

## "Form of Life" as Transcendental *Dhvani* Meaning

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**Abstract.** "Meaning" has been an evergreen concept in Indian philosophy and poetics. Traditional Indian philosophical and literary schools have been competing with each other in the conceptual clarification of how one arrives at the meaning of a word and on what basis. This paper is concerned with one such conception of "meaning" called *dhvani* (suggested meaning), aiming at a philosophical rationale for the concept of *dhvani*. In discourses pertaining to Indian theories of meaning, *dhvani* occupies an important place. Often the concept of *dhvani* is found in poetic and literary discourses. This paper focuses on one important aspect concerning what makes suggested meaning possible. It focuses on the philosophical rationale of how one can understand a suggested meaning. How can a suggested meaning be understood by one and not by another? What are the conditions for the possibility for an individual to understand? To answer these questions, the author follows the philosopher Wittgenstein's notion of "form of life", developing it further to claim that "form of life" is the conditions for the possibility of having a *dhvani* meaning. Thus this paper aims at exploring the conditions that give rise to the possibility of suggested meanings through the concept of "form of life".

**Keywords and phrases:** meaning in Indian philosophy, *dhvani*, language-game, form of life

### Introduction

"Meaning" has been an evergreen concept in Indian philosophy and poetics. Traditional Indian philosophical and literary schools have been competing with each other in the conceptual clarification of how we can arrive at the meaning of a word and on what basis.

In India the various schools of philosophy, including those of the Sanskrit grammarians and the rhetoricians, devoted much thought to the problems of linguistic philosophy and general linguistics and evolved different theories to explain the manifold aspects of language behavior. (Raja 2000, 4)

The *Naiyāyikās*, *Mīmāṃsakās*, Buddhists, *Vēdāntins* and almost all other philosophical schools have given this much attention to justify their metaphysical standpoints. Similarly, the Indian literary schools have also tried to sort out what

makes the meaning of a word to explicate their greater concern for what makes good poetry. Thus, philosophical and literary schools are often preoccupied with finding the "meaning" of a word and the role of words in understanding the "meaning" of sentences.

### **The Dhvani Theory of Meaning**

In Indian systems of thought, generally two approaches are noticeable in relation to the problem of meaning. One gives primary focus to words as the essential component of meaning (*khaṇḍapakṣa*) and the other considers sentences to embody the primary and essential component of meaning (*akhaṇḍapakṣa*). According to the former, "a word is considered as an autonomous unit of thought and sense and language studies are made on the basis of words and the sentence is taken to be a concatenation of words" (Raja 2000, 6). In his *Some Indian Theories of Meaning*, J. Brough also observes that the early studies of language in India were primarily focused on individual words and their meanings. He claims that almost all schools at that time supported the idea that each individual word possessed an individual meaning (Raja 2000, 6). Even within this camp of awarding primary status to words, ideological differences arose as to whether the words are real or unreal and other similar debates. On the other hand, the *akhaṇḍapakṣa* talks of "sentence" as the primary and fundamental meaning-giving component. The Indian language philosopher Bhartrahari was a key advocate of this idea. One of the important aspects of this idea is the notion of *prathibhā*, which is described as the "instantaneous flash of light or intuition". The literary critic Anandavardhana developed Bhartrahari's idea using the concept of *vyanjanā* or "suggestion". In his monumental work, *Dhvanyaloka*, he talks about the nature of suggested meaning.

With respect to word meanings, Indian linguistic tradition defines two basic types of meaning, often referred to as primary and secondary meaning, named *abhidhā* and *lakṣanā*, respectively. Both *abhidhā* and *lakṣanā* are related to "word" meanings. While *abhidhā* is associated with the primary meaning of a word, the idea that a word has a primary meaning points to the essentialist conception of word meaning. The *lakṣanā* indicates secondary meaning, which exists only if there is incongruity in the primary meaning. Often the secondary meaning portrays a transferred or metaphorical sense of the word.

Primary and secondary meanings are the subjects of much debate and discussion in Indian philosophy. Anandavardhana does not enter into these debates extensively, although, typical of a classical Indian text, his treatise *Dhvanyaloka* contains a significant number of arguments as to why *dhvani* cannot be categorised as either *abhidhā* or *lakṣanā*. Rather, he focused his attention on the suggestive sense of primary and secondary meaning.

He accepts all these, but in addition, he postulates a third potency of language which he calls "the capacity to suggest a meaning other than its literal meaning". This suggestive power of language is called *vyanaajana*. (Raja 2000, 279)

His basic assumption is that apart from the words possessing a literal meaning, they also carry and convey a further meaning: a "socio-cultural" meaning. This includes everything other than the literal meaning (the primary and the metaphorical senses). Additionally, the term "meaning" includes not only the information conveyed but also the emotion induced; this naturally necessitates the assumption of the suggestive power of language (Raja 2000, 281).

