

The Context Principle in Indian Philosophy of Language

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The context principle

Mīmāṃsā and context

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▶ He found a bat.

- ▶ He found a bat.
- ▶ It was in the dugout.

- ▶ He found a bat.
- ▶ It tried to bite him.

- ▶ He found a bat.
- ▶ He didn't bat an eye.

- ▶ *paśum ālabhēta* (“he should sacrifice **an animal**”)
- ▶ *grahaṁ sammārṣṭi* (“he wipes off **the cup**”)

▶ Aleksandar is [here](#).

- ▶ That sounds like a **great** idea.

Frege's context principle

It is only in the context of a sentence that words mean something.

Nur in Zusammenhange eines Satzes bedeuten die Wörter etwas.

Frege 1884: §62, p. 73

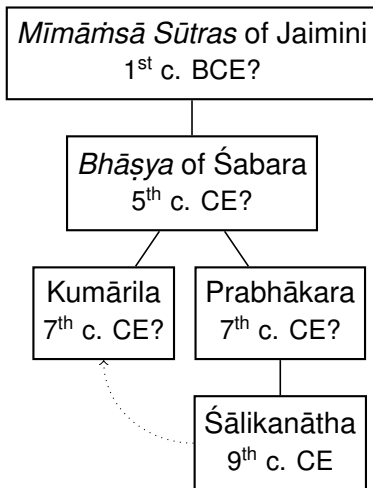
Voloshinov's context principle

The meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context. In fact, there are as many meanings of a word as there are contexts of its usage.

Смысл слова встсело определяется его контекстом. В сущности, сколько контекстов употребления данного слова, — столько его значений.

Vološinov 1973: 79

An outline of the Mīmāṃsā system



Mīmāṃsā's definition of a sentence

It is a single sentence if, upon being split up, there would be unresolved dependencies, on account of the fact that it has a single meaning/purpose (*artha*-).

arthaikatvād ēkaṃ vākyaṃ sākaṅkṣaṃ cēd vibhāgē syāt

Mīmāṃsā Sūtra 2.1.46

The traditional doxography

abhihitānvayaḥ (“the relation of [word-meanings] that have been expressed [by the words]”): first words express their meanings, then these meanings are synthesized into a sentence-meaning

anvitābhidhānam (“the expression of relational [word-meanings]”): words express meanings that are *already* related to the meanings expressed by the other words in the sentence

Kumārila on sentence-meaning

Our position is that sentence-meaning is secondary meaning in every case.

vākyārthō lakṣyamāṇō hi sarvatraivēti naḥ sthitiḥ

*Extensive Notes (Br̥haṭṭīkā)? (quoted in Śālikanātha's
Fundamentals of Sentence Meaning)*

Prabhākara's intervention

TEACHER: ...my purpose here is to express a distinction.

STUDENT: But what distinction do you mean to express? The aforestated objection that there is no connection [between a linguistic expression and its meaning] has already been dealt with, hasn't it? And as for sentence-meaning, hasn't that already been objected to [in *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* 1.1.4, where perception is rejected as a source of knowledge for *dharma* because] "it apprehends only things that are present"?

Mīmāṃsakas consider that the originariness of the connection applies to words.

Prabhākara's intervention

TEACHER:— Why should I bother making up the speech of lazy students? Something's meaning is whatever is understood from it. And in the practical activity of adults, no meaning at all is observed to be understood from just a word. And it's impossible to say that a meaning that *isn't* understood has a connection with anything at all.

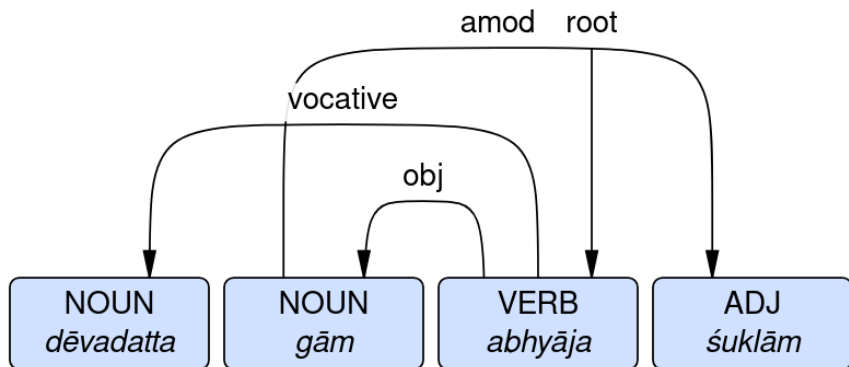
Prabhākara's intervention

STUDENT: Then why does everyone think that the *sūtra* applies to words?

TEACHER: Because they're lazy students, as I said! Therefore **it is the connection between a sentence and its meaning that is originary.**

Long Explanation, p. 135

What does “relation” mean?



Conditions for understanding relational meanings

They are *conditions* because, being neutral themselves, they fix the meaning of the expression to a particular simply from a consideration of the utterance.

upādhayō hi taṣasthāḥ prayōgadarśanamātrācchabdārthaṁ viśēṣē
'vasthāpayanti

Long Explanation, p. 387

Conditions for understanding relational meanings

- ▶ **dependency** (*ākaṅkṣā/apēkṣā*): “a listener stands in need of knowing the correlate of a given word-meaning, either in order for the expressed meaning to make sense at all, or for the word to fully express its relational meaning.”

e.g. *dvāram*

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- ▶ **compatibility** (*yōgyatā*): “the ability to be connected with something else”

e.g. *puraṁ rathaṁ yāti*



References

- Frege, G. *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik. Eine logisch mathematische Untersuchung über den Begriff der Zahl*. Breslau: Wilhelm Koenig, 1884.
- Vološinov, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.