

Bridging Linguistics: Sanskrit and Modern Theories on Word Meaning Acquisition

This study explores how ancient Indian linguistic theories intersect with modern psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic theories to understand the acquisition of word meaning. Modern studies suggest that word meaning acquisition is a dynamic process shaped by cognitive, social, statistical, and linguistic factors. Similarly, Sanskrit linguistic traditions describe various methods for learning word meanings by children or any individual, including grammar, analogy, lexicon, the statements of reliable individuals, the speech behavior of elders, association, and non-verbal factors such as context, space, and time. (Vākyapadīyam 2.317-318; Śabdaśaktiprakāśikā 20).

Some of the aforementioned methods of meaning acquisition share similarities with modern theories, which this paper aims to analyze in the following manner. Ancient Sanskrit scholars across various disciplines consider the speech behavior of elders (*vṛddhavyavahāra*) the most effective way to learn the meaning of words. Gangeśa observed that children learn the meaning of words by watching how elders speak, associating words like “cow” and “bring” with corresponding actions. Through repeated exposure and an unconscious process of assimilation and elimination (*āvāpodvāpa*), they infer word meanings. Matilal (1998) further explained that children must understand the intentions of elders, as shown by their bodily movements. Additionally, Mimāṃsakas, Naiyāyikās, and grammarians argued that children do not simply learn isolated words (*Vyakti*) but entire conceptual categories, such as understanding 'cow' as a general class (*Jāti*).

Paul Ibbotson (2022), like ancient Sanskrit scholars, highlights the role of elders or caregivers in guiding the meaning acquisition process for the children. However, the Sanskrit scholars have ascribed such acquisition on the agency of the child in absence of purposeful adult instruction while Ibbotson provides for a deliberate attempt of instruction by the elders or caregivers. Similarly, Paul Bloom (2000), like Matilal, highlights the importance of recognizing the adults' intentions but differs in the medium of such acquisition as Bloom places it in the cognitive capabilities of the child while Matilal posits the observation capabilities for understanding the intentions. Additionally, Peter Gärdenfors' (2023) concept of “meaning domains” aligns with the Sanskrit perspective that words are learned within broader conceptual frameworks.

Grammar is another method of word meaning acquisition shared by both Sanskrit and modern scholars. A neuroscience experiment conducted by Roman Feiman et al. (2024) with toddlers highlights the significance of grammatical cues in language development. Likewise, both traditions recognize the importance of non-verbal factors, such as context, in word meaning acquisition. Sanskrit linguists emphasize context's role in resolving semantic ambiguity. Similarly, William E. Nagy (1995) highlights that context is crucial for vocabulary learning, as much word knowledge is gained from it, despite the challenges of inferring meaning from a single instance. The study also compares and analyzes the other methods in the aforementioned list. Notably, the author does not claim that any method in Sanskrit texts is scientific; instead, he offers new interpretations based on modern theories. By bridging ancient Indian linguistic insights with modern research, this study highlights their relevance and potential to enrich contemporary perspectives on word meaning acquisition.