On the Theory of Phonemes Conveying the Sentence Meaning

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0. Introduction

Kumārīlabhaṭṭa (6c.), a foundational philosopher of the Mīmāṃsā school, who had a huge influence on the later development of the linguistic philosophy of the sentence, claimed in the Vākyādhipikaraṇa (ŚVv) of his Slokārṇītika (ŚV) that the sentence meaning (vākyārtha) is conveyed by the meanings of the words that compose it. In his argument from v. 110 to v. 117, he refers to and briefly rejects the idea that it is the individual phonemes (varṇāḥ) that are responsible for conveying the sentence meaning. The doctrine that phonemes as the conveyors of sentence meaning is also criticized by Śālikanātha of the Prābhākara school of Mīmāṃsā in the Vākyārthamātṛkā of his Prakaraṇapañcikā (PrPv), and by Vācaspati too in his Tattvābhidhu (TB), in which he often uses very similar texts to those used by Śālikanātha. On the other hand, Jayantabhaṭṭa criticizes Kumārila’s doctrine from the standpoint of the Naiyāyika school in his Nyāyamañjarī (NM) 6.2, formulating his unique argument on the relationship between phonemes and sentence meaning.

In this paper, I shall first discuss how the Mīmāṃsakas rejected the theory that it is the phonemes that convey the meaning of sentences (the varṇa theory). I shall then compare their criticism with Jayanta’s argument in favour of the theory.

1. Kumārila’s Refutation of the Varṇa-Vākyārtha Theory

In Kumārila’s doctrine, phonemes play an important role in conveying the meaning of the word (padārtha). For him, it is not the word itself but the component phonemes that make us understand the word’s meaning. We might imagine that the same strategy would be applied to the sentence meaning, but Kumārila refutes that idea in the ŚVv, vv.
112–117 on several grounds. “Phonemes” (varṇāḥ) in his discussion in vv. 112–114 are, as his commentator Pārthasārathimiśra explains, entities that disappear immediately after their utterance and survive only in the memory of the hearer. ¹³ The varṇa theory is always vulnerable to the objection that individual phonemes disappear before the manifestation of the word’s or sentence’s meaning. But in case of the word’s meaning, of which Kumārila and the later Mīmāṃsakas accept phonemes to be the cause, the latent impressions (saṃskāra) left by the perception of the phonemes as well as the memory (smṛti) produced by them are postulated as mediating between the phonemes and the understanding of the word’s meaning. In case of the sentence’s meaning, however, according to Kumārila, it is much more difficult to claim this role for phonemes since sentences are longer and more complex entities than individual words. Kumārila also says that phonemes exhaust their role by conveying the meaning of the word. ¹³

What then if it is claimed that the last phoneme (antyavarnā) supported by all the memories of the previous phonemes is what conveys the meaning of the sentence? ¹³ This idea too is refuted by Kumārila: the latent impressions of phonemes cannot work both on the cognition of word’s meaning and on that of the sentence’s meaning. ¹⁴ Furthermore, the cognition of the sentence’s meaning inevitably comes after the cognition of the word’s meaning, which blocks any direct function on the part of the phonemes. Thus in Kumārila’s view, phonemes cannot be accepted as the conveyors of the sentence’s meaning.

2. Śālikanātha’s and Vācaspati’s Follow-up of Kumārila

Kumārila showed us two types of the varṇa theory, in which (1) the last phoneme supported by the memory of the previous phonemes or (2) the series of phonemes in the form of memory conveys the sentence meaning. Following his argument, Śālikanātha and Vācaspati criticize the same two views. There is a high possibility that Vācaspati knew Śālikanātha’s PrPv and used his text in the TB in a similar manner. For the discussion and its wording in the two texts are quite close. ⁹ Here let us have a look at Vācaspati’s criticism of the varṇa theory. In his argument, there are two types of the opponent: (1) the first claims that it is the last phoneme (antyavarnā) together with the latent impression of the previously perceived words and their meanings that conveys...
the sentence meaning; and (2) the second holds that it is the series of phonemes (varṇamālā) located in the memory that makes us understood the sentence meaning. How does Vācaspati refute these two opinions?

(1) Against the antyavarna theory Vācaspati asks the following question. If perception of the last phoneme is the cause of our understanding the sentence meaning, then when is it that the hearer recollects the linguistic convention (saṅketa) of the last word? If he recollects it after hearing the last phoneme, and the last phoneme conveys the meaning of the sentence thereafter, there would be the undesirable consequence that the last phoneme, which will already have disappeared at the time that one recollects the linguistic convention, will be the cause of the understanding of the meaning of the sentence. If, on the other hand, the hearer does not recollect the linguistic convention that defines the meaning of the last word, then there would be no point in any linguistic convention intervening between the word and the meaning, and anyone who hears any sentence will understand its.

Thus, the antyavarna theory entails the problem of how to recollect the linguistic convention. However, the second theory, that of the varṇamālā theory, can remove this problem, because in that case, since the whole series of phonemes is grasped as a single sentence in the form of memory, the hearer recollects its relation with the meaning. Here there is no need to recollect the meaning of the last word.

