

The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy of Language

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

The Deontic Nature of Language in Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta Schools¹

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1 Introduction: What Is the Meaning Conveyed by a Text?

The authors of the Nyāya school are upholders of a correspondence view of language, akin to the one found in L. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. According to them, language reproduces ontologically given states of affairs in an epistemically valid way. In other words, a sentence like "The cat is on the mat" simply describes the state of affairs of a feline lying on a piece of soft textile. This view might appear to be the obvious option to Euro-American readers, but it was by no means the only one in the history of early Indian reflections on language. This contribution will discuss the idea that language communicates a deontic meaning, that is, a duty, something to be done (*kārya*).

For simplicity's sake, let me call "descriptive view" the view that language describes states of affairs, and "prescriptive view" that according to which language conveys things to be done. The descriptive view has no problem explaining the meaning of descriptive sentences like "The cat is on the mat," but can encounter problems with prescriptive sentences like "Do your homework!." In fact, if all sentences just describe an actual state of affairs, what is the state of affairs described by this sentence? The homework to be done does not yet exist in the external world, so in this sense the descriptive solution seems inadequate. A Nyāya author would still claim that the sentence describes a state of affairs in which the addressed person is characterized by the fact of having to do her homework. In current philosophy of language or deontic logic one could say that such a sentence describes an ideal world in which the addressed person would have done her homework. These explanations, however, appear

as counterintuitive, because they do not correspond to what people usually understand as the message of prescriptive sentences. Normally, when we receive a command, we do not think of ideal worlds being described, and neither do we understand it as describing something about us. Therefore, both the above interpretations seem rather a posteriori ways of avoiding the deontic element intrinsic in commands. In fact, linguists working on the semantics of imperative sentences still discuss about how to determine their meaning and how to apply truth conditions to them, without postulating that imperatives are identical to modal sentences.² By contrast, the prescriptive view has no problem explaining the meaning of prescriptive sentences but requires more effort to explain descriptive sentences as parasitical on implicit or explicit prescriptive ones.

This chapter describes and compares the interpretations of prescriptive language in ordinary communication and in the sacred texts in the two schools of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta.

2 The Veda, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta

2.1 What Is the Veda?

The term “Veda” has meant different things for contemporary scholars and for most Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta authors. Contemporary scholars tend to call only the so-called Saṃhitās, namely the *Rgveda*-, the *Sāmaveda*-, the *Yajurveda*- and possibly the *Atharvavedasaṃhitā*, “Veda.” To each of these four compositions (*saṃhitā*), the tradition attaches further texts divided into different genres: the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, and the Upaniṣads. The Brāhmaṇas contain ritual prescriptions, as well as some etiological and mythical material loosely related to sacrifices. The Āraṇyakas contain speculations about the interiorization of sacrifice, and the Upaniṣads progress further on the path of the Āraṇyakas by offering philosophical speculations, which usually originate in the interiorization of sacrificial elements. All these texts are considered to be Veda by Indian authors. For Mīmāṃsā authors, however, “Veda” is primarily used in reference to the sacrificial texts, the Brāhmaṇas, while the Upaniṣads and the Saṃhitās are considered from the standpoint of the Brāhmaṇas. In the Mīmāṃsā view, the Saṃhitās supply the ritual formulas (*mantra*) to be used in the sacrifices prescribed in the Brāhmaṇas, while the Upaniṣads provide supplementary sentences about sacrificial elements. For instance, the speculations around the self (*ātman*) contained in the Upaniṣads should be understood as eulogies of

the agent of sacrifices. By contrast, Vedānta authors look at the Veda from the standpoint of the Upaniṣads.

