

From Reference to Cognition-Reconsidering Meaning through Modern Linguistics and the Indian Semantic Tradition

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Abstract: *Meaning is one of the most fundamental yet complex problems in linguistic theory. The question of what a linguistic expression means has generated diverse approaches, ranging from reference and sense to use, context and cognition. Modern linguistic thought has progressively moved beyond the assumption that meaning is reducible to the relationship between a word and an external object. Frege's distinction between sense and reference, Wittgenstein's emphasis on use, Austin's analysis of language as action, and contemporary cognitive approaches have progressively foregrounded the roles of context, conceptualization, experience and cognition in meaning. The Indian śāstric traditions developed a sophisticated analysis of linguistic meaning through the concepts of śabda, artha, śakti, abhidhā, lakṣaṇā, tātparya, vākyārtha and śābdabodha. Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā and Vyākaraṇa approached the problem from distinct philosophical perspectives, while Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya offers an especially comprehensive account connecting language, meaning and cognition. This paper undertakes a comparative examination of these approaches. Rather than equating concepts belonging to different intellectual traditions, it investigates the semantic problems addressed by them and argues that a movement from reference to cognition provides a productive framework for understanding meaning as a dynamic phenomenon involving linguistic expression, context, interpretation and consciousness.*

Keywords: meaning, semantics, reference, cognition, śabda, artha, vākyārtha, śābdabodha, Bhartṛhari, Vākyapadīya, sphoṭa, cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction: The Problem of Meaning

The question “What is meaning?” appears simple, yet it constitutes one of the most difficult questions in the study of language. A linguistic expression may refer to an object, evoke a concept, convey information, perform an action, express an intention or acquire a particular interpretation from its context. Consequently, meaning cannot easily be reduced to a single relationship between words and things.

The history of modern semantic thought reflects this complexity. Early approaches emphasized reference and the relationship between linguistic expressions and objects in the external world. Subsequent theories drew attention to the distinction between reference and sense, the role of mental representation, the significance of linguistic use and the contribution of context. Contemporary cognitive approaches further understand meaning as dynamic, perspectival and grounded in human experience. The result is a gradual movement from an object-centred understanding of meaning toward a more comprehensive account involving cognition.

A comparable richness is found in the Indian intellectual tradition. Indian grammarians, philosophers and literary theorists devoted extensive attention to the relationship between śabda and artha, the capacity of words to convey meaning, the interpretation of sentences, contextual factors and the cognition generated by linguistic expression. Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā developed elaborate theories of śābdabodha, while the Vyākaraṇa tradition, especially in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya, connected linguistic meaning with the nature of cognition itself.

The present study therefore explores the movement **from reference to cognition**. It does not propose that modern and

Indian theories are historically identical or that concepts from one tradition can be mechanically translated into the terminology of the other. Instead, it asks whether a comparative study of their approaches can deepen our understanding of the nature of meaning.

The central question is:

How does linguistic expression become meaningful cognition?

2. From Reference to Sense, Use and Context

The referential understanding of meaning is perhaps the most intuitive. A word such as *tree* appears to derive its meaning from its relationship with trees in the world. Yet general linguistic expressions immediately reveal the limitations of such an approach. The expression *man*, for instance, may refer to an individual in one context, to a class in another, and to humanity in a generic statement. The linguistic form remains the same, while its semantic function changes.

Bertrand Russell's work represents an important stage in the development of modern semantic thought. His early concern with the relationship between language and reality was subsequently refined through his theory of descriptions, which addressed difficulties arising from treating linguistic expressions as straightforward names of entities.

Frege's distinction between **sense (Sinn)** and **reference (Bedeutung)** provided a decisive conceptual development. Two expressions may have the same reference while presenting that reference differently. His famous example of the “morning star” and “evening star” demonstrates that both expressions refer to Venus but possess different cognitive

significance. Meaning, therefore, cannot be identified simply with reference.

Frege's emphasis on the proposition also points toward another important development: the meaning of an individual expression is connected with its contribution to the sentence in which it occurs. Meaning consequently begins to be understood relationally rather than as an isolated property of words.

