

Buddhist ‘Theory of Meaning’ (*Apohavāda*) as Negative Meaning

SANJIT CHAKRABORTY*

Abstract

The paper concentrates on the most pressing question of Indian philosophy: What is the exact connotation of a word or what sort of entity helps us to identify the meaning of a word? The paper focuses on the clash between Realism (Nyāya) and Apohavāda (Buddhist) regarding the debate whether the meaning of a word is particular/universal or both. The paper asserts that though Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas challenged Buddhist Apohavāda, yet they realized that it is difficult to establish an opinion in support of a word that conceptually denotes a negative meaning first.

Keywords: *Apoha Vada, Jāti-śaktivādin, Universal, Negation, Transcendental illusion, Kumarila, Dignāga.*

A bigger part of Indian Philosophy concerns about the sheer analysis of language at both semantic and syntactical levels. As per semantic aspect is concerned, the analysis remains centred around meaning that in some way hooked with the external objects and non-existent objects too. The concept of the word, meaning and word-meaning relation seems not only intriguing but one of the most intricate issues in Indian Philosophy. The analysis of word and meaning relation stands for reference fixation that may correspond to our sense data in general. My concern does not focus on the query whether an external fact can resolve the meaning of a word properly or not. The question that I stress here is what kind of entity assist us to identify the meaning of a word or ‘Is the meaning actual or ideal?’

Words are the primary sources of knowledge. The analysandum of a complex sentence is possible due to the analysis of it through the elemental words, which stand for sense data. When a person enters into the field of

*Sanjit Chakraborty (cogitosanjit@gmail.com) is a Research Fellow in Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University.

Indian Philosophy, he/she apparently covers that the meaning theory (*ArthaVāda*) is a vexing topic concerning an immense area. A few prominent Indian philosophical schools like the Nyāya, the Buddhist and the Mīmāṃsakas focus on the meaning theory from their own perspective. Pāṇinī, in his *Mahābhāṣya*¹ stresses on the idea that a word seems particular and this opinion is familiar with the name of *Vyakti-śakti-vādin*. Pāṇinī clarifies that the meaning is related to a nominal kind that is called a particular object. This doctrine is much close to the western theory of reference (the causal theory of reference), a dynamic theory once propounded by Hilary Putnam, Saul Kripke and the followers. In short, this externalist appeal considers meanings of the natural or non-natural kind terms as external that are not situated in the brain of the speakers. The content of our beliefs or more precisely the meaning of the word is not only determined by the external objects but also shared by the other minds that the traditional descriptive theory of meaning overlooks. Theory of description believes in the descriptive use of the term that concentrates on the meaning of a term through its descriptive properties. Externalists hold a naturalistic turn when they preserve meaning as part of a human endeavour that emerges in the world by implying externalism about the mind. I hesitate describing in detail the thesis of internalism which also argues that the meaning of the terms can be determined through the conceptual role of semantic, an internal facade of mind that is beyond of any causal linkage to the external objects. Meaning for them is intentional content that depends on the psychological modes of the speakers. I think, "A parallel between language and mental states can be drawn in terms of the contribution of the mind, rather than language. The mind imposes intentionality on language purposely, and here, the purpose is obviously to meet a condition that expresses a psychological state upon it."² We also know that mental states don't have meaning, only the words have meaning. The conception of the Buddhists aligned to the imports of the words does not fit with internalism as the internalists by no means deal with the exclusion or the opposition theory of meaning. Internalists in western school like Fodor, Searle, Chomsky and Frank Jackson mainly consider that meaning is indeed the conceptual matter that is not located where the believers are. They never put forward any thought like the import of the words. Meanings are neither subjective nor objective but we may consider it a fiction as once the Buddhist urged. I will discuss the issue very soon.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Mīmāṃsakas, the realist schools of Indian philosophy, actually believe in a sentence that may be affirmative or

negative but have a direct factual relation (reference) to the objects. They get rid of the thesis of subjective edifice of reality that hinges towards conceptual schemata. Besides, there is a different view which claims that the meaning of a word is universal. They urge that the meanings related to the nominal kind have universal properties. This theory gives prominence on the aspect of general features of the meaning of a particular term or word. They are often called *Jāti-śaktivādin* (meaning generalist). Kumārila and the other Mīmāṃsakas are the prominent followers of the *Jāti-śaktivāda*. However, the problem arises when some critics ask, ‘What is the precise connotation of a word? Or ‘Whether is it universal/particular or maybe both?’ In *Slokavārtikam*, the Mīmāṃsaka argues that a word directly denotes a genus and indirectly connotes to the individual. In the *NyāyaSūtra*³, the Naiyāyikas hold that a word can denote a particular object qualified by a universal (*Jāti-ākritivisistavyākṛti*).

