The Meaning of “Meaning”:
A Debate between Navya-Nyāya and Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā

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1. Introduction

“A word has the capacity to generate knowledge of its object for any competent speaker of the language to which the word belongs. By virtue of this capacity the word is said to denote the object, and the object is said to be the meaning of the word.” (Scharf 1996: 1)

“The verb ‘to denote’ is used here in precisely the sense mentioned, namely, to directly cause cognition of an object.” (Scharf 1996: 1n3)

“This significative power or śakti is defined as the relation that exists between the word and its meaning, by which the meaning is cognized whenever the word is heard.” (Raja 1969 [2000]: 19)

There is a subtle difference between the above-quoted interpretations of Indian semantics in the conception of “meaning.” The first one asserts that an object is called the meaning of a word because the word has the capacity to make those who know the word understand the object. This interpretation allows nothing to evade identification as the meaning when it is understood by the word, whereas the other interpretation allows it. I do not intend to take a position on which interpretation is correct. There can be as many interpretations as there are semantic theories in Indian philosophy. The issue discussed by Indian philosophers concerns this question: Is there anything that is not the meaning of a word, although it is understood by the word? The Nyāya School answers “no,” but the Mīmāṃsā School states “yes.” I will examine the debate about the correct semantic theory between the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā Schools as described in the Tattvacintāmaṇi (TC) of Gaṅgeśa (14c), and I present the differences in the meaning of “meaning.”

It must be noted at the outset that there are two levels of “meaning” in Sanskrit: artha and śakya. Under strict terminology, śakya has less scope than artha. For example, the word “Ganges” primarily means the Ganges River, but, sometimes, the word
metaphorically means the bank of the Ganges River, as in “Villagers are living on the Ganges.” This indirect, secondary, and contextual meaning is also artha, but it is not śakya. The śakya-level meaning is that which invariably relates to the word and always is understood by the word before an understanding of its indirect meanings. Nevertheless, the word “artha,” which is the most common Sanskrit word for “meaning,” is often used to refer only to śakya. In this paper, I primarily use “meaning” in reference to śakya the way that Peter M. Scharf and Kunjunni Raja meant śakya when they used “meaning” in the above passages.

For the purposes of this analysis, three predicates are distinguished, as follows.

M  To be the meaning of the word x.
U  To be understood by the hearer by the word x.
I  To be intended by the speaker by the word x.

In Indian philosophy, there were times when these three predicates were considered equivalent. Arguments in Nyāyasūtra and Mahābhāṣya were based upon that assumption. However, later philosophers have doubted it. For example, Śālikanātha (9c) of the Prābhākara School shows an early form of the Prābhākara–Nyāya debate. He quotes the opponent’s perspective, presumably of the Nyāya, that defines M as U and asserts that the object of verbal understanding should always be regarded as the meaning of the word. Śālikanātha rejects this view. According to him, there is something understood from a word that is not regarded as the meaning of the word. The conflict between these two viewpoints is key to understanding Gaṅgeśa’s semantics.

2. Semantics of General Nouns in TC

Outline
In the Śaktivāda (section on semantics) of TC, Gaṅgeśa considers the evergreen topic of debate: What is the meaning of a general noun, e.g., “cow”? Is it the universal cowness (jāti), its particular instance (vyakti), or both? In this context, the universal is the entity that is externally real, eternal, shapeless, and shared by all particulars, e.g., the cowness shared by all cows. Gaṅgeśa’s answer to the above question is that the meaning is the structured object constituted of the universal and the particular; the word “cow,” when singular, means a physical entity that has cowness. In the resulting cognition of hearing the word “cow,” both the universal and the particular are manifested. Therefore, the
meaning of “cow” is neither a particular nor an uninstantiated universal; it is a structured object of both of them. To defend this position, Gaṅgeśa introduces and rejects the views of three groups of the Mīmāṃsā School. The following list presents the structure of Gaṅgeśa’s discussion.

1. Examination of the view of the Prābhākara subschool. (TC, pp. 556–578)
2. Examination of the view of the Bhāṭṭa subschool. (TC, pp. 578–586)
3. Examination of the view of “Maṇḍana.” (TC, pp. 586–591)

The Prābhākara subschool presents two views: a standard view and what is referred to as kubja-śakti-vāda (the theory of deflected signification). All of the Prābhākara, the Bhāṭṭa, and Maṇḍana but the kubja-śakti-vāda hold that a general noun directly means only the universal. The primary reason for this tenet is that the Mīmāṃsā takes the position that the relationship between a word and its meaning (I call it “meaning relationship”) is eternal. Because particulars are perishable, they cannot be related with words by the eternal relationship. Nevertheless, all of the Mīmāṃsā parties regard that we actually understand a particular by the word as true. When we are told “Bring a cow,” we understand that what we are ordered to bring is not cowness, but its particular, namely, something that has cowness. They must explain how this understanding is achieved.

