

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nyāya and Vyākaraṇa on Śābdabodha (Verbal Cognition)

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Śābdabodha refers to the cognition of sentence meaning – the knowledge gained when one understands a sentence. In Indian linguistic philosophy, a sentence (vākya) is typically analyzed into two parts: a subject (उद्देश्य, *uddeshya* – the entity being talked about) and a predicate (विधेय, *vidheya* – what is said about that entity). The Nyāya school and the grammarians (Vyākaraṇa tradition) sharply differ on which part of the sentence is primary in conveying meaning. Below, we explain the Nyāya view that the *subject* (typically in the nominative case, *prathamā*) is the principal element of meaning, versus the Vyākaraṇa view that the *verb/predicate* (*ākhyāta* or *vidheya*) is primary. We also clarify how the sphoṭa theory fits into the grammarians' perspective, and why Nyāya emphasizes the *dharmin* (substratum, the subject) at the center of understanding.

Nyāya: Subject (Uddeshya) as the Primary Focus in Meaning

According to the Nyāya-siddhānta, the meaning of the subject (the word in the nominative case) is the principal concept in a sentence. In other words, the entity denoted by the subject is taken as the *mukhya-viśeṣya* (the primary referent to be qualified) to which the meanings of all the other words relate. The predicate (typically a verb or verb phrase) is understood as an attribute or action that rests upon that subject. All the other components of the sentence (object, instrument, etc.) function as qualifiers that ultimately connect to the subject's meaning.

For example, consider the sentence in Sanskrit: "चैत्रः पदभ्यां ग्रामं गच्छति" (*Chaitraḥ padbhyāṃ grāmaṃ gacchati* – "Chaitra goes to the village on foot"). The Naiyāyika (Nyāya philosopher) would express the sentence meaning as a single cognitive unit centered on *Chaitra*: "Chaitra, who possesses a going-to-the-village-by-foot action in the present tense." In the technical language of Navya-Nyāya, this is formulated as a compound like *pāda-karaṇaka-grāma-karmaka-vartamāna-kālīna-gamanābhinna-kṛtimān Chaitraḥ*. This intricate phrase means that *Chaitra* is characterized by an action of going (गमन, *gamana*) – an action which has foot as the instrument (*pāda-karaṇaka*), village as the object or destination (*grāma-karmaka*), and present time as its temporal qualifier (*vartamāna-kālīna*). Crucially, *Chaitra* (the subject, a person – a *dravya* or substance in Nyāya ontology) is the substratum (*dharmin* or *adhāra*) in which this complex action-property inheres. In Nyāya's analysis, the agent (*kartr*, expressed by the nominative case) remains the central figure, and the verb's action is a property attributed to that agent. The sentence thus primarily informs us about *Chaitra* – specifically, it tells us that Chaitra has the property of "going to the village (on foot, now)."

This Nyāya stance is sometimes termed *karṭṛ-mukhya-viśeṣya-bodha*, meaning “cognition with the agent as the primary substantive”. The subject is the determinate locus that the listener’s cognition centers on, and the predicate is seen as determining or qualifying that subject (for instance, by adding the information that *Chaitra is-doing-going*). In simpler terms, for Nyāya the sentence describes a fact about a substance (person/thing) – the fact that this substance has a certain property or is engaged in a certain action. The meaning of a sentence in the Nyāya perspective corresponds to a real state of affairs (*vastu*) – a configuration of substances, qualities, and actions in the world. Words are understood to refer to real ontological categories (such as *dravya* for a substance like Chaitra, or *karma* for an action like going), and sentence-meaning arises when these word-meanings are syntactically connected to depict a unified fact. Nyāya philosophers emphasize that beyond the individual word meanings, a sentence conveys the intended relation (*samsarga*) among those referents – e.g. the relation of an action to its agent and object – and this relational structure is grasped through the syntax, not by any single word alone. In our example, the relation is one of an action (“going”) inhering in an agent (“Chaitra”) and directed toward an object (“village”) with an instrument (“feet”). The subject term “Chaitra” is primary because it is the entity we come to know something new about (we learn that *Chaitra is performing such-and-such action*). The predicate supplies that new information as a qualification of Chaitra.