I would like to clarify here that both the realist schools (Nyāya and Mīmāṃsa) uphold that a universal resides in many particulars and without recognizing particulars we cannot grasp the sense of universal. This descriptive approach claims for the concept of universal through conjoining the mere particulars. The presentation of the Nyāya and the Mīmāṃsa theory of meaning are pretty diverse, but these philosophers further defend that our perceptual experience is cognizant of the particular and the universal both at one sweep. Dignāga considers that the world has immense particulars that are interlinked with external objects, but the concept of universal seems mind-dependent unable to fulfil any reference fixation. The Universal as an intellectual fiction can be utilized as propositional attitudes that maybe relevant in the case of ‘negative purposes of exclusion’ having no relation with the import of a word. Gaurinath Sāstri writes, “The negation of the opposite is the common element in the meaning of the word, and this is falsely interpreted and hypostatized as a positive universal. This is made possible by a transcendental illusion, which cannot be avoided, but can be made harmless by criticism.”⁴

My effort here is to make out how the Buddhist theory of meaning or ‘ApohaVāda’ aims to rebut the realist’s point that I have discussed earlier. The crucial query is, ‘What is the meaning of the term *Apoha*?’ The literal meaning of the term *Apoha* is nothing but ‘exclusion’ or ‘differentiation’, i.e. a particular thing is excluded or differentiated from other things. As a supporter of the theory of momentariness, the Buddhist cannot accept that a particular object has some stable entities. As *Upādhi* is the source of similar judgment,

they conclude that a universal does not exist. Through the concept of a momentary entity like particular, one cannot construct a conceptually apprehended property (which is common to all particulars), that is called universal. Besides, Buddhist refutes the idea of universal by arguing that an ultimate real entity must be causally efficient. The causal efficiency leads to a change, but the idea of change is very unsuited with the universal. If the concept "cowness" leads to a change, then it would be something other than 'cow'. Bimal Krishna Matilal claims, "For the Buddhists, the purpose of applying a general name or, perhaps, any name, is differentiation or exclusion. The Dignāga School seems to treat any name or term not as a genuine proper name, but as a general name signifying a 'class exclusion'... Thus, by emphasizing the 'exclusion' aspect of naming (which we may also call the negative aspect of our naming act) the Buddhist expected to avoid the consequence of admitting universals as meanings of general terms."⁵

Secondly, the Buddhist principal idea is to rebut the realist's idea of the referential theory of meaning. They assert that words cannot connote an objective reference or our words do not have any reference to reality. For them, words can be regarded as mental images. The import of the word is beyond of subjective-objective dispute. Meaning is associated with a mental act of reference, but meaning has no referential directness to the world or facts. The universal is an intellectual fiction that occupies a distant extraction from the external facts. Gaurinath Sastri says, "The Buddhist answers the question by positing that the import of a word is neither a subjective idea nor an objective reality but a fiction. The speaker thinks that he is presenting an objective fact to the hearer while the hearer is deluded into thinking that the import is an objective reality. So the import of a word is a mental construction which is hypostatized as an objective reality existing in its own right independently of the thinking mind."⁶

The third appealing characteristic of '*ApohaVāda*' is that some of the *ApohaVādin* considers 'meaning' as a relation between the word and the mental image of the objective. They actually uphold a 'subjective construction of reality'.

The most outstanding exponent of '*ApohaVāda*' delimits the outline of conventional theories of meaning in the following ways:

First, *ApohaVādin* argues that the realist's dispute of a word can refer to a particular that does not serve any relevant purpose in philosophy. They argue that as it is impossible for an agent to perceive all the particulars,

similarly it is also an irrelevant presupposition for an agent to assume that the particulars are conceptually apprehended and labelled, by a common name and properties, which are regarded as a 'universal'. If they support the principle then it would be a collapse for the realist's own referential theory of meaning. It is because the conventional relations of the common properties may encourage us to admit the conceptual construction that has no referential attachment with the particular objects.