2.2 The Mīmāṃsā School

The Mīmāṃsā school recognizes as its basic text Jaimini's *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra* (henceforth PMS), possibly composed in the last centuries BCE. The PMS has been commented upon several times, but Śabara's *Bhāṣya* (henceforth ŚBh), possibly composed in the fourth or fifth century CE, soon became the standard commentary and is therefore the only extant one, having superseded previous ones. In the sixth or seventh century two authors, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Prabhākara Miśra, offered divergent sub-commentaries on the ŚBh and thus created two Mīmāṃsā sub-schools, known as the Bhāṭṭa and the Prābhākara ones, respectively.³

The initial concern of the Mīmāṃsā school is the exegesis of Vedic texts, and especially of their prescriptive portion, the Brāhmaṇas. Since Mīmāṃsā authors consider the Vedas as authorless, they developed special hermeneutic rules for the interpretation of Vedic texts, independently of any author's intention. Despite this particularity, for many Mīmāṃsā authors and especially for those of the Prābhākara school the Vedas remain the paradigmatic case of language, although they always take into consideration also worldly (*laukika*) usages of language, along with the Vedic ones.

2.3 The Vedānta School

The Vedānta school is a philosophical school primarily focusing on the exegesis of the Upaniṣads. Vedānta, as we currently know it, gained recognition in the philosophical arena of South Asia only in the latter half of the first millennium CE; hence Jaimini, Śabara, Kumārila, and Prabhākara did not need to address or reject its claims.

One of the first authors who made Vedānta into a full-fledged philosophical school is Śaṅkara (possibly eighth century CE), who is traditionally recognized as the founder of the Vedānta school of nondualism (*advaita*). Śaṅkara is not keen to establish the harmony of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, and instead affirms that the study of Vedānta can be autonomous and does not presuppose the study of Mīmāṃsā.

The situation becomes more complex for further Vedānta authors. Rāmānuja (eleventh century), who is traditionally credited with the foundation of the Vedānta school of qualified nondualism (*viśiṣṭādvaita*), is in fact actively campaigning for the unity of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, which he respectively calls

Prior (*pūrva*) and Subsequent (*uttara*) Mīmāṃsā. The doctrine of the unity of the Mīmāṃsā will be further developed by a later thinker of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta school, namely Veṅkaṭanātha (thirteenth to fourteenth century), who tries to synthesize a unitary Mīmāṃsā teaching.⁴

2.4 Views on Deontic Language in Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta

The main difference between the two sub-schools of Mīmāṃsā lies in the fact that Prābhākara authors consider worldly language to be structurally similar to Vedic language, insofar as both convey only something to be done. In other words, sentences do not convey the existence of something, but rather that something is to be done. Sentences which look as if conveying a descriptive statements should be interpreted as supplementing a prescriptive statement, which might be explicitly expressed, but can also be implicit. For instance, in day-to-day language, “It is hot in here” should be understood as a supplement of “Please, open the window,” just like in Vedic language “Vāyu is the swiftest deity” is a supplement of “One should sacrifice to Vāyu.”

Bhāṭṭa authors, by contrast, claim that only Vedic language conveys something to be done, whereas they interpret worldly language according to the descriptive view outlined above (Section 1). Otherwise said, Prābhākara authors uphold that in all cases language conveys something to be realized (*sādhya*), whereas Bhāṭṭa authors state that worldly language conveys something already realized (*siddha*).

Vedānta authors, some of whom emphasize their connection to the Mīmāṃsā, either claim that both in the Veda and in worldly usage all sentences convey descriptive meanings or try to find a way to account for both this thesis and the Mīmāṃsā view of Vedic prescriptions. These differences are rooted in a more general relation of Vedānta with Mīmāṃsā: authors who are closer to Mīmāṃsā try to embed its approach to Vedic language into their system, as will later be explained in Section 5.2.

3 Inner-Mīmāṃsā History of Deontic Language

According to the Mīmāṃsā, each instrument of knowledge is defined by its capacity to make one understand something new, that is, previously unknown (*apūrva*). Sense perception is an instrument of knowledge because it allows one to access what exists *hic et nunc*. By contrast, the Veda is an instrument of knowledge because it conveys dharma, that is, one’s individual duty, which

Table 15.1 The Early *Mīmāṃsā* and *Prābhākara* Model

Instrument of knowledge	Field of knowledge
Sense perception, etc.	What exists
Veda	What should be done (dharma)

cannot be known through sense perception or other instruments of knowledge since these all depend on perceptual data. In fact, except for the Veda, all the instruments of knowledge, beginning with inference, can only elaborate the raw data delivered by perception.