Nyāya and Prābhākara versus Bhāṭṭa and Maṇḍana

The Bhāṭṭa and Maṇḍana explain our understanding of universal and its particulars in two steps. First, the hearer understands the universal, and, then, he or she understands its particulars, by logical implication (ākṣepa) according to the Bhāṭṭa, or by indirect signification (lakṣaṇa) according to Maṇḍana. What we should note is that, in the second step, both perspectives involve the hearer’s reasoning. The word is not responsible for the understanding of the particular; the eternal word expresses only the eternal universal and its application to particulars is the hearer’s responsibility.

Apparently, the two-step model is an ingenious device to maintain the two premises that only universals are the meaning of words and that we understand particulars as well as universals. However, the Nyāya and the Prābhākara do not accept that because both of them hold to the epistemic rule that the universal and the particular must be grasped by a single awareness. This rule is called ekavittivedyatvaniyama (rule of single awareness). According to them, because a person cannot understand cowness without
the awareness of a particular cow (we cannot think of cowness without thinking of a cow), the first step cannot be taken. The universal and the particular must be understood simultaneously.\textsuperscript{73}

**Nyāya versus Prābhākara**

The Nyāya and the Prābhākara agree on the rule of single awareness, but they differ on another issue. It is maintained by both parties that a relationship exists between a word and its meaning and that, for a hearer to understand a meaning by a word, he or she must have learned that relationship in advance. If a hearer did not know the meaning relationship of the word “cow” to types of animals that have horns, dewlaps, and so on, that hearer would not understand those animals as the meaning upon hearing the word “cow.” This logic creates a problem. Because there are innumerable cows in the past, present, and future, how can the relationship of the word “cow” to all those particulars be learned?

The Nyāya answers: We can learn the relationship of a word to all particulars based on the theory of “connection with objects through the universal” (sāmānyalakṣaṇā pratyāsatti) in which universal cowness, being related to all cows, functions to connect the hearer to all cows. By this theory, the Nyāya can explain how we learn the relationship to all cows, including future unborn cows.\textsuperscript{8} The Prābhākara, however, does not accept this theory. Its position is that we cannot learn it by any means.

**Standard Prābhākara View versus Prābhākara kubja-śakti-vāda**

The standard view of the Prābhākara cited by Gaṅgeśa concludes that the universal is the sole meaning of a general noun based on the two reasons stated above: the rule of single awareness and the impossibility of learning the relationship to an infinite number of particulars. Now, it must explain how we can understand a particular when it is not meant by the word. It gives a few explanations, all of which suggest that our natural cognitive faculty makes us understand the particular as well as the universal.\textsuperscript{9}

On the other hand, the kubja-śakti-vāda opposes this viewpoint. It proposes that the particular also must be the meaning of the word, but the hearer must learn the meaning only in relation to the universal. There is a relationship between the word and the infinite number of particulars, but we need not learn it. This relationship works without being known.\textsuperscript{10}

I doubt that the kubja-śakti-vāda was actually stated by the Prābhākara. Acceptance of
a word’s relationship to perishable particulars would destroy the Mīmāṃsā’s fundamental premise that the meaning relationship is eternal. If a supporter of this view truly accepts the meaning relationship to perishable objects, how could he or she account for the eternality of the meaning relationship? The *kubja-śakti-vāda* is mentioned in Śaśadhara’s (14c) *Nyāyasiddhāntadīpa*, but Śālikanātha does not refer to it. We need further studies to identify its sources.

**Gaṅgeśa’s Criticism**

Gaṅgeśa’s one critical blow knocks down both Prābhākara views. He claims that these views are not tenable based on the rule of single awareness. Both Prābhākara views assume that we can learn the relationship of a word to the universal; however, according to Gaṅgeśa, that is not possible because the universal cannot solely arise in the awareness of the meaning relationship. For example, in the awareness resulting from learning the word meaning, “The word ‘cow’ means cowness,” cowness cannot appear without its particular. Therefore, according to the rule of single awareness, both Prābhākara views must be rejected. The only option is to accept that the relationship of a word to its infinite number of particulars can be learned.

**3. Conclusion: The Meaning of “Meaning”**

The Prābhākara views are very close to that of Gaṅgeśa because both accept that a word makes us understand the universal and the particular. In my opinion, the divergence arose because of their different meanings given to the word “meaning.”

