

Anekānta and Problem of Meaning

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Introduction

The doctrine of Anekānta is the heart of Jaina ontology, epistemology and logic. It claims the indeterminateness of reality, its knowledge and verbal expression. If reality is infinitely manifold, logically, there must be infinite ways of intellectually cognizing it and verbally expressing its infinite aspects. This presupposition enables one to harmonize various apparently contradictory descriptions of reality. And therefore, the doctrine of Anekānta may serve as a beacon in studying the semantic, logical and epistemological problem of the meaning of 'Meaning.'

Four types of Meaning

In India, the various school of Philosophy, including those of the Sanskrit grammarians and rhetoricians have devoted much thought to the linguistic problem of meaning and have evolved different theories to explain the semantic aspect of language. As to the meaning it is supposed that a word or a sentence may convey the primary or metaphorical or suggested meaning. In addition to these three types of meaning, some Mīmāṃsakas, Naiyāyikas and rhetoricians postulate the tātparya or sentence-meaning as the fourth type. Some consider it to be independent of the first three while others associate it with one of them. Out of these four kinds of meaning, namely the primary, metaphorical, suggested and purposive, the suggested and purposive are severally indeterminate, relative, and hence anekantic in nature. But increase of primary and secondary meanings the principle of indeterminateness or anekānta involves in selecting one between them while interpreting a given statement.

Suggested meaning

Of all the four types the suggestive meaning is the most indeterminate. It depends on a number of contextual factors such as time, place, occasion, the intension, intonation, gestures etc. of a speaker and the intellectual capacity, mental frame, mood etc. of a listener or spectator. It varies from context to context. Unlike the primary and

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secondary meanings it includes various socio-cultural meanings and even emotive meaning also. It is well known how numerous meanings may be evoked in the minds of different persons by the stock example, 'गतोऽस्तम् अर्कः', that is, 'the sun set.' Though the grammarians, scientists, logicians and philosophers interested more in the accuracy, precision, clarity and objectivity in the use of words prefer lexical or primary meaning to the suggested one, the very indeterminate and infinite potency of the latter has rendered it more competent than the former for experiences. Because it is only through the power of connoting meanings that can not be expressed directly that the language may convey philosophical truths. In his 'Introduction to Metaphysics' Bergson says¹ : "Language is incapable of apprehending and expressing reality. But language may be used in another way, not to represent, but to bring the hearer to a point where he himself may transcend language and pass to incommunicable insight. It is a dialectical ladder which, when we have ascended, may be kicked away." This insight intuition can not be expressed directly by words, but they can be communicated through the power of suggestion.

Tātparyavṛtti or sentence meaning

Thus from the foregoing, the anekantic nature of suggested meaning becomes obvious. The same may be asserted in respect of even Tātparyavṛtti or sentence-meaning. There is difference of approach between the abhihitānvaya theory of sentence meaning advocated by Bhāṭṭa school of Mīmāṃsā and anvītabhidhāna theory of sentence-meaning propounded by Prābhākara school of Mīmāṃsā. The former holds that the unitary meaning of a sentence is indirectly conveyed through the recollection of the meaning of the words that comprise it while the latter takes the view that the unitary meaning directly arises from the collection of the words.²

We neednot enter further into the controversy. Here it strikes to state that those who like Abhinavagupta, Mammaṭa, Viśvanātha etc. refer to tātparya as a separate vṛtti or function of words hold that the intention of a speaker, or the general purport of the utterance is obviously to give a united purposeful sentence-meaning. Here the dependence of meaning on the intention of a speaker (i.e., what he intends to be understood by a listener), or a general purport of the sentence involves the element of anekānta or indeterminateness. Because

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so far as the intention of a speaker is concerned it is associated with different psychological contexts. It is possible for the same sign to belong to different psychological contexts ; a word may mean different things in different cases. Even the same thing can be examined from different angles without exhausting its characters ; but from the linguistic point of view we are only concerned with so much of the thing as required to elucidate what the speaker intended the listener to understand.³ Even though what is in the mind of the speaker at the time of the utterance is something subjective, and not capable of being put to an objective analysis, the idea intended to be conveyed to the listener by the speaker could be determined to a great extent with the help of contextual factors.⁴ Thus, as in the case of suggested meaning the dependence on contextual factors while interpreting the sentence-meaning is indicative of anekantic element in *tātparyavṛtti*. It is true that the *Mīmāṃsakas* even use the term *tātparya* for the purport of a passage dealing with a particular topic, and refer to six *lingas* by which it could be obtained objectively without any reference to the speaker or author. But in our opinion whether the real purport of the passage is identical with or different from the intention of the speaker or author, the very dependence of interpretation on the contextual factors such as six *lingas* as consistency in meaning between the introduction and conclusion (*upakramopasaṃhārau*) etc. is indicative of anekantic nature of the *tātparyavṛtti* or sentence-meaning.