Why does Nyāya put the *dharmin* (substratum, here the agent) at the center of the meaning? This is rooted in Nyāya’s realist ontology. In Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thought, an action (*kriyā*) is considered a *dharma* (attribute) that cannot exist on its own; it must reside in a *dharmin* (a substance that performs or possesses that action). The world, according to Nyāya, is composed of substances (*dravya*) which bear qualities and actions. Therefore, any situation described by a sentence is ultimately a substance-quality or substance-action complex. It is natural, then, that in understanding a sentence, the mind identifies the substance (the subject) as the foundational element, and attributes the action or quality to it as something subsisting in that substance. In our example, *gamanam* (going) is a motion attribute that inheres in the *dravya Rāma/Chaitra*. So the cognition “Chaitra is going” is principally about Chaitra, with “going” as a property attached to him. In Nyāya’s view, the sentence’s meaning is essentially the knowledge of a particular *substratum-attribute linkage* – in this case, the fact of Chaitra’s going – which is a real event in the world. This is why the *uddeshya* (subject) occupies the primary role in Nyāya’s *śābdabodha*: it represents the anchor in reality (the entity) that the rest of the sentence predicates something about.

(*Side note:* Nyāya subscribes to the *abhihitānvaya-vāda* theory of comprehension, holding that each word first conveys its own meaning, and then those meanings are connected (*anvaya*) based on syntactic expectancy, congruity, etc., to yield the sentence meaning. Thus, understanding a sentence is a step-by-step composition of word meanings. By the time the final word is heard, the listener’s mind (via memory and syntactic clues) integrates all prior word-meanings with it, forming a unified interpretation. This approach rejects the need for any indivisible sentential entity beyond the words. Every sentence for Nyāya is ultimately analyzable into its constituent words and phonemes. We mention this to contrast with the grammarians’ holistic view discussed next.)*

Vyākaraṇa: Predicate (Verb) as the Primary Focus, and the Sphoṭa Doctrine

The Vyākaraṇa school (Sanskrit grammarians, including philosophers like Patañjali and Bhartṛhari) does not accept the Naiyāyika view above. Instead, they contend that in sentence cognition, the predicate – specifically the action denoted by the verb – is the principal part of the meaning, and all other words (including the subject) are subordinate to it. In other words, the vidheya (that which is stated or enjoined by the sentence, usually the verb/predicate) is the core around which the sentence’s meaning is built, according to grammarians. This standpoint is termed ākhyāta-mukhya-viśeṣya-bodha – meaning “cognition with the verb (ākhyāta) as the primary substantive”.

Revisiting the same example, “Chaitra goes to the village (on foot)”: a grammarian would say that the sentence primarily conveys an action of going – a going-to-the-village-by-foot event – and that this action is qualified by various adjuncts (agent = Chaitra, destination = village, instrument = feet, time = present). Thus, the action or occurrence itself is central in their analysis, and the subject is just one among several qualifiers of that action. In a formal paraphrase, the Vaiyākaraṇa might describe the sentence’s content as *“a going-to-the-village-by-foot event, which is characterized by having Chaitra as its agent (kartṛ), in the present time”*. The compound given in traditional analysis is *pāda-karaṇaka-grāma-karmaka-Chaitra-kartṛka-vartamāna-kālika-gamanābhinnā-kṛtiḥ*. Here, the action of going (gamana) is imagined as the primary entity (“indeed an undivided act”) and is qualified by *Chaitra-kartṛka* (“having Chaitra as the doer”), *grāma-karmaka* (“having village as object”), *pāda-karaṇaka* (“having feet as instrument”), etc. The fundamental difference from Nyāya is clear: whether the central “unit” of thought in understanding a sentence is the subject or the predicate. Nyāya says the sentence tells us something *about the subject*, whereas Vyākaraṇa (and many other schools like Pūrva Mīmāṃsā in ritual contexts) say the sentence essentially *asserts an action or predicate*, to which the subject and other elements are attached.

This grammarian perspective is closely tied to their broader theory of language, especially the sphoṭa doctrine. The sphoṭa theory, championed by Bhartṛhari and others, posits that a sentence (and likewise a word) is ultimately an indivisible unit of language and thought – an internal unity that is only revealed by the sequence of spoken sounds (dhvani). According to this view, the listener’s mind does not compile meanings bit by bit; rather, the complete meaning flashes forth as a single holistic insight the moment the sentence is fully heard. The sphoṭa of a sentence is that single holistic utterable unit (the inherent form of the sentence) which bears the meaning. When one understands a sentence, what arises is an indivisible cognition of that whole meaning. Bhartṛhari uses the term pratibhā to describe this instantaneous flash of understanding – a clear, intuitive revelation of the sentence meaning. In his view, the sentence’s meaning (*vākya-artha*) is nothing but this flash of insight (pratibhā) that the sphoṭa (the whole sentence-unit) produces in the mind. For example, upon hearing “Chaitra goes to the village,” one doesn’t necessarily think in piecemeal fashion “Chaitra – village – going – foot – present – combine”; rather, ideally one gets a single unified idea of a scenario: *Chaitra going to the village (on foot, now)* – all at once as an integrated understanding. This is the indivisible sentence cognition the grammarians speak of, and they consider the verb (the action/event) to encapsulate the unity of that occurrence which the other parts modify.

