic content will maintain its unitary and holistic character? Bhartrhari answers that meaning or sphota is itself the unitary semantic universal that emphasizes all linguistic changes. So language may change but the meaning will be the same (Prasad, 2002, pp. 51-55).

### 4. Concluding remarks

Thus, Bhartrhari's philosophy offers us a picture of 'semantics theory', which is free from the meaning atomism but the dynamic dimensional semantic discourse analysis outlooks. Moreover, Bhartrhari's account of the meaning theory is broadly called holistic because he argued that language and meaning can be treated as integral wholes, no word or sentence can be taken in isolation for its meaningfulness. For Bhartrhari the sentence is the primary semantic unit and the speaker's intention as part of the meaning. We establish the meaning of sentences through someone uttering a sentence and then pointing to the object it describes, with the intention that we connect the sentence with the object. Therefore, Bhartrhari approach in our philosophical tradition, which helps us to mould our own thought and future in philosophy.

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