Anandavardhana, who is primarily a literary critic, introduces the concept of *dhvani* in poetry to include the emotional meanings of linguistic utterances. The earlier linguistic Bhartrahari also talks about meaning in context. He talks about *sphotā* as a linguistic symbol. In Indian theory of meaning, *sphotā* is considered to be one single meaningful unit that can comprise a series of words or even sentences arranged in order. *Sphotā* theorists maintain that

the logical interpretation of sentence-meaning on the basis of the individual word meanings is defective in many cases. At times the meaning of the whole utterance is different from what the individual words indicate. (Raja 2000, 277–278)

Supporting this concept in poetry, Angus Sinclair says that "in a passage of poetry or of impressive prose... a word has in itself no fixed and definite meaning and has slightly different meaning in every context" (Raja 2000, 280–281). Following the grammarians' tradition, the *dhvani* theorists extended the scope of *sphotā* using the concept of *dhvani*. The grammarians used the word *dhvani* to refer to "that which suggests *sphotā*", while the later literary critics, the *dhvanivādins*, employed the term *dhvani* to refer to both the word and the meaning, which is capable of suggesting a meaning subordinating the primary and secondary meaning (Tripathi 1995).

As Anandavardhana was more concerned with linguistic meaning in literature, he took inspiration from Bhartrahari and proceeded to propose further that suggestive meaning forms the soul of poetics. He included suggestion as a different meaning-giving component to account for poetic and emotional meaning that is imbibed in the social and cultural spheres of human life. "Under the term *artha* or meaning he included not only the cognitive, logical meaning, but also the emotive elements and the 'socio-cultural' significance of utterances which are suggested with the help of contextual factors" (Raja 2000, 101). He

laid great emphasis on the suggestive element in poetry and advocated the *dhvani* theory. *Dhvani* is *vyanjanā* or "suggestion" applied to poetry. In fact, *dhvani* occurs in poetry, where the suggested meaning (*vyangyarthā*) excels the other meanings.

Although Indian literary critics, particularly the *dhvani* theorists, do not negate the existence of literal meanings for words and sentences, they claim that over and above the literal meanings is the suggested meaning or "the socio-cultural meaning". "In addition to the regularly recurring responses to the lexical items and structural arrangements there are also throughout a linguistic community recurring responses to unique whole utterances or sequences of utterances" (Raja 2000, 281). These socio-cultural meanings fall within the domain of *vyanjanā*. For good poetry, according to *dhvani* theorists, it is not enough to contain *abhidhā* (literal meaning) and *lakṣanā* (metaphorical meaning), but it should also possess *vyanjanā*, the suggested meaning, which has nothing to do with the other two levels of meaning.

The "*dhvani*" School, in its analysis of the essentials of poetry, finds that the contents of a good poem may be generally distinguished into two parts. One part is that which is expressed and thus it includes what is given in words; the other part is the content that is not expressed, but must be added to it by the imagination of the reader or the listener. (Thirumalai 2003)

Anandavardhana, for instance, cites a poem from Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava* to emphasise the presence of *dhvanyarthā*, in which a suggested meaning exists and the suggested meaning exceeds the literal meaning. The verse is *evam vāḍini devarṣau pārśve pitur adhomukhī / līlā-kamala-patrāṇi gaṇayāmāsa pārvatī //* (Anandavardhana, 2004). The literal meaning of the verse is as follows: "While the seer-deity was telling such (regarding Pārvati's marriage proposal), Pārvati counted the leaves of the beautiful lotus standing by the side of her father". In this verse, the expressed meaning of Pārvati counting the petals of the beautiful lotus fits well with the literal meaning. Nevertheless, there is a classical presence of suggested meaning in this verse. The context is an event in which Nārada, a seer-deity, talks about Pārvati's marriage to Shiva. As she hears the sage talking about her marriage, she feels shy and tries to hide her bashfulness, which is a typical reaction of young girls, in the guise of counting the leaves of the beautiful lotus as if she hears nothing of the conversation. In this context, the poet conveyed Pārvati's bashfulness through the suggested sense, which has a more significant meaning in the context than the given literal meaning. Anandavardhana in his *Dhvanyaloka* cites numerous such instances from Indian poetry to show that suggested meaning exceeds the literal meaning, thereby marking the presence of *dhvanyarthā*.

The expanded *vyājanā* meaning is what constitutes the *dhvani* meaning. This understanding of the *dhvani* and consequently the pleasure derived from such a poetic experience cannot be experienced like any other ordinary experience. Thus, for Anandavardhana, *dhvani* makes the distinction between a good poem and an ordinary one. "The unexpressed or the suggested part, which is distinctly linked up with the expressed and which is developed by a peculiar process of suggestion, is taken to be soul or essence of poetry" (Thirumalai 2003). Comprehending the suggested meaning in poetry marks real pleasure in literary appreciation.