Therefore, in order to safeguard the validity of the Veda as an instrument of knowledge, dharma needs to be drastically distinguished from the sense-perceivable aspect of sacrifices, such as the sacrificial substances and acts, and needs to be radically inaccessible to sense perception. The nonavailability of dharma to sense perception is therefore a necessary presupposition in *Mīmāṃsā*, because it is the basis for the primacy of the Veda.

Consequently, the Veda needs to be prescribing duties, since otherwise the Veda would not be conveying anything new and specific.

In this connection, there is a fundamental divergence in the epistemology of the two schools. *Prābhākara* authors uphold that there is a radical difference between Vedic and worldly communication, insofar as only the Veda conveys something new and is thus an instrument of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). By contrast, *Bhāṭṭa* authors maintain that in both cases linguistic communication is an instrument of knowledge, although only in the case of Vedic language it is a unique source for its content. Thus, according to the *Bhāṭṭa* view, ordinary language can be about existing states of affairs, which one could have known also through other instruments of knowledge, if one had tried hard enough. For instance, I know that Siberian tigers or Tasmanian emus exist just because of the reports of other people, but could also imagine traveling to Siberia or Tasmania and trying to see them. Even if it does not convey an exclusive type of knowledge, ordinary language is still useful, because it makes it possible for me not to have to check for myself everything in the world.

3.1 Jaimini and Śabara on Deontic Language

3.1.1 Jaimini on *artha*

Deontic elements played a role since the early history of *Mīmāṃsā*, as shown also by the complex semantics of the term *artha*. This plays a key role since

Table 15.2 The Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā Model

Instrument of knowledge	Field of knowledge
Sense perception, etc.	What exists
Worldly language	What exists
Veda	What should be done (dharma)

the beginning of the PMS, but has multiple meanings in Sanskrit.⁵ In Sanskrit philosophical texts, it could mean any of the following:

1. the meaning of a linguistic expression;
2. the content of any cognitive act;
3. its corresponding referent; or
4. a goal or purpose.

The confluence of these senses permeates Mīmāṃsā texts and needs to be constantly kept in mind when readers encounter the term *artha* in Mīmāṃsā literature.⁶ This is not due to a lack of awareness, but rather to the Mīmāṃsā approach to language, according to which the meaning of language is chiefly deontic, that is, something to be realized.

Prābhākara authors emphasize duty (*kārya*), whereas Bhāṭṭa authors stress the aspect of purpose. In both cases, however, the criterion of having a single meaning (*ekārthatā*) identifies a sentence and entails the fact of having a single meaning which is a purpose or something to be done.⁷

It is noteworthy that at least the meanings (1) and (4) are present already in Jaimini's use of the term *artha*. PMS, 1.1.2, most significantly, defines the object of the Mīmāṃsā investigation, dharma, as follows: "Dharma is the *artha* conveyed by Vedic prescriptions (*codanālakṣaṇo 'rtho dharmah*)."

What does *artha* mean here? The aphorism cannot mean that dharma is the content or meaning of a Vedic prescription, because this would be tautological and it is a fixed convention in philosophical sūtras that all words must be interpreted as having a distinct purpose. If this were the case, either of the words "artha" or "conveyed by" (*lakṣaṇa*) could just be left out, without loss of meaning. Therefore Frauwallner here translates "artha" as "useful thing" ("etwas Nützliches," Frauwallner 1968, 17).