Primary and Secondary or Metaphorical Meaning

Now let us examine the anekantic aspect of primary and secondary or metaphorical meanings. We restrict our query to the domain of philosophy only and that also particularship to the *Mīmāṃsā*, *vedānta* and *Jaina* systems.

Mīmāṃsā

The *Mīmāṃsā* divides the *Veda* into two parts : *Vidhi* and *Arthavāda*. *Vidhi* refers to the supra-mundane affairs and has to be interpreted literally, that is in the primary sense ; while the *Arthavāda* part roughly refers to the matters of ordinary experience. It has no logical system. It merely reiterates facts otherwise already known. Its purpose is to flatter a man into the doing of good actions or to frighten him out of evil ones. Taken independently the *Arthavāda* has no use.

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It ought to be interpreted liberally, that is, in secondary, metaphorical or figurative sense. Thus Mīmāṃsā lays down canons of interpretation in connection with determining what portion falls under these two heads namely, Vidhi and Arthavāda, that is, the primary and secondary meanings respectively. It holds that only vidhis or injunctions are directly authoritative ; for, they teach us what to do and what not to do. Sentences which merely state something are of no use ; for, nobody gains thereby anything. Hence all the arthavādas are authoritative only in so far as they form a unitary passage with command sentences. For example, the arthavāda, 'vāyu is a swift deity' forms a unitary passage with the injunction, 'one who wants prosperity should touch a goat relating to vāyu', because taken independently the arthavāda has no use, while taken as a corroborative statement of the injunction, it praises the god vāyu and suggests that a rite in connection with god is highly praiseworthy.⁶

Thus according to the Mīmāṃsakas action is the guiding principle of interpreting a particular word or sentence and ascribing to it a primary or secondary meaning. In this respect they equally attach importance to contextual factors as well as a purport also. Even they maintain that an action consists of parts ; and words corresponding to them may be divided into parts if necessary to express their idea. consequently it follows that not only the meaning but even form of a word may also be indeterminate in nature. For example, the word 'svāhā' may be divided into sva, ā, hā meaning "(sva) the soul, (ā) leading to or associated with (hā, 'an exclamation of satisfaction) satisfaction." Hence it expresses the satisfaction of the soul with action, with result that it can continue to act. Similarly, if we divide the word dāna into parts,—d, ā, na—the meaning would be "(d) sacrifice (ā) associated with (na) the senses of knowledge;" and it would signify "the sacrifice or proper function of the senses of knowledge," and the idea becomes different from that of a "gift."⁶ These examples illustrate one of the mīmāṃsīc methods of interpretation which ascribes a special meaning to a common word by dividing it according to the context, purpose and purport. This indicates the indeterminate or anekantic aspect of their concept of meaning. The canons of interpretation laid down by the Mīmāṃsakas are of great value not only to those who want to understand the veda aright but to all who are engaged in the work of finding out the exact import of fixed texts like legal codes.⁷

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Advaita-vedānta

In my article “Bādarāyaṇa and the Doctrine of Anekānta,” I have discussed in details the anekantic basis of Bādarāyaṇa’s philosophy. Here I may point out that his flexible usage of the primary and secondary meanings while interpreting upaniṣadic passages and there by reconciling even cotradictory philosophical views is one more dimension of his anekantic philosophy. In the Brahmasūtra he uses the terms mukhya, pradhāna etc. for denoting the primary meaning while terms such as Bhākta⁸, Gauṇa or Gauṇī⁹, arthavāda¹⁰ in the sense of secondary meaning. Thus, for example, in a sūtra चराचरव्यपाश्रयस्तु स्यात्तद् व्यपदेशो-
भाक् तद्भावाभावित्वात्¹¹ he contends that the mention of these words (birth and death) with relation to moving and stationary bodies is in a primary sense while it is to be taken in a secondary sense with reference to the individual souls in habitating them. The very idea that meaning of a particular statement may either be primary or secondary according to the intention of the author as well as the context indicates its indeterminate or relative nature. We may cite one more example. In the aphorism ‘गौण्यसम्भवात्’², Bādarāyaṇa says, “If it be argued that the “seeing” is in a secondary sense, we say, not so, owing to the use of the word self.” The sāmkhya wants to ascribe “seeing” figuratively to the insentient pradhāna which is referred to by the word Existence and supposed to be the primordial cause of universe. Bādarāyaṇa objects it by discarding the secondary meaning of “seeing” in favour of primary meaning and thereby he asserts that not pradhāna (i.e. prakṛti) but Brahman is the cause of universe.

