

## SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

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We become desirous of studying language carefully because we face certain linguistic impasses which are often alleged to be due to 'misuse of language'. Meaningless sentences also sometimes generate from this misuse of language. Misuse may be of different sorts. Category-mistake, ungrammaticality, using bad metaphor all are the results of this misuse of language. There are some expressions, however artificial, about whose meaninglessness we can all agree. For example,

1. The theory of relativity is blue
2. Number 5 weighs more than number 6
3. Socrates is a prime number
4. Fragrance is as high as sky scraper
5. Saturday is in bed
6. Theory is but not.

The above sentences, at least some of them, can be interpreted to be meaningful of course if the rules and conventions of English language change or if different interpretations are given to these sentences in different situations. But in the existing rules and conventions of English language and in the normal interpretation they are meaningless. Whether a sentence is meaningful or meaningless is to be judged only with respect to the existing rules and

conventions governing the usage<sup>of</sup> language. So it is logically possible that a new usage could be found for a meaningless sentence — a new usage which would satisfy the criterion of meaningfulness. The sentence "The theory of relativity is blue" could be interpreted as meaningful in the following manner. Suppose in a scientific institution all the data on the scientific theories have been kept in a coloured file. The data on the relativity theory is kept in a blue file. One day a scientific officer comes to the institution and asks for the file on relativity theory. One may help him to locate the correct file by saying "The theory of relativity is blue". "Saturday is in bed" can be a meaningful sentence if someone named his child "Saturday". In certain societies of India, children are named after the day of their birth.

There are some sentences, although they are perfectly grammatical, controversies are there among philosophers as to whether they are meaningless or meaningful. Philosophers possessing different beliefs and world views would interpret these sentences differently. Take some examples :

1. The Absolute is perfect
2. God exists
3. Mind and body exists.
4. Time has a beginning.
5. Socrates exists
6. Everything is complex.

Although these sentences are grammatically correct they are not universally accepted as instances of meaningful sentences. This is because a language user may look at the world differently. The possibility of sincere use of language is predetermined by some definite world outlook. Again it is not correct to think that each individual possesses one and only one world-view or system of beliefs. The world-view of a language user sometimes becomes a determining factor as to whether a sentence is meaningful or not. Descartes belief that world of bodies is essentially distinct from the mind, because one can doubt the existence of the external world including his body but not to his mind, led him to the view that there exist both physical substance and mental substance. But to Ryle "World of bodies and minds exist" makes no sense. Minds and bodies are so distinct in nature that they can not be together said to exist.

In our everyday speech the use of the term "meaningless" is not altogether absent. In everyday speech we say sometimes that "Life is meaningless". More we use the term "meaningless" to mean "without importance", "purpose" or "value". But we are not concerned here with these uses of "meaninglessness". We are concerned rather with the meaninglessness of a sentence. And it is the typical business of the philosopher and of the poet to concern themselves with the

meaningless expressions. In scientific writing the application of the concept of meaninglessness is almost absent. In scientific writing there are no doubt words and sentences, but these words are of no intrinsic importance, reference made by the words are all important. Scientists always try to restrict their words to purely symbolic use because of their clarity and precision. In poetry and in philosophy the medium is all important. The problem of meaninglessness arises there whenever 'ways of saying' or 'medium of saying' is taken to be identical with 'what is said'.

Immediately the dispute arises about what is and what is not meaningless. Is there any general criterion for distinguishing what is meaningless from what is meaningful? Many attempts have been made to formulate an adequate general criterion to settle the dispute about what is and what is not meaningless. Different theories of meaning may be adapted for this purpose. According to the truth conditional theorist the capability of giving truth condition of a sentence is the guarantee of its meaningfulness. So if one is incapable of giving truth condition of a sentence that would determine that the sentence is meaningless. While to the verificationist unverifiability in principle is the criterion of a sentence's being meaningless. The category-mistake argument states that a sentence is meaningless if it breaks the type or category restrictions. Some philosophers, however, find some

interesting connection between metaphor and meaninglessness because metaphorical use is based on the concept of category-mistake argument. But unfortunately the general criteria of meaninglessness are all inadequate.

Is then the concept of meaninglessness a useless concept? Should we not cease using the concept of meaninglessness? It can be said in this context that not only in philosophy but also in our everyday use of language we do use a variety of concepts for which no general criterion can be enumerated. When one remarks that "'life is a dream' is a beautiful expression" he may not have any general criterion of using the concept 'beautiful'. That does not mean that we abandon the concept 'beautiful'. The same may be true in the case of meaninglessness. Moreover most of the basic concepts of philosophy like 'knowledge', 'truth', 'falsity', 'validity', 'invalidity' lack any general criterion of their application. There is a controversy as to what is knowledge, when a statement is true or false, valid or invalid. Now if due to the lack of a general criterion for these concepts they have to be abandoned from the philosophical discourse then doubt may creep in whether anything remains as philosophical concepts or not. Lack of any general criterion or test is no way a sufficient reason to stop using the concept(s) in question. Moreover it may be said that none of the criteria

given by the philosopher for distinguishing meaningless sentence from the meaningful ones is separately sufficient for understanding the meaninglessness of all sentences. There is no single criterion which would cover all cases of meaningless expressions. There are only separate errors such as using sentences outside a given context, mixing up categories, contradicting one self, using untranslatable metaphor, expression which lack truth-condition, not verifiable or confirmable by experience and so on. We can group all these sentences together and call them all 'meaningless'. We can show that a sentence is meaningless by using whatever argument is required by the case in hand, instead of using one general argument.