Yet, Frauwallner's solution is not fully satisfactory. When Śabara explains that the mention of "artha" in the aphorism is necessary, he discusses in this connection the conundrum of alleged non-*arthas* (*anarthas*) that appear to be conveyed by some Vedic prescriptions, for example, the malefic sacrifice called *śyena* through which one can harm one's enemy. Śabara, and later Kumārila,

ask whether such a non-*artha* can legitimately be called dharma just because it is conveyed by a Vedic prescription. The problem with the *śyena* sacrifice is not that it is in itself not useful, but that its goal, namely harming one's enemy, is in contradiction with further Vedic duties, most notably with the prohibition to harm living beings. The *śyena* is certainly useful, if one wants to harm one's enemy, and could even be one's own goal, as in meaning (4) above. But it is defined as a non-*artha* because it is in conflict with other duties conveyed by the Veda, and so it cannot be prescribed on their same level. Therefore it is not a principal, unconditioned duty, and can at most become obligatory if one is in a subideal situation.⁸ Moreover, a translation of *artha* that focuses on its descriptive aspect, such as "useful thing," certainly does not do justice to the nature of dharma, which is defined as something to be realized, and not as something already existing.

Let me now check this interpretation against the background of another important aphorism, namely PMS, 1.1.5:

The relation between language and *artha* is original. The knowledge of dharma is the teaching. And this is infallible in regard to an imperceptible *artha*. Therefore it is an instrument of knowledge, according to Bādarāyaṇa, because it is independent.⁹

As explained above, it is important to highlight how in order for the Veda to be an instrument of knowledge its *artha* needs to be unperceived (*anupalabdha*). This would not be the case if an *artha* were just temporarily unavailable, for example, because its vision is obstructed by a wall. Consequently, there must be something in the nature of the proper *artha* of the Veda that makes it unsuitable to be directly perceived. In the context of Jaimini's aphorisms,¹⁰ this intrinsically imperceptible *artha* is duty, dharma. This runs against the simplistic interpretation of *artha* as an external referent.

3.1.2 Śabara's Seemingly Contradictory Statements

Even admitting that Jaimini understands language as conveying a deontic purpose, one might object that this is not Śabara's standpoint. In fact, in his commentary on PMS, 1.1.5, Śabara explicitly states that the meaning of words is a universal, and that this universal is perceptible. He even opposes the condition of being perceptible to that of being something to be realized (*Vṛttikāragrantha*, 40):

[Q:] What is the meaning of the word "cow"?

[A:] We say that this is the universal specified by having a dewlap, etc.

[Q:] But is the universal something to be realized or not?

[A:] If something is directly perceptible, it should not be something to be realized.¹¹

Does this interpretation of words signifying perceptible universals hold for all words? Elsewhere, Śabara himself states that sacrifices are instead something to be realized (ŚBh, ad PMS 3.6.43).¹²

These two statements could be harmonized, assuming that for Śabara some words denote something already established and some denote something to be realized. But what about sentences? Śabara's states that "a word signifies a universal, a sentence an individual" (ŚBh, ad PMS 1.1.24).¹³

This phrase at first sight leaves no space for *artha* as a purpose to be accomplished, since it seems to distinguish the meaning of words and that of sentences only on the basis of their being more or less specific. Śabara leaves the problem of the seeming contradiction between his and Jaimini's standpoints unresolved. Most significantly, he uses the prescriptive expression "One who desires heaven should sacrifice" (*svargakāmo yajeta*) as if it were interchangeable with the description "Through sacrifice, heaven occurs" (*yāgāt svargo bhavati*),¹⁴ thus implicitly presupposing that prescriptive sentences can be reinterpreted as descriptive ones, describing how the prescribed action is the instrument to realize a desired goal. However, Śabara states in his commentary on Jaimini's definition of sentence, "what has a single *artha*" (ŚBh, ad PMS 2.1.46), that in the case of a universal there is a seen meaning (*dṛṣṭa artha*), whereas in the case of the sentence he rather speaks of a purpose (*prayojana*). This suggests that by "a word signifies a universal, a sentence an individual" Śabara did not want to indicate an ontological correlate for words as well as for sentences. A seen meaning could be interpreted as indicating an established meaning (*siddha artha*) and this could be in turn equated to an external object only in the case of some nouns and not in the case of nouns expressing sacrifices. Nonetheless, the identification of the sentence meaning as purpose clearly rules out the possibility of identifying *artha* with an external object.