Secondly, those who consider that the words have reference to the conceptual image may commit a mistake as the conceptual images are not linked to any external reference. Conceptual images are located in the intrinsic mood of an agent's mind. One may have the conceptual images of 'Golden Mountain' or 'Hare's horns' but in these cases the reference fixation is not possible at all. A cognitive judgment becomes trifling if the subject does not hold any objective properties or it would be better to say that the reference fixation of a sentence would not be possible in the case of some representing sentences where the subject term resonates as non-existent.

Thirdly, philosophers may perhaps allege that we can undefine the meaning of a word as there is a lack of a specific determination of meaning. When we hear a word 'dog' then it connotes to something to which the name cow is affixed. In this case, we are unable to find out any form that has an effect to be a purely existential referent. These types of fortitude of such contexts are purely a matter of belief. The linguistic users of a word cannot refer to a vague reference; it needs to have an objective value. Here 'the concept of dog' denotes that 'something exists' but that does not confirm that this existence would be an indefinite concept.

Fourthly, some thinkers believe that an external object can endorse the reference of a subjective content. If we believe in a subjective fact, then the thought of reality cannot be causally productive. Hence the theorists crack down on the intricate issues that focuses on the mere ideas or the objects that has a linkage to the import of words. Here the ideas are impinged upon the reality that causes it. This outlook is quite similar to Buddhist's '*ApohaVāda*'. But there is a considerable disparity we find here, the Buddhist theory of *Apoha* holds that the import of words is a subjective idea hypostatized as an objective fact, but this objectivity is an ungrounded illusion as it is neither purely subjective nor objective. According to the Buddhist, it is actually a fiction. However, the present theory holds that the idea is an exact measure of the reality and it is in fact superimposed upon an objective datum

to which it refers. But we know that the Buddhist opposes the idea of factual meaning of a word as they favour for mental images.

We can sum up the Buddhist '*ApohaVāda*' in this way:

- a) This theory sustains that a word does not mean either a particular or a universal. The reason is that those particulars are self-contained and has nothing to do with their context. Moreover, a universal is a subjective fiction.
- b) '*ApohaVāda*' rejects the idea of objective reference of the words.
- c) '*ApohaVāda*' refutes the pluralistic conception of reality that accepts the universal as real. They oppose that a real will not be '*Śalaksana*' that is beyond the propositional operation. The object of a judgment can be a flux, but not momentarily real. Actually all kind of verbal expressions denote to the thesis of differentiation.

The question that may perhaps get prominence is, 'If a word does not signify any real object, then what is its significance?' The Buddhists say that what is signified by a word is neither subjective nor objective but is something unreal. Prof. Satkari Mookerjee in his famous book *The Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux*, clarifies it when he says, "The fact of the matter is that both the speaker and the hearer apprehend in fact and reality a mental image, a subjective content and not any objective fact; but the speaker thinks that he presents an objective fact to the hearer and the hearer too is deluded into thinking that the presented meaning is not a mental image, but an objective verity."⁷

There is an inclination to call '*ApohaVāda*' as a 'negative approach towards meaning' or 'negativism'. A few non-Buddhist scholars like Udayana and Kumārila raised this type of objection to the opponent Buddhist. However, in Buddhist Philosophy, the negative characteristic of verbal import has two-fold aspects – Firstly, as an absolute negation, it has no positive reference. For an instance, 'the book is not non-book'. This sentence is called a simple and a pure negative sentence. Secondly, a relative negation may have a 'positive reference' and its negative value seems connected with an indirect sense. Actually, this relative negation collaborates to a past affirmation. Moreover, because of the relation to others, the past affirmation might compel to transform into negation. Satkari Mookerjee also considers, "So when Dignāga declared that word imports a negation and neither an objective universal nor a particular, he only emphasised this negative implication of

verbal import. He did not mean that negation was the primary and apparent connotation. But Uddyotakāra and Kumārila misunderstood the real significance of Dignāga's doctrine and raised objections which were uncalled for and irrelevant."⁸

In *PramāṇaVārttika*, Dharmakīrti amends Dignāga's claim about negation. For him *Apoha* means an opposition or *Virodha*. The ground is that Buddhist philosophy does not rebuff the concept of meaning rather they called it momentary. Dharmakīrti considers that negations are rooted in opposition. They can be divided into two groups:

- a) An efficient opposition (*sabhābviruddha*) like hot and cold.
- b) Logical contradiction like blue, non-blue.

