

The Relation between Word & Meaning: In Western Epistemological Approach

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Abstract

Epistemology which is one of the most important parts of philosophy is a science which deals with the nature, source, condition & scope of knowledge. The present paper attempts to examine the relation word and meaning as it exists in the western epistemological theories such as Referential theory, Ideational theory, Behavioural theory and Use theory. The views of these theories relating the issue of the relation between word and meaning are different. The paper concludes that word has no separate meaning, so far as our knowledge is concerned.

Keywords: word, meaning, Epistemology, knowledge etc. .

Epistemology is one of the most important parts of philosophy. The word ‘Epistemology’ consists of two words- ‘episteme’ and ‘logos’. ‘Episteme’ means ‘Knowledge’ & ‘logos’ means ‘science’ and hence *Epistemology* is a science which deals with the nature, source, condition & scope of knowledge. The word ‘knowledge’ is derived from the word to ‘know’. In our daily life we can know many things with the help of our sense organs. But all knowing things are not knowledge. So the word “know” has two senses: 1. weak sense of ‘know’ and 2. Strong sense of ‘know’.

In weak sense of ‘know’ there are certain conditions. ‘I know that ‘p’ is true ‘means (i) ‘I’ believe that ‘p’ is true. (ii) My belief is true (iii) There are certain arguments for supporting my truth of believe. In case of synthetic proposition the word ‘know’ is used in weak sense .For example, Fire burns. But in the case of necessary truth the word ‘know’ is used as strong sense, for example, the proposition about our consciousness. In this sense Descartes says, ‘I think therefore I am’. Also in case of analytic statement the word ‘know’ is used as a strong sense.

Strong sense of knowledge means propositional knowledge .When knowledge is expressed through the sentences, that knowledge is called propositional knowledge.

Propositional knowledge means knowledge of a true proposition which is believed to be true by the knower and whose truth is justified by sufficient evidences. This kind of knowledge is the basis of all others forms of knowledge. So in the field of western philosophy we mean by the word “knowledge” is propositional knowledge. A proposition or a sentence is a collection of words. ‘Word’ is a smallest part of meaning. To put in other words, there is a relation between word and meaning. In western epistemology, there are various types of theories about the relation between word and meaning. In this context William P. Alston (1988) mentioned three theories: 1. *Referential Theory*– this theory has been attractive to a great many theorists because it seems to provide a simple answer that is readily assimilable to natural ways of thinking about the problem of meaning.

According to the *referential theory*, a word is meaningful by its referring occurent that means meaning of a word depends on the object, which it refers. So according to this theory a word itself has no meaning, meaning is constituted by its referent. In this context, Bertrand Russell says, in his book *Principles of Mathematics*, “words all have meaning, in the simple sense that there symbols that stand for something other than themselves”.

Referential theory exists in two forms. The view of the first form is that the meaning of an expression with it refers. The first form of the theory can easily be shown to be in adequate by virtue of the fact that two expressions can have different meanings, but the same referent. For example, the two expressions ‘Rabindronath Tagore’ and the ‘author of Gitanjali’ refer to the same individual. Although they have different meanings, the converse phenomenon, same meaning but different referents can be demonstrated, not for different expressions, but for different utterances of the same expression. There is a class of terms, sometimes called ‘Indexical Terms’, for example, ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘here’, which systematically change their reference with changes in the conditions of their utterance .When John utters the word ‘I’ it refers to John ; when Smith utters it ,it refers to Smith .Here ‘I’ has the single meaning ,the speaker. For avoid the difficulties of first form of referential theory, another view is that the meaning of a word determined by referential relation. For it may be that although ‘Suktara’ and ‘Sandhatara’ refer to

the same object, they are not related to that referent in the same way. So this view is also defective.

First of all, there are many words as found in our everyday speech like ‘Ah!’, ‘Oh!’ etc. feeling expressed words and there are conjunctions and other components of language are meaningful but refer to nothing. Referential theorists usually reply to this objection denying that “syncategorematic” terms like these have meaning “in isolation”, or that they have meaning in the primary sense in which nouns, adjective and verbs have meaning .

For avoiding this difficulties referential theorists give a proposal to use the expression ‘stand for’ in terms of the expression ‘refer to’, which is such that every meaningful linguistic unit stands for something. In broader sense, the expression ‘stand for’ means denotation, connotation, definition, etc.