A different response emerged through psychologicistic approaches, which associated meaning with ideas or mental representations. Although cognition is clearly involved in language, the reduction of meaning to private mental images presents difficulties. Speakers do not necessarily possess identical mental images when using the same expression. Linguistic meaning therefore involves an intersubjective dimension that cannot be explained solely through individual psychology.

Twentieth-century philosophy of language subsequently emphasized **use**. Wittgenstein's later philosophy challenged the assumption that words possess meanings independently of their employment in linguistic practices. The meaning of an expression is closely related to what speakers do with it. The word *hand*, for example, has different functions in "give me a hand," "a hand of applause," and "hand me the book." Context and use determine the relevant interpretation.

Austin extended this functional understanding by demonstrating that language is not merely descriptive but also performative: utterances can promise, warn, request, order or perform other actions. Meaning thus becomes connected with communicative function.

Contemporary cognitive semantics extends this movement further. Meaning is understood as dynamic, perspectival and grounded in experience. Polysemy provides a particularly important example. A single linguistic form can participate in a network of related meanings depending upon context and conceptual construal. The English preposition *over*, for instance, can express spatial relations, covering, control, transfer, preference and temporal extension.

The development may therefore be represented as:

Reference → Sense → Use → Context → Cognition

This trajectory is important because it demonstrates that meaning is not adequately understood as a fixed entity attached to a linguistic form. It involves the interaction of linguistic convention, context, conceptualization and interpretation.

3. The Indian Semantic Tradition: Śabda and Artha

The Indian semantic traditions approach the problem through the relationship between **śabda** and **artha**. However, neither term corresponds exactly to a single modern category. *Śabda* can denote linguistic expression and, in different philosophical contexts, verbal testimony or language itself. *Artha* can refer to an object, semantic content, purpose or that which is apprehended through language.

The relationship between *śabda* and *artha* therefore constitutes a fundamental problem of Indian linguistic philosophy.

Indian thinkers examined questions such as: What enables a word to convey meaning? What is the relationship between a linguistic expression and its meaning? Does a word denote an individual, a class, an action or a quality? How do individual words contribute to sentence meaning? What role does context play in interpretation? What kind of cognition arises from linguistic expression?

The concept of **śakti**, the capacity of a linguistic expression to convey its meaning, provides one important framework. Discussions of **abhidhā**, **lakṣaṇā** and **vyāñjanā** further demonstrate that verbal meaning cannot be restricted to a single mode of signification.

Abhidhā concerns primary or conventional verbal signification. *Lakṣaṇā* becomes relevant when the primary meaning is unsuitable or insufficient and an associated meaning is understood. *Vyāñjanā*, particularly in poetics, accounts for suggested meaning beyond direct verbal expression.

These categories invite comparison with modern discussions of denotation, semantic extension and pragmatic interpretation. However, such comparison must remain analytical rather than reductive. *Lakṣaṇā*, for example, should not simply be identified with "pragmatics," because it belongs to a different philosophical account of linguistic cognition. The important point is that Indian semantic thinkers explicitly recognized that meaning may involve **convention, association, context and interpretation**.

4. From Word Meaning to Sentence Meaning

The problem of meaning becomes more complex when linguistic analysis moves from individual words to sentences. Does a sentence mean merely the sum of the meanings of its constituent words, or does the sentence generate a meaning that cannot be reduced to its individual components?

This question generated extensive debate in Mīmāṃsā.

The **abhihitānvayavāda** explains sentence meaning through the combination or connection of meanings conveyed by individual words. The **anvitābhidhānavāda**, by contrast, gives greater emphasis to the fact that words convey meaning in relation to other words within a syntactically and semantically connected expression.

The debate demonstrates that Indian semantic theory was deeply concerned with a problem that remains central to contemporary semantics: the relationship between **lexical meaning and sentence meaning**.