### **The Possibility of *Dhvanyarthā***

Now the question arises as to what makes this *vyāgyarthā* possible. In the context of poetry, what makes this *dhvanyarthā* possible? Comprehending *dhvanyarthā*, if there is any in the poetic content, is what marks good poetic appreciation, according to for Anandavardhana. Naturally, it should be a concealed meaning that is not known to everyone. If everyone were capable of knowing it, then there is no sense in it being a *dhvanyarthā*, as it is as good as any other articulated meaning, whether articulated through *abhidhā* or *lakṣanā*. So, the nature of the *dhvanyarthā* is that it is concealed, suggested and known to a group of people and not to the rest.

However, *dhvanyarthā*, as the name indicates, is not that which is found in the articulated symbols, either words or sentences. It cannot be like *vāchyārtha*, which refers to primary, literal, or surface meaning, or like *lakṣyārtha*, the secondary or metaphorical meaning because in that case, everyone has the chance of knowing the meaning, as *lakṣyārtha* often comes into play when there is a discrepancy of *vāchyārtha* in a particular context.

The suggestive part is something different from the merely metaphorical. The metaphorical or the allegoric, however veiled it may be, is still in a sense expressed and must be taken as such; but the suggestive is always unexpressed and is therefore a source of greater charm through its capacity for concealment. (Thirumalai 2003)

Hence, it is the suggested meaning, maybe made possible through the articulation of words, that results in *dhvani*. Now, the suggested meaning, if it is not understood, in no way disturbs the surface meaning, which is obviously the *vāchyārtha*. Added to that surface meaning is a way to understand the suggested meaning, assuming that a suggested meaning exists. The issue is whether some meaning is suggested, that is, *dhvanyarthā* and what the conditions are for

possessing such a suggested meaning. What are the conditions for the possibility of *dhvanyarthā*?

A search for the conditions for the possibility of *dhvani* meaning is based on the following three factors: (1) *dhvanyarthā* is neither *vāchyārtha* nor *lakṣyārtha* and hence, the meaning could not be derived from articulated symbols alone, (2) because it is not possible to derive the meaning through articulated symbols, it is not possible for everyone to understand the suggested meaning. The nature of *dhvanyarthā* is concealed and (3) further, it may not be possible for all even to identify that there is *dhvanyarthā*, let alone to identify the content of the suggested meaning. These three factors suggest that there are conditions based on which comprehending suggested meanings are made possible. So, what makes one person able to identify and understand the suggested meaning and some others not able to understand? The author presumes that herein lies the transcendental nature of *dhvani* meaning. That is, there should be conditions for the possibility of the occurrence of *dhvani* meaning. If *dhvani* meaning, that is, suggested meaning, is to occur, then there are conditions to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of the conditions does not actually make *dhvani* meaning happen, but rather, if the *dhvani* meaning is to happen, then the conditions must be fulfilled. This is what the author presumes is the transcendental element of *dhvani* meaning. Moreover, the author proposes that these conditions are participation in the same "form of life". Form of life, then, becomes the conditions for the possibility of having *dhvani* meaning. What, then, is form of life?

### **Wittgenstein's Form of Life**

Form of life is a notion developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *later* philosophy. Those familiar with the writings of Wittgenstein know that he focused his attention on the way in which language functions. In the western analytical tradition, most of the philosophical discussions related to meaning were confined to analysis of statements that describe or report a state of affairs – the propositions of the natural sciences or analysis of those statements that are found in the domains of logic. Early Wittgenstein works that were concerned with the functions of language could, controversially, be considered within this western analytical tradition. With respect to language he maintained a sole function, that of picturing reality. In his earlier years, he believed that the sole function of philosophy is the logical clarification of thought. However, in his later approach to language, he completely deviated from his earlier position and showed that language has multiple usages. Wittgenstein rejected, in his later approach, the idea that language has a unique function to perform; rather it has multiple functions to perform in various forms of life. He calls the multiple functions of language the language-game. The concept of language-game has played a significant role in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. He arrived at this

conception with the help of certain similarities between the various uses of language and the rules of various games. Just as there are varieties of games, there are also varieties in linguistic usage. Any game for that matter is guided by a set of rules. Similarly, according to Wittgenstein, every linguistic usage is guided by certain rules. The same word may mean different things in different language-games. This possibility leads us to the conviction that there is a scope for language-game.