Another meaning theory is *Ideational theory* which was propounded by the great thinker John Locke in his ‘Essay Concerning Human Understanding’, section -1, chapter-2, Book-3, “the use, then of word is to be sensible marks of ideas, and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification”.

According to this theory, what gives a linguistic expression a certain meaning is the fact that it is regularly used in communication as the “mark” of a certain idea, the idea with which we continue our thinking has an existence as well as a function that is independent of the language. A linguistic expression gets its meaning by being used as such through an indication. This presumably means that whenever an expression is used in that sense, 1. The idea must be present in the mind of the speaker, and 2, the speaker must be producing the expression in order to get his audience to realize that the idea in question is in his mind at that time. So far as communication is successful, the expression would have to call up the same idea in the mind of the hearer.

These conditions are not the fact satisfying. The real difficulty lies in the fact that we are unable to spot “Ideas” as we would have in order to test the ideational theory .There is to be sure, a sense of ‘idea’ in which it is not completely implausible to say that ideas are involved in any

intelligible bit of speech .Idea in this sense is derivative from such notions as ‘meaning’ and ‘understanding’, and so can provide no basis for an explication of meaning.

One deficiency of the ideational theory, as generally and widely claimed, lies in the fact that it does not look for ideas present or active in the minds of speakers and listeners in order to settle questions about what a word means in the language or about the sense in which a speaker uses a term on a given occasion.

According to Behavioral theory word meaning can be determined by the stimuli and its response. According to this theory ‘word’ meaning can be determined in two sides:

- (i) Through word meaning and
- (ii) Through sentence meaning.

Generally, single word has no common element, it can’t determine the meaning of the word. Hence we take alternative view which can be determined the meaning through sentence. For instance, “bring me another cup of coffee please”. Here situation is that “I have recently had a cup of coffee”. It may be that “I have taken more than one cup of coffee” & now “I have no need to take coffee”. If in some situation the meanings of the two sentences are completely different then it can’t determine the meaning of the sentence.

In this context we can mention Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning. His philosophy is divided into two parts: early Wittgenstein & latter Wittgenstein. In the early Wittgenstein, the theory of word meaning is called *Tractatus theory* of meaning and in latter Wittgenstein the theory of word meaning is called the ‘Use theory’ of meaning. According to *Tractatus theory*, word itself is meaningful; i.e., meaning of a word is predetermined .The meaning of a word is determined by the nature of the object, which the word refers. For example, the meaning of the object ‘table’ is predetermined by the word ‘table’. According to this theory, in the same situation function of a word is same.

After that the later Wittgenstein has rejected the *Tractatus theory*, of meaning & he said that meaning of a word cannot be predetermined .He also says that the act of word is never same. We have a false idea about language. So we think that all words have same act in same situation.

Wittgenstein says that to refer something is not the only act of word, but one of the acts of word. That is why, he argues that sentence is the circumstance of word, out of sentence word has no meaning. According to this theory, meaning of a word depends on its use, and it suggests that the use of word is its meaning. This theory of meaning is called *Use theory* of meaning. To explain the use theory of meaning, Wittgenstein uses two concepts: Language game & Forms of life.

- (i) Language game means the combination of linguistic & non-linguistic activity. For example, the word ‘pain’ is expressed by both linguistic and non-linguistic activities. A new born baby can express his/her pain through his/her crying, but after learning language she expresses her pain through a sentences ‘I feel pain’. According to the view of Wittgenstein, ‘crying’ is a non-linguistic expression of pain and the sentence, ‘I feel pain’ is the linguistic expression of pain. So the formation of the word ‘language-game’ is the conjunction of linguistic & non-linguistic activities.
- (ii) Form of life, means various ways or various modes in which human being behaves. For example, if a boy can utter the word ‘ball’ then it can’t say that the boy has known the meaning of the word ‘ball’. Hence utterance of word is not the meaning of the word. Many activities are related with the word ‘ball’. Meaning of word, as observed in the present discourse, relates to and is determined by society and societal systems, norms and other factors involved with it. The statement “language is a ‘form of life’ means that language is the ability to behave in a certain way. There we can say that meaning of the word depends on the context. So use of word depends on the form of the social life.

Therefore, on the basis of above discussion we can safely conclude that word has no separate meaning. For this reason we can’t always want to know the meaning of a word very clearly from dictionary. Sometimes word meaning depends on its use in a sentence, sometimes depends on how it behaves in certain way and sometimes depends on context. Hence it is evident that word itself has no meaning, so far as, our knowledge is concerned.

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