(2) Against the varṇamālā theory, Vācaspati raises three problems. [1:] If the series of phonemes, namely the sentence, is taken to be a single entity with its own meaning, we have to postulate a new capacity for every sentence. [2:] if the word’s meaning is not cognized in the sentence, the sentence meaning would be never manifest because the latter depends on the former. [3:] if the sentence meaning is understood after cognizing the words’ meanings, there would be no use for phonemes as the conveyor of the sentence meaning, because the words’ meanings would have the same role.

In this way, Vācaspati [and Śālikanātha] criticize the varṇa theory in almost the same way as that of Kumārila, but since their criticism is much more detailed, it suggests that there might be real people who asserted that theory. Moreover, we can find a similar but positive argument in the NM of Jayanta.
3. Jayanta’s Argument on the Varṇa Theory

In the long discussion of the varṇa-vākyārtha idea, Jayanta refers to the views of the senior Naiyāyika philosophers: Ācāryāḥ (“teachers”), Vyākhyātāraḥ (“commentators”), and Śaṅkarasvāmin. Among them, the Ācāryas’ view is the simplest, and it is close to that which we have seen as the antyavarṇa theory. And therefore this view has the problem that it cannot explain when the linguistic convention of each word is recollected. 10)

The Vyākhyātṛs’ view is a revised version of this: After cognizing the first word (W1), one recollects its linguistic convention, and through it there arises the cognition of W1’s meaning (W1a) demarcated by the cognition of W1. The cognition of W1a creates a latent impression. The same process is repeated until the cognition of the last word. Immediately after the cognition of the last phoneme of the last word, there arises a single memory of all the preceding phonemes and words, a memory which has all the previous words and the meanings demarcated by them as its object. In this single memory together with the cognition of the meaning of the last word, there arise the aggregate of the words and that of the words’ meanings, namely the sentence and its meaning. 11)

This view, however, is also rejected by Jayanta. How then does Jayanta explain the varṇa theory? In Jayanta’s view, the cognition of W1 brings about its latent impression as well as the recollection of the relation with W1a; and the cognition of W1a, which is produced by the recollection of its linguistic convention, also causes its latent impression to arise. 12) Thus, three kinds of latent impressions, namely of phonemes, words, and words’ meanings, are stored separately in the mind. Kumārila claimed that the latent impressions of phonemes exhaust their role by conveying the word’s meaning. But in Jayanta’s opinion both processes, those of phonemes’ conveying the word’s meaning and of phonemes’ conveying the sentence meaning share the following process: [1] Cognition of phonemes → [2] Latent impression → [3] Memory (= Cognition of the word) → [4] Recollection of its convention → [5] Cognition of the meaning. In case of the sentence meaning [3] and [5] produce the latent impressions and those of the subsequent words are separately stored until the cognition of the last word’s meaning.
4. Conclusion

Though the discussion in the ŚVv is too brief to reveal the existence of real opponent, it is possible that the situation is different in case of the PrPv and TB. It has been more or less agreed in recent scholarship that Jayanta is earlier than Vācaspati. Furthermore, the flow of the argument in the TB is very close to that of the sixth chapter of the NM. From these facts, I propose the possibility that the opponents holding the varṇa-vākyārtha theory in the TB are the Naiyāyikas. To be more precise, the antyavarṇa theory is close to the theories of the Ācāryas and Vyākhyaṭrs, while the varṇamālā theory is close to Jayanta’s. The editors’ notes in the PrPv and TB support half of my view: they identify the holders of the antyavarṇa theory as the Naiyāyikas, but do not identify those who hold the varṇamālā theory.

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Notes
1) See the commentary on the ŚVv, v. 112.
2) ŚVv, vv. 112cd–115ab.
3) The similar argument is seen in the Sphoṭavāda of the ŚV when Kumārila claims phonemes as the conveyor of the word’s meaning.
4) ŚVv, vv. 115cd–117.
5) See Moriguchi [2014] for the further information on the TB and PrPv.
6) TB, p. 164, l. 3–p. 165, l. 2.
7) TB, p. 231, l. 1–p. 234, l. 2.
8) TB, p. 237, l. 1–p. 238, l. 2.
9) TB, p. 238, l. 5–p. 243, l. 2.
10) NM, p. 192, l. 7–p. 193, l. 2.
11) NM, p. 194, l. 17–p. 195, l. 14.
12) NM, p. 199, l. 12–p. 200, l. 8.
13) See Marui [2014], pp. 231–299.

Abbreviations and Primary Sources
NM Nyāyamañjarī of Jayantabhaṭṭa with Ṭīppanī–Nyāyasaurabhā by the Editor. Edited by K. S. Varadācārya. Vol. 2. Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 1983.
TB Tattvabindu by Vācaspatiniśra with Tattvavibhāvanā by Rṣiputraparamēśvara. Rev. ed. Edited by V. A. Ramaswami Sastri. Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2009.
ŚV/ŚVv Ślokavārttika of Śrī Kumārila Bhaṭṭa with the Commentary Nyāyaratnākara of Śrī Pārthasārathi Miśra. Edited and revised by Ganga Sagar Rai. Varanasi: Ratna Publications, 1993.
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