The analysis of sentence comprehension also led to the identification of conditions necessary for meaningful interpretation. **Ākāṅkṣā**, **yogyatā** and **sannidhi/āsatti** are discussed in relation to the interconnectedness, compatibility and proximity of linguistic elements. These concepts

demonstrate that meaningful sentence comprehension cannot be explained through isolated lexical meanings alone.

The concept of **tātparya**, or intended purport, adds another dimension. An utterance may convey a meaning determined not only by the conventional meanings of its constituent words but also by the purpose and context of communication.

This has an important point of contact with contemporary pragmatics, where interpretation involves contextual information and communicative intention. Yet the theoretical foundations remain different. The Indian analysis belongs to a broader epistemological and hermeneutical framework concerned with the nature of verbal cognition.

Thus the question shifts from:

What does the word mean?

to:

How does the hearer arrive at the meaning of the sentence?

5. Śābdabodha: Meaning as Cognition

The concept of **śābdabodha** provides one of the most significant points of contact between Indian semantic theory and contemporary cognitive approaches.

The term refers broadly to the cognition arising from linguistic expression. Indian philosophers examined the conditions under which such cognition arises and the relationship between the meanings conveyed by individual linguistic elements and the unified cognition of the sentence.

This represents a major conceptual shift. The central question is no longer simply:

What does this word denote?

but:

What cognition arises when this linguistic expression is understood?

Contemporary cognitive semantics similarly emphasizes that meaning involves conceptualization rather than merely correspondence with an external object. Interpretation draws upon linguistic structure, contextual information, prior knowledge and human experience.

The Indian analysis, however, goes further in explicitly making the **cognition generated by language** a central object of philosophical investigation. The study of meaning therefore becomes connected with epistemology: language is not merely a means of referring to objects but also a means through which knowledge or cognition arises.

6. Bhartṛhari: Language, Meaning and Cognition

The Vyākaraṇa tradition offers perhaps the most philosophically comprehensive framework for the present comparison. Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* does not treat language merely as a system of labels attached to independently

existing objects. Language is deeply intertwined with cognition.

A foundational verse states:

न सोऽस्ति प्रत्ययो लोके

यः शब्दानुगमादृते

अनुविद्धमिव ज्ञानं

सर्वं शब्देन भासते

“There is no cognition in the world without the accompaniment of *śabda*; all cognition appears as though penetrated by language.”

The philosophical significance of this statement is considerable. The relationship between language and meaning is placed within the larger relationship between **language and cognition**.

Bhartṛhari's approach consequently permits the semantic problem to be reformulated. Instead of asking merely what an expression refers to, we may ask how linguistic expression participates in the emergence and organization of cognition.

The concept of **sphoṭa** is central to this discussion. Speech is experienced as a temporal sequence of sounds, yet meaningful understanding is not ordinarily experienced as a mere mechanical accumulation of independently perceived sounds. The hearer apprehends a meaningful unity.

The problem may therefore be expressed as follows:

How does sequential linguistic expression result in the apprehension of a unified meaning?

Bhartṛhari's theory of *sphoṭa* addresses this problem within the philosophical framework of Vyākaraṇa. The audible sounds provide the manifestation through which linguistic unity becomes apprehensible, while *sphoṭa* is treated as distinct from the temporal succession of individual sounds.

This has an interesting, though not identical, point of comparison with modern psycholinguistic and cognitive approaches, which investigate how sequential linguistic input is integrated into coherent interpretation. The comparison should not suggest that *sphoṭa* is an ancient equivalent of a modern cognitive representation. Rather, both approaches raise the problem of how linguistic sequences become meaningful wholes.

7. Pratibhā and Immediate Comprehension

The concept of **pratibhā** further enriches Bhartṛhari's account. Linguistic comprehension is not necessarily experienced as a conscious process of mechanically assembling individual lexical meanings. The meaning of a sentence can be apprehended as a unified whole.

This provides a useful point of comparison with contemporary cognitive accounts of language comprehension, where interpretation is understood as an active and dynamic process involving linguistic information, context and prior knowledge.