Śabara's sub-commentator Kumārila was forced to try to offer a solution to Śabara's implicit ambiguity. Kumārila kept Śabara's ontological commitment to substantialism in the case of *words*, and more explicitly of nouns, insofar as he identified the meaning of words as the universal (*ākṛtī*). Kumārila then explained that at the level of *sentences* every element of a sentence concurs toward a sentence meaning, which is an action and thus something to be accomplished. In this way, Śabara's universal meaning (*sāmānya*) is confirmed as something

already established. By contrast, his individual meaning (*viśeṣa*), which is conveyed by a sentence, becomes with Kumārila more of a goal, rather than something already established. This position is even stronger in Prabhākara's sub-commentary on Śabara, due to the interpretation of the sentence meaning as something to be done (*kārya*).

In sum, sentences are characterized as conveying a single *artha* in both Kumārila's and Prabhākara's accounts, but the *artha* of sentences is respectively considered a purpose or something to be done.

3.2 Prabhākara Mīmāṃsā on Prescriptive Language as the Norm

Bhāṭṭa authors differ from the Prabhākara analysis of non-prescriptive statements in ordinary and Vedic language—outlined above through the examples of “It is hot in here” and “Vāyu is the swiftest deity” (Section 2.4)—because according to them ordinary language can also convey the description of states of affairs. Nonetheless, they agree that Vedic sentences only convey a prescriptive meaning. This asymmetry between Vedic and ordinary language is due to the abovementioned fact that the Veda, in order to be an instrument of knowledge, needs to have a specific field of application, which cannot be shared with the other instruments of knowledge.

Conversely, Prabhākara authors did not want to have two distinct accounts for what is conveyed by Vedic and ordinary language; hence they asserted that, in general, each kind of language conveys duties. They are thus confronted with the problem of explaining how even in common language seemingly descriptive statements do not in fact denote any descriptive meaning. Two counterfactual examples advanced by Prabhākara opponents are “Your wife just begot a son” and “Your unmarried daughter is pregnant.” These sentences clearly convey a descriptive content and they are certainly understood by their hearer, who as a consequence experiences happiness and anger, respectively. How can this be explained within the Prabhākara theory?

Prabhākara authors answer by arguing that the hearer's reaction is not due to the understanding of a descriptive meaning, which would contradict their theory. Rather, the hearer reacts because he infers that something extremely good or bad must have happened, after noticing the facial expression of the speaker. A present-day Prabhākara might argue in favor of the prescriptive view differently, perhaps by construing the above sentences as supplements to an implicit prescription, for example, “Go back home and perform the

prescribed rituals!" and "Punish your daughter!." They might in this way stress the fact that language is used in order to perform illocutionary or perlocutionary speech acts and that it is hardly the case that it represents a pure exchange of information. Even in the extreme case of chatting or gossiping, the exchange of information can be better understood as a supplement to an implicit prescription. "X bought a new car" would therefore be a supplement of "You should also buy one" or of "You should blame them for their choices." Alternatively, a present-day Prābhākara proponent might argue that Vedic language is prescriptive in a different sense than ordinary language. In favor of this view, he could mention the fact that according to Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā ordinary language is not an independent instrument of knowledge, since one understands its meaning via the understanding of the intention in the utterer's mind. This is not the case with Vedic texts, since they are authorless and therefore convey their meaning independently of the intrusion of an utterer's intention.

4 Epistemological and Logical Consequences

The thesis that all meanings are prescriptive has important epistemological and logical implications. Epistemologically, it implies that the Veda is an instrument of knowledge only in relation to duties. By contrast, sense perception or inference only conveys knowledge about what exists. Therefore, the knowledge of duties conveyed by Vedic sentences cannot be falsified by other instruments of knowledge, which convey a completely different set of contents. This leads to the conclusion that sense perception and the Veda have two radically different precincts of application. In this way *artha* can also mean an epistemologically sound content of knowledge, as in (2) listed in Section 3.1.1.