Whatever may be the reasons for generation of meaningless sentences the possibility of generation of meaningless sentences are inherent in the general nature or characteristic features of language. They are not just artificially formulated by the philosopher. This follows from the simple fact that human language is creative. Language is highly compositional in nature. We learn only limited number of words and by their different combination we compose infinite number of sentences not even heard before. We possess the skill to generate new sentences and to interpret what these new sentences mean. This may call the elasticity or flexibility of our understanding. Our understanding of the words and the

syntactical rules of their combination help us to identify the meaning of new sentences. In composing the sentence we enjoy certain degrees of freedom, high degree of freedom in some discourse. And where there is freedom there is also the possibility of misuse of this freedom. As a result absurd or meaningless sentences generate. Sentence is made up with words and every words has its definite logic, logic of its application in the sentences. Understanding the proper function of the words and their proper application (in forming a sentence) enables us to construct a meaningful sentence.

Some philosophers like Grice of course tries to establish that meaning is primarily a matter of intention what the speaker wants to say by uttering the sentence is most important in determining the meaningfulness of a sentence. According to this communication-intention theorist language is no doubt a matter of rules and conventions but the rules and conventions should be understood only in reference to the concept of communication-intention — the intention which the speaker wants to communicate to his hearer. One objection against this view is that one cannot know the beliefs and intentions of another in advance of understanding his language. It is true that when someone says something he always attempts to communicate something to his hearer, he utters the sentence with some intention but in determining the meaningfulness of a sentence not only the intention of the speaker but the

linguistic medium of making clear this intention should be equally emphasized.

One way to express the difference between the sounds that animal make in different situation and the sentences man uses is that man applies language with the intention to perform this or that speech act (the performance of illocutionary acts) while the sounds of the animal may be regarded only as stimulus-response process. Parrot may be capable of uttering sentences by listening them repeatedly but in uttering the sentence parrots actually says nothing. Parrot utters the sentences habitually and blankly, they do not perform any speech act like making a promise, ask a question, issue commands and so on. Moreover we live in the world of words. We talk even to ourselves (soliloquizing). No other animal ever do this. What distinguishes man from any other animals is the possession of an unique language. Besides these, animal never mistake in their communication. They can only show some deficiency or slip due to their unfitness of speech organ. But 'mistake', 'wrong', 'incorrect', 'absurd', 'meaningless', all these are relevant concepts of human language. For human language is highly complex and compositional in nature.

From the above discussion it seems that the concept of meaninglessness is an important concept of philosophy of language. 'Meaningless' is as genuine a term as 'good', 'bad',

'truth', 'falsity', and so on. 'Meaningless' is an additional word in the vocabulary of appraisal.

Some philosophers of course do not want to give a great importance to the concept of meaninglessness because according to them the concept of meaninglessness can be reduced into other concepts such as falsity and so on. But those who maintain that the concept of meaninglessness can be reduced into falsity of some kind and so on, commit a great mistake — the mistake of making no difference between sentences and propositions or statements. Propositions or statements must be distinguished from the sentences. Sentences are used to express the proposition as in the same way as numerals are used to express numbers. The bearer of truth-values is proposition which is expressed by the meaningful sentence. Meaningless sentence does not express any proposition. It makes no sense to ask the question whether this or that sentence is true or false. So 'meaninglessness' and 'falsity' does not belong to the same level of appraisal and may not be reduced one into another.

If the above analysis of the concept of meaningfulness and meaningless<sup>ness</sup> are correct, then we can draw some interesting conclusions about them.

(1) One among many things that a philosopher finds very interesting about language is that we say something or communicate something by using it. We cannot have a proper understanding of the nature of our language and of the nature of communication if we are ignorant about what makes some linguistic expressions meaningful as distinguished from other which are meaningless. Significance of language is the most fundamental issue of philosophy of language. The question of significance does not arise about things like mountain, river, sea and so on, but only about language which is a man made phenomenon. A river or mountain may have significance in some other sense not in the sense in which a linguistic expression can have a significance. A mountain or river may have significance from the geographical point of view, for example, a mountain or a river may separate two states one from the other. Here 'Significance' means having some 'geographical value'. A proper account of the function of signification in a language is possible where the signified, the signifier and the linguistic medium or sign system formed a structural unity.