Different senses of the same word do not come from the different meanings that the word possesses, but from the different uses of the same word in various language-games. A word's sense is determined from the context in which it is used. Thus, for Wittgenstein, words have different meanings not because they are either homonyms or polysemy but because of the various contexts in which they are applied. The uses of language in a language-game should not be confused with a metaphor for which there is a ready explanation and a "literal" substitute. For example, the word "head" can be used as a metaphor in the expression "He is the head of the family". This is a clear case of a metaphor. However, Wittgenstein's language-game concept cannot be equated with this. For example, the word "high" in the expressions "high road", "high places", "high pitch" and "high fever" is used in different senses. Thus, its usage is not metaphorical. A significant move in this direction is to realise that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 19). Thus, a word having a singular "meaning" has different senses based on the context in which it is used. The meaning of the word is understood in various contexts through participation in different forms of life. Thus, form of life acts as conditions for the possibility of having different suggested meanings. A "form of life" is something shared and standardised (not necessarily in any permanent way) in our lives and the language-game is one example. A "form of life" is a package of mutually related behavioural tendencies, with each package including the tendency to use language in a particular way. A "form of life" is "a way of life, or mode, manner, fashion or style of life" (Hunter 1968).

Every language-game represents a form of life. Unfamiliarity with a particular language-game and, hence, with a particular meaning suggests that one is not aware of a particular form of life. It is thus superficial to hold that language has only one function to perform. It is used in many senses. This point is further amplified in the following statement by Wittgenstein:

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:  
 Giving orders, and obeying them—  
 Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements-

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—  
 Reporting an event—  
 Speculating about an event— ...  
 Forming and testing a hypothesis—  
 Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—  
 Making up a story; and reading it—  
 Play-acting—  
 Singing catches—  
 Guessing riddles—  
 Making a joke; telling it—  
 Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—  
 Translating from one language into another—  
 Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

(Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 23)

Wittgenstein called these different activities "language-games". The term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity or of a form of life (Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 23).

For Wittgenstein, to speak a language is to participate in a form of life. Without participating in a form of life, it is not possible to engage in communication. Hence, learning a language, articulating and thereby sharing one's ideas all take place only in the context of a form of life. Coming to share a form of life consists in being trained to share it; such training obviously has to take place in public, for otherwise it is not a training in the sharing of the form of life which gives meaning to language (Grayling 1988, 86). Although Wittgenstein rarely wrote about this notion, it has an extensive significance in his philosophical ideas. For Wittgenstein, a "form of life" is the ground upon which actions prevail. It is the ultimate substratum that supports a particular way of acting or performing. "Form of life" forms the common ground between two different individuals or communities who share the same mode of life. Form of life can be considered a wider notion than the notion of language-games.

It is the underlying consensus of linguistic and non-linguistic behavior, assumptions, practices, traditions and natural propensities which humans, as social beings, share with one another and which is therefore presupposed in the language they use; language is woven into that pattern of human activity and character and meaning is conferred on its expressions by the shared outlook and nature of its users. (Grayling 1988, 84)



Wittgenstein's notion of "form of life" can be seen as a philosophical support for his ideas about language-games.

The form of life is the frame of reference we learn to work within when trained in the language of our community; learning that language is thus learning the outlook, assumptions and practices with which that language is inseparably bound and from which its expressions get their meaning. (Grayling 1988, 85)

### Conclusion

In summarising this study, author claims that if *dhvanyarthā*, by the virtue of its concealed and suggested meaning, is only possible after certain conditions are fulfilled and if "form of life" is the underlying substratum for our linguistic utterances, then it becomes all the more natural for us to understand that "form of life" could be the conditions for the possibility of attaining *dhvani* meaning. What else could account for the poetic appreciation of like-minded people, which Anandavardhana refers to as *sahridayatvā*? There are times in poetry, if not at all times, in which the unsaid but suggested is far more compelling and captivating than a thousand words could convey. Any person can understand verbatim what those words mean, either through literal meaning or through secondary meaning, but only those people who are in that shared "form of life" can understand what is suggested in that poem. They alone can enjoy the excellence of suggested meaning, going beyond the literal and secondary meanings. For them alone is the *prathibā*, the flash of light that makes poetic appreciation possible.

Of course, many questions can arise from the discussions, particularly related to how one knows that one is in a particular "form of life" or not, which perhaps may be evident from whether he/she is able to grasp a suggested meaning if one exists. Is that "form of life" something acquired or innate? If it is acquired, then are there any conditions for acquiring that "form of life"? The presence of such conditions may result in the fallacy of infinite regress. If it is innate, why can all persons not have it? If that were the case, there would be no concealment and, hence, no suggested meaning. While many issues remain to be resolved, this paper claims that *dhvanyarthā* is different from other meanings, that conditions are required for the possibility of the occurrence of suggested meaning and that the required conditions are "form of life". Thus, "form of life" could be construed as transcendental *dhvani* meaning.

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