

Thought and Language: Its Practical Significance

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The nature of thought has been a classical topic of debate among the philosophers. Right from the ancient period, both the western as well as the Indian schools have been involved in the inquiry into the nature of thought and its expression in the empirical plane. In the present paper, we are primarily concerned with the Indian perspective on the expression of thoughts in language.

If we sketch the history of thoughts in India, we find its origins in the Rigveda. The Vedic texts are believed to be the collation of the eternal ideas as expressed in language by our Rishis who did not compose them but discovered those ideas. This is the classical standpoint taken by our philosophers of orthodox schools. Further the Brahmana texts express the *vidhis*, the injunctions which are again the expressions of the Indian thoughts which are considered as eternal by the Mimamsakas. These are the injunctions which are applied upon the human beings unlike the Vedic hymns which are addressed to the gods and express the injunctions which are applied upon the gods. The expressions of thoughts have changed its mode in the Upanishads where the texts declare some factual states of affairs rather than any imperative ideas which can be implemented in practice. This is the fundamental point that we are going to underline in this paper.

Even in the period of the rise of the various forms of heresies in the 6th century BCE, we find that the forms of teachings as expressed in the language of those contemporary texts have been predominantly normative and imperative where the ultimate goal of teaching is to impart some practical wisdom among the disciples which can be implemented in practice rather than those information about the universe which are irrelevant in practice. In this way, we find that unlike the west where the primary objective of learning was to know and understand the universe as this is in itself, the motive of learning in India was to get those ideas which are good to be implemented for the human welfare. The teachings of the

Buddha consist of the wisdom which is required to be implemented in practice while ignoring or discouraging the metaphysical questions. The understanding of the universe is secondary to the practical teachings.

Further we can underline the fact that the most orthodox school, namely, the Prabhakar school of Purva Mimamsa has declared that all meaningful propositions whether Vedic or secular are imperative. Here we get the clue of the pattern of thinking towards which the Indian mind was moving. The implementation of the propositions is possible only if these are presented to us in the imperative form and this area of teaching is the glimpse into that sphere of knowledge into which only the words have a reach.

Unlike the west where only the declaration of the factual states of affairs has been the primary object of learning, the Indian thinking was always inclined towards the expression of the imperative ideas, that is, those ideas which can be implemented in practice. In the Indian system of learning as well as the teachings, the wisdom consists of the imperative ideas which can be expressed by the propositions with injunctive verbs. This is the sphere of knowledge where perception and inference have no relevance while the words become an independent source of knowledge and an independent epistemological value of the words are established in the Indian philosophy. Had the direction of thought been in the direction of the declaration of the facts of the world as has been the case with the contemporary western philosophy, this is possible that an independent epistemological value of language could not have been cognized. If an idea is expressed in an imperative form, the idea is only cognized and can be implemented in practice but there is no question of its being true or false. The question of its verification becomes meaningless and its expression itself becomes its proof that is different from perception as the meaning of the said proposition is not perceived but is known by its expression through words.

The famous statement of Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”¹, is not suitable in the Indian context. The logical positivist approach on meaning is also not relevant in understanding the Indian perspective on the relation between language and world. The Indian perspective was never inclined towards establishing the language in the role of just copying the facts of the universe which can be known by perception.

The development of an orthodox materialistic school, namely, the Mimamsa can also throw some light on this topic. Here we are primarily concerned with its linguistic aspects. The question about the derivation of meaning from a given text has well been discussed in this philosophy. According to tradition, among the two chief schools of this philosophy, the founder of the Prabhakar school, namely, Prabhakar Mishra was a disciple of Kumarila Bhatta, the founder of the Bhatta school. Once they were studying the scriptures and they found the following text-

“Atratunoktam tatrapinoktam iti dviruktam”².

Kumarila Bhatta was analyzing the text in this way-

“Atra tu na uktam tatra api na uktam iti dviruktam”³.

This makes sense thus-

“Here this has not been said there also this has not been said thus said twice”⁴.

In this way, the text was making no sense at all. Ultimately they failed to derive the true meaning and left for the evening prayer (*sandhya vandana*)⁵. They returned to study the text in the night and Prabhakar, the disciple, analyzed the proposition in the following way and reached at the true meaning-

“Atra tuna uktam tatra apina uktam iti dviruktam”⁶.

This makes sense thus-

“Here this has been said (*tuna* is *nipaata*), there also this has been said (*apina* is *nipaata*), thus said twice”⁷.

As the disciple had reached at the true meaning by following his own method of the *anvitabhidhanvada* that is different from the *abhihitanyavayavada* method of his teacher, the teacher was so pleased that he conferred the title ‘Guru’ upon his disciple⁸. For this reason, the view of Prabhakar, the disciple, is known as the Guru school.

This fact can also lead us towards the understanding of the reason behind the acceptance of Shabda as an independent Pramana. The knowledge of the injunctions as enjoined for a performer desirous of his welfare is not possible by perception, inference or any means other than words which have the power of expressing those injunctions. The *mantra* portion supplements the *vidhis*. This can be understood as the performance of the actions which form the parts of the ceremonial sacrifices, by speech. This reminds us about the ‘performative statements’ as said by Austin.

There is another view regarding the difference between the *mantra* and the *vidhi* portions. This view is that the *mantra* portion constitutes the substantive laws while the *vidhi* portion constitutes the procedure laws⁹. This is the legal interpretation of the Vedic texts.

One more view can be underlined that the *mantra* portion expresses those injunctions which are applicable for the gods of Nature while the Brahmana portion or the *vidhi* portion expresses those which are applicable for the human beings. In this way, the role of language is primarily concerned with the expression of the imperative ideas which can be implemented in practice and in the Vedic world-view all the events happening in the universe are just the implementations of the various Vedic commands expressed through the Vedic hymns addressed to the gods for the orderly maintenance of the universe. So the view on learning and teaching is concerned with those ideas which are required to be implemented in practice for the welfare of the human beings rather than the mere indications towards the facts already present in the universe.

Notes and References-

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 5.62.

² Mahamahopadhyaya Ganganath Jha, The Prabhakar School of Purva Mimamsa, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, reprint- 1978, pp. 11.

³ Ibid., pp. 11

⁴ Ibid., pp. 11

⁵ Ibid., pp. 11

⁶ Ibid., pp. 11

⁷ Ibid., pp. 11

⁸ Ibid., pp. 11

⁹ Mohan Lal Sandal's Introduction to the Mimamsa Sutras, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, reprint- 1980, pp. 38.