From Bādarāyaṇa when we come to Śaṅkara we find that Śaṅkara uses the concept of primary and secondary meanings enormously and exuberantly while interpreting the aphorisms of the Brahmasūtra. For secondary meaning he employs the following terms or forms :—

गुणवाद¹⁸, गुणानुवाद¹⁴, गुणवृत्ति¹⁵, गुणविवि¹⁶, गुणविधान¹⁷, गौण¹⁸, गौणत्व¹⁹, गौणी²⁰, गौणीकल्पना²¹, गौणार्थ²², गौणवृत्ति²³, गौणबुद्धि²⁴, भाक्त²⁵ or भक्त, उपचार²⁶, औपचारिक²⁷, उपचारदर्शन²⁸, अमुख्य²⁹, लक्षणा³⁰, लक्षणावृत्ति³¹, लक्षणाश्रय³², लक्षणार्थो-
पलब्धि³³, लाक्षणिक³⁴, लाक्षणिकत्वसिद्धि³⁵, अर्थवाद³⁶, अर्थवादकल्पित³⁷, अर्थवादमात्र³⁸ etc. while in the context of the primary meaning the terms or forms occurring are :—मुख्य³⁹, मुख्यत्व⁴⁰, मुख्यार्थ⁴¹, मुख्यसंभव⁴², मुख्यार्थोपपत्ति⁴³ etc. For example, Śaṅkara while commenting on the aphorism

परं जैमिनिर्मुह्यत्वात्⁴⁴, contends that according to Jaimini the primary meaning of the term param is the Supreme Brahman and the secondary meaning is the inferior Brahman. He further adds that between the primary and secondary meaning one readily understand the primary alone. Again while commenting on the aphorism वराचरव्यपाश्रयस्तु....⁴⁵ Śaṅkara argues that the words birth and death with regard to the individual souls, are used figuratively while primarily in the context of material bodies inhabiting them. Thus, Śaṅkara's interpretation of the aphorisms of the Brahmasūtra, in the light of primary and secondary meanings is indicative of an anekantic element involved in them. In passing, we may add that the Advaita Vedānta school following Śaṅkara has thoroughly developed the concept of purport and primary as well as secondary meaning while interpreting the Upaniṣdic Mahāvākyas such as 'That thou art' etc. For example. Vedantins like Sureśvara, Vācaspati, Vidyānārāṇya, Prakashātman, Dharmarāja, Madhusūdana consider the Mahāvākyas as 'That thou art' to be the purport of the Upaniṣads. They further make distinction between the primary and secondary meaning and try to interpret Mahāvākyas by ascribing either of it to them. Thus, Sureśvara applies Lakṣaṇā to the Mahāvākya 'That thou art' while Dharmarāja rejects it.⁴⁶ We need not enter into further details here. The very sharp differences in the interpretations of Mahāvākyas suggest the indeterminate or anekantic nature of meaning in general.

Finally, we turn our attention to the treatment of the primary and secondary meanings in the Jaina philosophy.

Jainism

The Jaina logicians, rhetoricians, grammarians and philosophers have been discussing different aspects of meaning right from the early centuries of Christian era. For example, in the epistemic and logical theories of Nayavāda, Syādvāda or Saptabhaṅgī, Nikṣepa etc. deal with the problem of knowledge and meaning thoroughly. The concept of Śabdanaya and arthanaya is indicative of their linguistic views applied to epistemology. Even to present the brief outline of these multifarious endeavours is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we shall precisely discuss Kundakunda's position with regard to the primary and secondary meaning.

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Kundakunda's treatment

Kundakunda in his monumental philosophical work *Samayasāra* elucidates the empirical self from the empirical standpoint and the transcendental self from the transcendental standpoint. Since the empirical standpoint deals with the impure, accidental, pervert, superimposed and unreal condition of the mundane soul, its statement may yield the figurative, metaphorical and secondary meaning. Again, since this accidental impurity is caused by the material body, the physical qualities like color, touch, smell, taste, form etc. are superimposed on or transferred to the self ; and consequently all non-self qualities are figuratively affirmed of the self.⁴⁷