The Mīmāṃsā also upholds the theory of intrinsic validity of cognitions (*svataḥ prāmāṇya*), according to which any cognition is valid unless and until it is proven to be false.¹⁵ The conjunction of the prescriptive theory with that of intrinsic validity leads to the conclusion that, since the Veda teaches us about duties and since duties cannot be known through any other instrument of knowledge but the Veda, the Veda remains unfalsifiable. Further, the prescriptive nature of meanings contradicts the idea that language simply corresponds to states of affairs, without any intermediate mental step, since prescriptive contents just do not exist as external and subject-independent states of affairs.

Recapitulating, of the four possibilities listed in Section 3.1.1, the *artha* of the Veda is its meaning (1), while being also an epistemologically soundly conveyed content (2), and a goal to be achieved through one's ritual actions (4). The only acceptation that needs to be restricted is the descriptive one (3), which applies only to single word-meanings. Thus, *artha* in the Veda comes closer to something to be done, a duty. According to this interpretation of PMS, 1.1.2, dharma is a duty conveyed by the Veda and a malicious sacrifice such as the *śyena* would be a non-*artha* because it is not an imperative duty (Section 3 above). This further suggests that, in order to defend their prescriptive views, Mīmāṃsā authors needed a theory of language, an epistemology, and a logic that is able to accommodate nondescriptive items. They developed a structured theory regarding duties and their hierarchy, distinguishing among primary and secondary ones, among prohibitions and prescriptions, and adding further conditions of application for each of them in order to rule out possible deontic conflicts. In other words, they developed a way to think of knowledge and of the sentences conveying it, which implied the prescriptive dimension much like in medieval and contemporary modal and deontic logics.¹⁶

5 Deontic Logic and Its Linguistic Consequences

The Mīmāṃsā analysis differentiates between prescriptions (*vidhi*) and prohibitions (*niṣedha*). These are distinguished because the performance of the content of prescriptions generally leads to results that are independently desirable, such as sons, cattle, wealth, and happiness. By contrast, abiding by a prohibition does not lead to anything desired, whereas transgressing it leads to negative consequences.¹⁷

Prescriptions and prohibitions, therefore, are not identified just on the basis of their superficial linguistic form. Although generally prohibitions include an explicit negation, while prescriptions do not, a sentence may present a negation and still be a prescription, if it leads to a result. This means that, just like in the case of the identification of verbs expressing a prescription based on their meaning rather than on their form, semantics prevail over morphology. For instance, the utterance "One should not look at the rising sun" can in this sense be reinterpreted as enjoining "One should form the resolution not to look at the rising sun," if it entails a desirable result. Conversely, exhortative statements which do not contain a negative particle must be interpreted as prohibitions, if they entail a sanction.

At times, no sanction is mentioned, but still an exhortative statement containing a negative particle needs to be interpreted as a prohibition. For instance, the utterance “One should eat the five types of five-nailed animals” in fact conveys a prohibition, namely, the prohibition to eat any other kind of animal. Why so? Because, as outlined above, each instrument of knowledge is defined by the fact that it conveys something new (*apūrva*), and the Veda is an instrument of knowledge for this very reason; a prescription telling one that she should eat animals would not convey anything new, since appetite for edible meat is a natural instinct that does not require instructions. By contrast, what is new in the statement is its prohibitive component, namely that animals others than the five mentioned should not be eaten.

Alongside novelty, another criterion is the principle of singularity, namely, the idea that Vedic prescriptions should convey a single duty. Sentences are accordingly interpreted following a strong teleological approach, in which everything should ultimately be functional to the communication of a single duty. Consequently, whatever does not directly contribute to this purpose is interpreted as indirectly contributing to it, for instance, as a praise of elements connected with the duty. This is how commendatory statements (*arthavādas*) are interpreted as supplements to a prescription. In other words, they are descriptive statements that have a meaning exactly because they supplement a prescription (see Section 2.4 above).