In the first case, two facts can subsist in parallel without opposing each other. Their opposition becomes efficient when they are placed together in one space-time. This opposition actually talks about the negation of entities. Besides, in the second case (logical contradiction) without excluding the other in the case of logical contradiction we cannot define two opposed facts in general. In the case like 'Blue' and 'non-blue', here the essence consists in exclusion of the others. Logical contradiction mainly deals with the reference of negation of a proposition. Dharmakīrti claims that '*ApohaVāda*' does not bring a negative approach to reality; rather it shows the dialectical approach that depends on the law of opposition. For example, a term 'Blue lotus' not only excludes the lotuses that are non-blue, but it also excludes the blue things that are not lotus. Uddyotakara, in his *Nyāya-Vārtika* opposes Dignāga's *Apoha* theory by arguing that a plain contradiction may apprehend in Dignāga's '*ApohaVāda*'. If negation itself signifies negation without correlating with others, then the principal statement like, 'A word signifies its meaning by negating the meaning of other words' might express 'A word only can signify another word without signifying itself' would be a self-contradictory proclamation.

In a broader way, the Buddhist comprehends the thesis that a word does not denote a negative idea first. A word has a positive concept of meaning and the concept of negative import is a consequence of cognition. Ratnakīrti also attempts to sort out the misunderstanding of Dignāga's claim. He argues that the words mostly designate the negative concept first as it does not have any positive reference. Ratnakīrti in his *Apohasiddhi* infers a perspective of a realist and claims that a conceptual image can be qualified

by a negation of the opposite entities. He believes in the intricacy of connoted words like the Naiyāyikas. For Ratnakīrti, a word 'cow' is predictably dissimilar from a 'non-cow'. Here the 'non-cow' is considered as much as the 'cow' is considered, since here the negative and positive factors are much more comparable. Dhammakīrti and Ratnakīrti emphasise the modified '*ApohaVāda*' as the objective reality which is unable to articulate the precise connotation of a word. A subject has the conceptual image of a word in his/her mind and this image is hypostatized as an external fact. As an explicit context, it constructs periphery delineation from the other concepts related to the external facts. This negative approach is treated as 'constitutively' of 'individuality' of the concepts. We can precise it by saying in Dignaga's tune that a word can express a concept and the concepts are unable to characterize certainly the concept of particulars as realist Naiyāyikas proposed. Matilal adds, "...but it can NEGATIVELY disqualify the particular from being claimed by other fictions or concepts. Since all concepts are fictions, a particular has equal claim to be associated with just any one of them. But in our construction or naming activity, we reject or exclude association with all other concepts except the concept expressed by the name. Thus, construction and verbalization are to be understood as exclusion of all rival claims."⁹

Some words

We know that the *Naiyāyikas* put forward the conception of universal as an ontologically real entity that consistently and pervasively belong to the particulars whereas the Buddhist argue against this type of ontological real entities as universal. Kumārila resists the Buddhist arguments on universal by claiming that an object consists of two different characteristics - specific and generic. This specific characteristic assists us to discriminate an object from the rest of the objects. Besides, its generic properties help us to comprehend all objects as one. If we agree to the Buddhist outlook that an object is solely particular, then it cannot generate any general idea in our mind. Moreover, if we accept that an object is merely universal, then it cannot produce the idea of differentiation in our mind. It would lead to an absurdity to accept the view that these two ideas are constructed by our imagination. The notion of particularity and generality produced by an object is never contradicted. If we admit that *Apoha* means opposition, then we should pore over the specific meaning of the term *Apoha*. It will positively stand for the exclusion of '*Non-Apoha*'. Here the problem raised is: What is the nature of '*Non-Apoha*'? We are aware that if the Buddhist claims in favour of every word denote to an *Apoha*, then '*Non-Apoha*' would undoubtedly be

an unidentified object. If the Buddhist replies that '*Non Apoha*' is unfeasible, then one can solicit 'How do you know the negative particles like 'not', 'non' etc?' Following the *Naiyāyikas*' stand, it seems to me that it is very difficult for the Buddhist to establish the argument that a verb denotes a negative meaning. If the Buddhist believes that only common nouns signify *Apoha*, then they should admit the common properties of the same noun and this will in turn collapse their basic theory of discarding universal.