(2) The concept of meaningfulness and meaningless-ness is related with our ways of understanding the world. We have classified the discrete elements of the world into

different categories for convenience of our understanding. This classification is of different orders and levels depending on different degrees of sophistication in understanding one wants to attain. And it has become a convention to take the world in a particular way. Classification is the ability to discover likeness between the seemingly unlike objects. There are certain principles of classification which we have to follow when we classify something. Members of the same category must have some common characteristics, although in some other respects they can have some dissimilarities. Classification is the means we use to make sense out of the unorganized world. We classify entities into two kinds such as physical or material entities and abstract entities. We also make classification among the properties of things such as physical or material properties and abstract or mental properties. So the sentence like "virtue is square" and the "shape of happiness is round" seems quite odd and meaningless to our common understanding, to our present conceptual framework. But if the principles or mechanism of division or classification change what seems meaningful now may appear as meaningless, while what seems as meaningless now may appear as meaningful in the changed mechanism. So there is no such concept as meaningful or meaningless independent of our ways of understanding the world or independent of the conventions of our language. Meaningfulness and meaninglessness is very much related with

mechanism of understanding the universe of discourse.

(3) A sentence is the production of three basic components. These are the phonological component, syntactic component and the semantic component. Presence of only one of the components in a sentence, however, does not give any guarantee that the sentence is meaningful. These three elements should have to be present simultaneously for a sentence's being a meaningful unit of language. Phonological, syntactic and semantic components are internally related to each other and form an integrated whole.

Although language is primarily a system of phonetic symbols every sequence of phonetic symbols are not permissible. Language is phonemic in character. Phonemes are built up arbitrarily. We have selected some arrangements of phonetic symbol as the unanalyzable unit of language or as the meaningful symbols of reference while reject some other. The significant structure of language also depends on the sequence of the phonetic symbols. Syntactic component organizes such sound units into proper sentential or formal structures. Semantical component, however, operate upon them to determine their meaning. Semantic component gives the formal structure an interpretation.

A sentence may be literally meaningless also due to these three factors - due to the improper application of these

components. One may deny to use only the conventionally fixed lexical items as a meaningful symbol of reference. If he arranged the phonetic symbols in this order like 'dgo' instead of 'dog' then this would be merely an empty sound and would signify nothing and the sentence in which this improper phonems would present also be meaningless. A sentence may be meaningless syntactically. Syntactic rules is concerned solely with the relationships between the signs. "Theory is but" is an instance of such syntactically meaningless sentence. It violates the rules of generating the formal structure of a sentence. A sentence may also be semantically anomalous or meaningless. A semantic rule is simply a conventional association between some element of language and some element of the world. The sentence "The sound of a sitar is green" is semantically anomalous and hence meaningless because the sound is not the kind of entity that can have a colour like green.

(4) We may divide meaningless or nonsense expressions into different types. In doing so we may proceed from some uncontroversial cases of meaningless expressions to some controversial ones.

(i) Nonsense as gibberish where we can find neither familiar syntax nor familiar vocabulary

(a) Grillang barpfenslaw

(b) Abracadabra.

(ii) Vocabulary nonsense - expression which contains enough familiar words and familiar syntax or grammar but contains some unfamiliar or untranslatable vocabulary (untranslatable into familiar vocabulary).

(a) The pabble who has no toes. (Edward Lear)

(b) He took his vorpal sword in hand. (Lewis Carroll)

(iii) Nonsense as random arrangement of familiar words.

They are ungrammatical or syntactically incorrect and hence semantically meaningless also. They may be properly called as 'nonsense string of words' instead of 'nonsense sentence' because they may not be regarded as a sentence in the strict sense.

(a) Cat mat between is are

(b) Theory is but.

(iv) Meaningless sentences which are well-formed but involved a category mistake or crossing of types.

(a) Theory of relativity is blue

(b) Smells are loud

(v) Sentences which are meaningless due to contradiction.

(a) He is married but bachelor

(b) Triangles are three sided figure and not threesided figure.

(vi) Sentences which seems meaningless which respect to some specific conceptual framework or background.

(a) Mind and body exists

(b) No material things exist.

Philosophers are not very much interested in the type<sup>of</sup> nonsense exemplified in (i) - (iii). Nonsense of the type (iv) - (vi) fascinate the philosopher very much.

There are controversies among philosophers as to what should be the decisive factor in determining whether a sentence involves a category mistake or not, whether contradictions are meaningless or not. There is also disagreement among philosophers as to whether sentences like "mind and body exists", "No material things exist" are meaningless or not. This has been discussed throughout the thesis.

(5) Meaningless sentence should be distinguished from the meaningless use of a sentence. Use of a normal sentence may appear deviant or meaningless because it is inappropriate or has no relevance to a particular context. For example, to say "Best of luck" when someone is going to sleep. It is the meaningless sentence and not its nonsensical use which stems from breaking the linguistic rules governing the construction of well-formed sentences. A linguistically

perfect sentence can be used meaninglessly when it has no relevance to the context. So the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness can be a distinction between the uses of the sentence.

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