Thus, for example, Kundakunda contends that from the empirical standpoint the self and body are certainly one and by lauding the holy body of Arhat one may think that the Arhat is lauded and adored. But from the transcendental or real standpoint, the qualities of body are not found in the perfect soul. He who lauds the attributes of the perfect soul, really lauds the perfect soul.⁴⁸ For, just as admiring the the city can never become admiration of the king, so by lauding the qualities of body the attributes of perfect soul are never lauded.⁴⁹ Again from the practical standpoint the remark is made of (king's) military forces, "the king has gone out," (although not) the king only out also his military forces are gone out with him.⁵⁰ Common people, seeing some one looted in the way, say, "the way is looted", but no way whatsoever is really looted.⁵¹ Similarly, seeing the karmic matter in the soul it has been said from the empirical standpoint, "this colour etc. is of the soul".⁵²

From a few examples cited above it is obvious that kundakunda's statements of practical or empirical standpoint may suggest the secondary meaning while his statements of transcendental or real standpoint may convey the primary or 'real' meaning.

It is needless to say that his doctrine of standpoints is the corollary of the theory of anekānta or indeterminateness.

Conclusion

To conclude, we may observe that a word or a sentence may possess multivalence, multilevels and multi-dimensions of meaning. Like the manifold, indeterminate and relative reality its knowledge

as well as verbal expression may also be manifold, indeterminate and relative. It is for our practical purpose only that we fix meaning of a particular word or sentence according to the context, the intention of the speaker, the general purport and so on. However, meaning is as inexhaustible as reality itself !

Abbreviations

- BS Brahmasūtra of Bādarāyaṇa
- BS SB Brahmasūtra of Bādarāyaṇa with Śaṅkara's Bhāṣya.
- ITM Indian Theories of Meaning. by K. Kunjuni Rājā, Adyar Library and Research Centre, Adyar, Madras, 1963.
- SS Samayasāra of Kundakunda, English translation with commentary by J. L. Jaini, Ajitashram, Lucknow, 1930.
- RRAD Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta, by K. Satchidananda Murty, Motilal Banarasidas, Reprint, 1974.
- EOIH The Essentials of Indian Philosophy, M. Hiriyanna, Allen & Unwin, 1969 7th impression.
- MIMĀMSĀ : Mīmāṃsā, by N. V. Thadani, Bharat Research Institute, Delhi, 1952.

References

1. ITM, p. 293.
2. Ibid, p. 194.
3. Ibid, p. 182.
4. Ibid
5. RRAD, p. 68.
6. Mīmāṃsā, p. 273.
7. EOIP, p. 140.
8. BS, II, 3. 15.
9. BS, I. 1. 6.
10. BS, III. 4. 2.
11. BS, II. 2. 15.
12. BS, I. 1. 6.
13. BSSB. I. 3. 3; III. 1.7; 3.42.
14. Ibid, I. 3. 33.

15. Ibid, I. 1. 6.
16. Ibid, III. 3.19, 56, 58.
17. Ibid, III. 3. 19.
18. Ibid, I. 1.4, 6, 7. 22, II. 3.3. 5, 7. 4.1, 2, 3, III. 1.4, 25. 2.3, IV. 1.3, 12.
19. Ibid, I. 1.6, 7, II. 3.5, 7.
20. Ibid, IV. 3.8.
21. Ibid, I. 1.7.
22. Ibid,
23. Ibid,
24. Ibid,
25. Ibid, II. 3.15.
26. Ibid,
27. Ibid,
28. Ibid, I. 1.5.
29. Ibid, I. 1.7, 8, 12
30. Ibid, III. 1.22, 2.21, 3.7, 9, 4.20, IV. 1.68, 2.1.
31. Ibid, III. 3.9.
32. Ibid, I. 4.11
33. Ibid, III. 3.30
34. Ibid, II. 4.19, III. 1.10, 6.
35. Ibid, II. 4.17
36. Ibid, I. 3.32, 33, III. 3.38, 4.2, 3.38; 4.2 4.28 4.31.
37. Ibid, I. 1.7
38. Ibid, III. 3.42, 49.
39. Ibid. I. 1.4, 5, 6, 8, II. 3.29, 43, III. 1.7, 3.6, IV 1.3, 1.3 etc.
40. Ibid. I. 1.6, 14, 4.9, II. 3.5, 4.17, IV. 3.12 etc.
41. Ibid I. 1.26.
42. Ibid I. 1.22
43. Ibid III. 1.24
44. Ibid IV. 3.12
45. Ibid II. 3.16.
46. RRAD, p. 94.
47. SS. verse 61.
48. Ibid, verses 31-35.

49. Ibid, verse 35.
50. Ibid, verse 52.
51. Ibid, verse 63.
52. Ibid verse 64.

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