The conceptual movement may therefore be expressed as:
śabda → linguistic apprehension → **pratibhā** → **artha-pratīti**

This should not be regarded as a literal cognitive-processing model in the modern scientific sense. Rather, it represents an Indian philosophical account of the transition from linguistic expression to meaningful apprehension.

8. Comparative Discussion: From Reference to Cognition

The comparison developed in this study suggests that both modern and Indian traditions move beyond a purely referential understanding of meaning, although they do so through very different conceptual frameworks.

Semantic problem	Modern approaches	Indian approaches
Language and object	Referentialism	Śabda–artha relation
Sense beyond reference	Frege	Jāti, vyakti, ākr̥ti and related analyses
Mental dimension	Psychologism, cognitive semantics	Buddhi, pratīti
Conventional meaning	Lexical semantics	Śakti, abhidhā
Extended meaning	Polysemy, semantic extension	Lakṣaṇā
Suggested meaning	Pragmatics	Vyañjanā
Sentence meaning	Compositional semantics	Vākyārtha
Context	Contextual/cognitive semantics	Ākāṅkṣā, yogyatā, sannidhi
Communicative intention	Pragmatics	Tātparya
Linguistic cognition	Cognitive semantics	Śābdabodha
Unity of meaning	Cognitive integration	Sphoṭa
Immediate comprehension	Cognitive processing	Pratibhā

The table does not establish equivalence. Its purpose is to identify shared **problems of inquiry**.

The most significant difference lies perhaps in the final orientation. Modern linguistics, particularly in its cognitive forms, investigates how linguistic meaning relates to conceptualization, experience and mental processing. Bhartrhari's inquiry extends beyond this toward a philosophical consideration of the relationship between *śabda*, cognition and consciousness.

Consequently, the Indian semantic tradition offers more than a historical collection of theories of word and sentence meaning. It provides a philosophical framework in which **meaning is inseparable from the process of knowing**.

9. Conclusion

The study of meaning has moved through several stages in modern linguistic and philosophical thought. Referential approaches emphasized the relationship between language and objects; Frege demonstrated the importance of sense in addition to reference; psychologistic approaches foregrounded mental representation; Wittgenstein and Austin emphasized use and communicative function; and cognitive approaches increasingly recognize the role of context, experience and conceptualization.

The Indian semantic traditions developed independently sophisticated analyses of many of these problems. Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā and Vyākaraṇa investigated the relationship between *śabda* and *artha*, the modes of verbal signification, sentence meaning, contextual interpretation and the cognition generated through language. Concepts such as *śakti*, *abhidhā*, *lakṣaṇā*, *tātparya*, *ākāṅkṣā*, *yogyatā*, *sannidhi* and *śābdabodha* reveal a semantic inquiry extending well beyond simple reference.

Bhartrhari's *Vākyapadīya* provides an especially significant philosophical perspective because it places language and

meaning within the wider domain of cognition. His statement that

अनुविद्धमिव ज्ञानं सर्वं शब्देन भासते

invites us to consider the possibility that linguistic meaning cannot be fully understood independently of cognition.

The comparative journey may therefore be summarized as:

Reference → Sense → Use → Context → Cognition

and, from the Indian perspective:

Śabda → Artha → Vākya → Tātparya → Śābdabodha → Sphoṭa/Pratibhā

These are not identical trajectories, nor should the concepts be treated as direct equivalents. Their significance lies in the questions they allow us to ask of one another.

The central insight emerging from the comparison is that meaning is neither simply an object “out there” nor merely an idea “inside” the mind. It is a dynamic phenomenon involving linguistic form, semantic convention, contextual conditions, communicative purpose and cognitive apprehension. The Indian semantic tradition, particularly Bhartrhari's thought, adds a further philosophical dimension by examining the intimate relationship between **language, meaning and cognition**.

Thus, moving from **reference to cognition** does not merely describe a historical development in semantic theory. It provides a framework for reconsidering meaning itself—as a phenomenon situated at the intersection of **śabda, artha, context, cognition and consciousness**.