Gaṅgeśa’s conception of “meaning” is simple. He holds to the principle that whatever is directly understood by a word is the meaning of that word. This means that he defines the meaning of word *x* as that which is understood directly by word *x*. However, the Prābhākara contends that for something to be understood by a word does not imply that the something is the meaning of the word. Then, what is the “meaning”? In the standard Prābhākara perspective, meaning must be learnable. Because the relationship to innumerable particulars is not learnable, the Prābhākara does not accept the particular as the meaning. If, by chance, they succeeded in explaining how to learn an infinite number of particulars, would they accept the particular as meaning? I assume that they would not do so because that would be incompatible with their tenet that the meaning relationship is eternal. It seems that the notion of learnability is invoked in
the logic merely to defend the theory, and they are unwilling to accept anything except the universal as meaning.

It is plausible that the "meaning" of a word for the Mīmāṃsā refers to that which ought to be understood by the word (even if it is not entirely uncontroversial what "understood" means in the context of a word, rather than a sentence). In fact, what ought to be understood from the statement, "Bring a cow," is only the cowness of the object brought. However, what we actually understand is not only the cowness, but also its possessor. This extension of understanding to the possessor is achieved by reasoning according to the Bhāṭṭa and Maṇḍana, and by the innate cognitive faculty according to the Prābhākara.

This does not mean that Gaṅgeśa endorses a kind of semantic anarchism that if somebody understands a cat by the word "cow," the cat is the meaning of "cow" for him or her. He states that the meaning relationship is decided, once for all, by God. What Gaṅgeśa has in mind seems to be that when we actually understand m by word w, we can assume that God actually expected m to be understood by w. For this to be said, it has to be accepted that what ought to be understood is decided by God, and God’s decision is inferred by actual community’s conventional use of the word. Meaning is normative even for the Nyāya, but they “naturalized” it by reducing it to our conventional use. This is absolutely unacceptable to the Mīmāṃsā.

The Mīmāṃsā primarily is the system of interpreting Vedic injunctions. Its objective is to establish the authorless authority and meaningfulness of Vedic injunctions without appealing to intention of God or any human beings. This is not only due to its religious belief that there is no omniscient creator God, but also for the following philosophical necessity. For an injunction to be universally applicable, its meaning, or what ought to be done, can be decided neither by the one who prescribes the rule nor those who obey or disobey it. We cannot derive what ought to be done from what the prescriber wished or what people have actually done, because the prescriber and other people can refer only to limited number of cases. We cannot define the meaning of a prescriptive sentence by what is intended by the prescriber or how it is used in practice; this is substantially the same problem as Keipke’s Wittgensteinian Paradox. The Nyāya may insist that God has eternal awareness that refers to infinite number of cases, but it is another topic to dispute if such omniscience is possible or not.
The semantics of general noun of the Mīmāṃsā is based on this theory of injunction. Understanding of the meaning of a word is also injunctive; there is something ought to be understood. Gaṅgeśa defines it by our actual understanding from the word that refers to particulars, but the Mīmāṃsā does not accept it. For the word “cow” to be universally applicable to any cow that has cowness, it cannot refer to the endless series of all particular cows.

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Notes
1) E.g., the beginning of Gaṅgeśa’s Jātiśaktivāda. TC, p. 558: “na ca govyaktimātram arthaḥ . . .”
2) Cf. Mahābhāṣya on Āṣṭādhyāyī sūtra 1.2.58 and 1.2.64; Nyāyasūtras 2.2.58–69.
3) PP, p. 411.
4) Gaṅgeśa’s conclusion is stated in TC, pp. 588–589. Following the position of Nyāyasūtras, he accepts the shared physical form (ākṛti) as also a part of meaning, but I do not consider that in this paper.
5) It is not certain that this “Maṇḍana” refers to Maṇḍana Miśra, the author of Sphoṭasiddhi, etc. Gaṅgeśa cites a verse in support of Maṇḍana’s viewpoint, but that is, in fact, Kumārila’s verse in Ślokavārttika.
6) TC, pp. 578, 586–587.
7) TC, pp. 564, 578.
8) TC, p. 578.
9) Three explanations are given in TC, pp. 562–565.
10) TC, p. 567.
11) TC, pp. 572–573.

Abbreviations
TC The Tattvacintāmaṇi of Gaṅgeśa Upādhyāya. Ed. Kamakhyanath Tarkavagish. Vol. 4, pt 2. Calcutta: Asiatic Society. Reprint, Delhi: Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan, 1990.
PP Prakaraṇapañcikā. Ed. Subrahmanya Shastri. Benares: Banaras Hindu University, 1961.

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