In line with this holistic approach, Vaiyākaraṇas hold the verb/predicate as the core because a sentence fundamentally conveys an action or occurrence (something being predicated) rather than primarily identifying a subject. The subject is often already known or an *uddeshya* (topic), and the predicate is the new information being imparted about that subject. Thus the predicate has the communicative centrality. Moreover, from a syntactic viewpoint, in Sanskrit the verb governs the expectancy (*ākāṅkṣā*) for a subject and other case-words; the verb is what *demand*s complements to complete the sense. This may be another reason grammarians see the verb as the pivotal element that unifies the sentence structure.

Notably, Nyāya rejects the *sphoṭa* doctrine. The Nyāya philosophers argue that we can explain sentence comprehension through the aggregation of phonemes and word-meanings aided by memory, without positing an unseen indivisible entity like *sphoṭa*. They maintain that a sentence is nothing over and above the letters and words that compose it (arranged with syntactical fitness). If all conditions of syntax and semantics (expectancy, congruity, proximity, and intention) are satisfied, the hearer can connect the word meanings to get the sentence meaning – no mysterious flash is needed, just a normal cognitive process. Thus, there is a classic debate: Grammarians (and the related Mīmāṃsā school in some contexts) often favor an action-centered, holistic meaning with *sphoṭa*, whereas Nyāya (and many other schools like Vedānta) favor a subject-centered, analytic meaning without invoking *sphoṭa*.

Summary of the Contrast

To summarize the differences clearly:

- Primary focus of meaning: Nyāya holds that the subject (*uddeshya*, in *prathamā* case) is the principal element of a sentence's meaning, and the verb's meaning (action or predicate) is understood as a qualifier of that subject. In contrast, Vyākaraṇa asserts that the verb or predicate (*vidheya*, *ākhyāta*) is the primary bearer of meaning, with the subject and other arguments acting as qualifiers of the action/event. In short, Nyāya gives a subject-centric interpretation ("X has Y-quality/action"), whereas Vyākaraṇa gives a predicate-centric interpretation ("There is an event of Y qualified by X, etc.").
- Ontology of sentence meaning: For Nyāya, a sentence conveys a factual state of the world – typically a substance-property relation. Meaning (*artha*) is grounded in real entities (*vastu*). Understanding a sentence yields knowledge of some real situation (e.g. a certain person doing something in a place/time). The subject is crucial as it denotes the primary existent to which others relate. By contrast, many grammarians are more concerned with the cognition produced by the sentence. They emphasize the internal mental grasp (*buddhi*) of the meaning. Bhartṛhari and his followers even suggest that the meaning of words and sentences is a mental projection (*bauddhārtha*), a conceptual content, as opposed to directly the external object. Thus, the flash of insight (*pratibhā*) is central – the sentence meaning for them is essentially this *experiential revelation* in the listener's mind, whether or not one explicitly breaks it down into subject and predicate parts.
- Theory of comprehension: Nyāya (like the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā) endorses a compositional process (often labeled *abhihitānvaya*), where each word contributes its meaning and then a synthesis occurs through syntax. Grammarians (and Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas) lean toward

a more immediate holistic grasp – in the extreme case, the sphoṭa doctrine says the whole meaning is grasped as a single unit, and words merely trigger this grasp but do not individually deliver isolated meanings in sequence.

In conclusion, the Nyāya school makes the agent or subject the centerpiece of sentence meaning, reflecting its worldview that sentences inform us about substances and what attributes or actions pertain to them in reality. The Vyākaraṇa school, along with similar views in other traditions, treats the action or predicate as the core, aligning with the idea that a sentence primarily communicates an occurrence or a new piece of information about the subject. The concept of sphoṭa underscores the grammarians' holistic approach, positing an indivisible unit of linguistic cognition and a flash-like meaning (pratibhā) that stands in contrast to the stepwise assembly of meanings favored by Nyāya. Each perspective thus offers a distinct insight into “śābda-bodha” – one seeing it as a fact anchored in a *dharmin* (substratum) qualified by properties, the other as an indivisible *meaning-event* centered on the *vidheya* (that which is being conveyed) and grasped in a unified intuition.