

INTRODUCTION

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In our everyday empirical arguments or in the controversies about scientific issues some disputed sentences or expressions may be claimed as true or false. In contrast, some disputed sentences — sentences in philosophical argument, in particular, are often claimed as neither true nor false, but meaningless. For example, "Saturday is in bed", "God exists", "Mind and body exists" and so on. The concern with meaningfulness as a philosophical phenomenon was stimulated by the logical positivists' verifiability criterion of meaningfulness and the consequent rejection of all metaphysical claims as cognitively meaningless. Ryle in discarding the official doctrine also used this concept. Logicians also make a distinction between meaningfulness and meaningfulness. They divide all the possible combinations of the basic material into two major classes (i) meaningful or permitted expressions called "Well-formed formula" or in short "wff" such as " $p \supset (q \supset p)$ " and (ii) meaningless or illegitimate combinations such as " $p \equiv VPV$ ". There is also a corresponding distinction in ordinary language between sentences constructed according to the rules and conventions of language such as "The water is boiling" (meaningful) and the random combination of words like "is over very cats between" which is meaningless. Random and arbitrary combination of words is not the only

cause of generation of meaningless expressions. Meaningless expression also generated from some linguistic illusion. The linguistic illusion comes generally from the creativity of language. Judgement about meaningfulness and meaninglessness sometimes depend on some theory about linguistic and non-linguistic truths. For example, according to Frege and Russell the sentence "Scott exists" is senseless or meaningless because according to them existence is a predicate of a concept or of a class, if it is applied to an individual, meaningless expressions would result. Quine, however, identifies a singular existential sentence with a analytical truth. Hence the singular existential sentence like "Scott exists" is a perfectly meaningful sentence to Quine. From this it appears that the concept of meaningfulness or meaninglessness may be a theory oriented concept. But is it not something strange that a sentence's being meaningful or meaningless does not depend on the nature of language, but on the theory about logic, world, human mind etc? Whether this view that meaningfulness or meaninglessness of an expression depends on particular theory about logic, world etc, is true or to what extent it is true constitute the most fundamental topic of the thesis. For answer to these questions will determine the very significance of the distinction between meaningful and meaningless expression. This issue will be discussed in Chapter I.

The major areas where the problem of meaninglessness or nonsense is most apparent is philosophy and poetry. One may wonder why is it that in philosophy and in poetry particular there is a problem of meaninglessness while in science the problem is relatively unknown. It may be said that scientific language is stereotyped and technical. Scientists are mainly interested to discover facts and they try to describe these facts in most precise and clear way. They require minimal linguistic apparatus to describe their results or hypothesis. It is not their business to say something in a better way or in a new way. It is the business of the philosophers and of the poets to say something not only in a clear way but in most elegant and comprehensive ways. Here there is a problem about content and style and the manner of saying is intrinsic to what is said. And the problem of meaninglessness comes in those fields where the manner or ways of saying is most important. This point will be discussed in Chapter II.

Looking into the natural criterion of distinguishing meaningless expressions from the meaningful ones can throw some light on the nature of the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. If we can find any natural criterion of distinguishing meaningless sentences from the meaningful ones then the concept of meaningfulness and meaninglessness would not be merely the theory oriented

concepts. Many attempts have been made to give a general adequate criterion of determining whether a sentence is meaningful or not. This will be discussed in Chapter III.

Whatever may be the cause of generation of meaningless sentences the distinction between meaningful and meaningless has found its way in language. Whether the concept of meaninglessness has found its way legitimately in language depends upon whether this concept is inherent in the very nature of language. So it is necessary to look into the general nature of language, inquire about its essential characteristics. Unless we inquire whether language has some essential features and point out them, if any, we cannot decide whether the judgement about meaninglessness is externally influenced or is theory oriented. It seems to me that the problem of meaningfulness and meaninglessness so far pointed out to a great extent has something to do with the compositional nature of language. I shall deal with this point in Chapter IV.

Language is a system consisting of different linguistic categories such as names, predicates, connectives etc. and their relation to each other. The ultimate motto of the compositional semantics is to represent a view about the best way to describe the functioning of individual words.

Given the proper functioning of these individual words and their right combination, sentences come to have the meaning that we require. So finding the right description of what items in the different categories do and the formulation of their right combination is an important task for it makes the meaning possible. How meaning is possible has an important bearing on how meaningless expressions are generated. This will be discussed in Chapter V.

Now what an expression means and what a person has said by using expressions, is mostly a socially fixed matter. "To imagine a language means" according to Wittgenstein "to imagine a form of life".¹ Meaning of a sentence mostly depends on specific culture, and is subject to different laws, principles, conventions partially unique to it and partially is a reflection of general properties of mind. What an expression means often does not accord with a speaker's own understanding. We have also a different picture. Recent development along this line begins with an analysis of 'speaker's meaning' advanced by H.P. Grice. His theory may be called communication-intention theory of meaning. Grice says that we use the word 'meaning' to label what a speaker intends

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, Section 19.

or is trying to do with his words. Expressions being meaningful is primarily a matter of intention. Grice's account can be interpreted to imply that meaninglessness of a sentence depends fully on the hearer because the speaker never produce a meaningless sentence deliberately or intentionally. This issue will be discussed in Chapter VI.

I have mentioned that human language is highly compositional in nature. This compositional feature of language distinguishes human language from animal language which in other respects shows signs of apparent intelligence. Another way of distinguishing human language from animal language is that man applies language with the intention to perform this or that illocutionary act while the sounds of the animal are merely stimulus-response phenomena. Besides those, animal never mistake in their communication. They can only show some deficiency or slip due to their unfitness of speech organ. 'Mistake', 'Wrong', 'incorrect', 'irrelevant', 'absurd', 'meaningless' all these concepts are inherent or implicit in human language, whether they are deliberate or due to confusion. For human language is creative and highly flexible in nature. And this creativity and flexibility is explicitly present in natural language and almost absent in artificial or formal language. From

this it may follow that the concept of meaninglessness is more relevant in the case of natural language than that of the artificial or formal language. These issues will be discussed in Chapter VII.

Some philosophers like N.V. Banerjee says that the concept of meaninglessness is not something new. This concept can be reduced into other concepts such as falsity and so on. So there is an issue about the reducibility of meaninglessness. This will be discussed in Chapter VIII.