A further deontic criterion guiding the interpretation of sentences is that prescriptions should be deontically feasible. The prescribed obligations need to be fulfillable. For instance, the prescription “One should sacrifice as long as one is alive” could in principle be interpreted in two ways: (a) one should perform a sacrifice that lasts the span of one’s life, and (b) one should sacrifice, under the condition of being alive. In other words, the phrase “as long as one is alive,” could be interpreted as specifying either the act or the agent. The former interpretation (a) would lead to several problems, insofar as it is impossible to perform a single sacrifice that lasts exactly the extent of one’s life, considering that one cannot predict her life span. The sacrifice would invariably be too long or short. If one were to complete it and then repeat it, in order to fill the reach of one’s whole life, one would add an element which is not directly enjoined in the original prescription, namely the sacrifice’s repetition. By contrast, the latter interpretation (b) does not require any further addition and is completely compatible with what is directly enjoined, since the specification “as long as one is alive” is interpreted as expressing a condition, and not a precise time span.¹⁸

Summing up, the three criteria of *novelty*, *teleology* and *feasibility* guide one's interpretation and constitute some of the rules (*nyāya*) to be applied before the final ascertainment of the sentence meaning.

5.1 Vedānta

Later Mīmāṃsā authors defend the prescriptive theory also against the Vedānta view, according to which the main function of the Veda is to convey descriptive contents about the Absolute (*brahman*) and the self (*ātman*). Vedānta authors concur that the Veda needs to have a specific precinct of application, inaccessible to sense perception. However, they add that this unique content is not (or is not only) prescriptive, since the main purpose of the Veda is, according to them, letting us know about the *brahman*, which is supra-sensorial and can only be known through the Veda. Their next task, therefore, is to decide whether the Veda has only one main content—namely, *brahman*—or rather two—namely, *brahman* and *dharma*—and in the latter case how the two are connected.

This means that the tables discussed above (Table 15.2) remains valid, but the identification of the specific field of the Veda may change (Table 15.3).

In Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara was ready to admit that the Brāhmaṇas do in fact convey prescriptive meanings (*sādhya artha*), whereas the Upaniṣads convey descriptions of states of affairs (*siddha artha*), that is, they describe the reality of the self (*ātman*) and of the *brahman*. Thus, for Śaṅkara two different hermeneutic strategies are justified in the case of Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads, since they are different classes of texts and are addressed to different kinds of people.

Rāmānuja and Veṅkaṭanātha, who try to synthesize a unitary Mīmāṃsā teaching, are confronted with the problem of taking seriously the unity of the Vedic texts and of their exegetical strategies. Accordingly, Rāmānuja supports the underlying unity of what he calls the Prior and Subsequent Mīmāṃsā, that is, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. He needs, therefore, to solve the apparent contradiction of two seemingly different hermeneutic strategies for what should be parts of the same text (the Veda). Thus, Rāmānuja cannot just use the strategy applied by

Table 15.3 The Vedānta Model

Instrument of knowledge	Field of knowledge
Sense perception, etc.	What exists in the world
Veda	<i>brahman</i> and/or <i>dharma</i>

Śaṅkara to the Upaniṣads and extend it to the Brāhmaṇas. Moreover, he cannot just deny that actions are undertaken upon hearing prescriptive statements such as those expressed in the Brāhmaṇas, so a theory of signification which does not account for this phenomenon would not be adequate.

Consequently, Rāmānuja explains that actions are, in fact, undertaken upon hearing the prescriptions of the Brāhmaṇas, but only as a consequence of the fact that they convey descriptive meanings. In a simile by Rāmānuja, only once one knows that there *is* a treasure in a house does one undertake action to take hold of it. Analogously, prescriptions are parasitical upon descriptive statements, insofar as prescriptive meanings are conveyed only once the descriptive meaning has been understood. It could not work in any other possible way, according to Rāmānuja and Veṅkaṭanātha, because one would not undertake any action unless one had cognized something as the goal to be attained by one's action.¹⁹

5.2 From Words to Meaning according to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta

In his *Seśvaramīmāṃsā* commentary to the PMS, 1.2.1, Veṅkaṭanātha writes:

The Veda is valid because it conveys an *artha* which has a purpose (*vedasya* [...] *saprayojanārthabodhanena prāmāṇyam*).