One can decline the Buddhist's *Apoha* theory and insist that the conceptual images are not at all exposing to prove an opposition or exclusion properly. The conceptual images require an objective plea to initiate its claim. The awareness of exclusion entails three different factors. First, it refers to an object, which is excluded. Secondly, the excluded object is also excluded from other objects. And thirdly, the objective ground of exclusion cannot be a conceptual image or delusion. Gaurinath Sâstri claims, "The Buddhist does not deny that the meaning of a word is felt as a positive reality, which is at bottom negation of negation and a concept without an objective basis."¹⁰

The Buddhist defines universal as a functional property that means *an exclusion of what is other than that*. Here 'that' infers to the particulars which are consisted in the domain of class names. The functional property of the exclusion excludes the particular things that are not located in the domain of the defining class like in the case of 'cow', the functional properties will exclude the non-cows from the class of cow. It seems to me true that the Buddhist approaches on this view emphasize both negative and positive purports. Negative purport possesses the elimination or the exclusion of the universal that I discussed earlier while the positive purport upholds the particulars, the positive element of our ordinary language. I agree with Matilal when he says, "Since the Buddhist phenomenalism admitted only momentary particulars as real entities there was an obvious problem of naming and talking about them in language, for linguistic description ordinarily presupposes recurrence or persistence of the objects described."¹¹

Acknowledgment:

My sincere thanks go to my revered teachers at Rabindra Bharati, Jadavpur and Hyderabad Universities who were well known about my interest on Analytic Philosophy but always inspired me to work on the splendid areas of Indian Philosophy. Thanks also to the reviewer(s) and the editor for their positive appreciation.

Notes

- ¹Patanjali. 1954, 35-38.
²SanjitChakraborty, 2016, 36.
³Gautama, 1939, 2.2.68.
⁴GaurinathSastri, 1959, 143.
⁵Bimal Krishna Matilal, 2005, 39.
⁶Sastri, 1959, 142.
⁷SatkariMookerjee, 1980, 116.
⁸ibid, 118.
⁹Matilal, 2005, 22.
¹⁰ Sastri, 1959, 143.
¹¹Matilal, 1992, 39.

References

- Bhattacharyya, K. 1965. *Philosophy, Logic and Language*. Allied Publishers, Bombay, New Delhi, Calcutta.
- Chakraborty, S. 2016. *Understanding Meaning and World: A Relook on Semantic Externalism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, London.
- Dhammakīrti, 1953. *Pramānavārttika*, (ed.), Rahul Sankrityayana. K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna.
- Gautama. 1939. *Nyāya Sūtra*, with *Nyāyabhāṣya* of Vātsyāyana. (ed.) G. Jha, Oriental Series 58, Poona.
- Kripke, S. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press, Harvard.
- Kumārila. 1898. *Mīmāṃsā-Ālokavārttikam* with Commentary of Parthasarathi Mīśra. Chowkhamba, Kashi Sanskrit Series 11, Benaras.
- Matilal, B. K. 1990. *The Word and the World, India's Contribution to the Study of Language*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Matilal, B. K. 2005. *Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Mookerjee, S. 1980. *The Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux*. Motilal Banarsi Press, Benaras.

- McCulloch, G. 1995. *The Mind and Its World*. London, New York, Routledge.
- Patânjali. 1954. *MahâBhaysâ*. Banaras, Kanshi Sanskrit Series.
- Putnam, H. 1975. *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers Vol. 2*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Ratnakîrti. 1957. *RatnâkîrtiNibandhavalî*. (ed.), Anantalal Thakur. Patna, K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1957. Sastri, G. 1959. *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning*. Calcutta, Sanskrit College.
- Sastri, G. 1980. *A Study in the Dialectics of Sphota*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass.
- Stalnaker, R. C. 2008. *Our Knowledge of the Internal World*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.