As seen above, in Jaimini's aphorisms *artha* has several acceptations, which all share the meaning of purpose. The above statement shows that in the *Seśvaramīmāṃsā*, unlike in the PMS, *artha* must be different than purpose, because it possesses a purpose (*saprayojana-artha*). Thus defined, it cannot be the same as purpose. Thus, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta authors like Veṅkaṭanātha split again the *artha* of PMS into two aspects, so that linguistic expressions convey meanings and these meanings are purposeful toward a given result, which becomes therefore a second step in the signification process.

Accordingly, since the Veda is a valid instrument of knowledge because it conveys an *artha* which has a purpose, the purpose is achieved through the *artha*. This might look like a small change in comparison to the position of Prior Mīmāṃsā, but in fact it leads to a different appreciation of the epistemological role of *artha*. In fact, according to Rāmānuja (see Section 5.1 above), only if the *artha* is true one can fulfill the purpose. The processes of linguistic communication analyzed in the Bhāṭṭa and Prābhākara schools of Mīmāṃsā (see Chapter 9 in this volume) remain in place, but with the addition of the intermediate step of communicating an established meaning (*siddha artha*). Does this mean that the

Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta authors see sentences as conveying an established meaning, like in the Nyāya school? Not exactly, since it is not the case that one *directly* moves from a linguistic expression (*śabda*) to an established meaning (*siddha artha*), as claimed by the Nyāya school. Rather, Veṅkaṭanātha appears to assume that first the individual words of a sentence communicate their meanings, as with the theory of the Bhāṭṭa school, and then these meanings combine into a sentence meaning expressing something established. Through this established meaning, a purpose is then conveyed. In this model, descriptive passages of the Veda such as eulogies (*arthavāda*) are no longer to be understood just as supplements of prescriptions (see Section 2.4 above); on the contrary, prescriptions are considered as a later output of one's understanding of descriptive statements.

Therefore, Rāmānuja and Veṅkaṭanātha seem to have adopted the Bhāṭṭa theory of sentence meaning, but to have widened it with the addition of a distinct step of the cognition of the purpose.²⁰

6 Conclusion

Indian philosophical schools dedicated much energy to the issue of prescriptive language. The most striking case is that of the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā authors. According to Mīmāṃsā, epistemically valid knowledge necessarily is knowledge of something new. In the specific case of language, its capacity to convey something new is directly connected by Prābhākara authors to its capacity to convey a duty. Language which does not convey duties only repeats contents and is therefore not an independent instrument of knowledge. The Bhāṭṭa sub-school of Mīmāṃsā adopts a less extreme view, insofar as it distinguishes the descriptive use of language from the prescriptive one, and recognizes that both uses can have epistemic validity. Lastly, the Vedānta schools, and especially Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, face the additional challenge of having to deal with the prescriptive portions of the Vedas without abandoning their descriptive interpretation of the Upaniṣads. I have shown how this leads to an interpretation of prescriptive language as parasitic on descriptive meanings, and as leading to the cognition of a goal. In logical terms, one could think of a parallel with the modern debate between interpreters suggesting an imperative logic—not subject to truth tables—and scholars using deontic logic—subject to truth tables, although in an ideal condition of fulfillment.

Notes

- 1 Research for this chapter has been supported by the WWTF project MA 16_028. I could read and discuss the texts upon which this chapter is based during several workshops organized at the IKGA (see <https://mimamsalanguage.wordpress.com/page/>). I am grateful to Marco Lauri for improving the language.
- 2 One can get an idea of the complex problem of the semantics of imperatives by reading Charlow 2014. I am grateful to Jennifer Nagel for having pointed it out to me.
- 3 For an overview on the above dates, see Kataoka 2011, Introduction.
- 4 Rāmānuja's and Veṅkaṭanātha's position might have had sociological reasons, insofar as they might have wanted to profit from the prestige enjoyed by the Mīmāṃsā school. This thesis is suggested as a reason for the imitation of the Mīmāṃsā methodology by Vedānta authors in Bronkhorst 2007. In the following, I will rather focus on the intrinsic philosophical value and content of their ideas.
- 5 See Freschi and Keidan 2017 for a discussion of the semantic values of *artha*.
- 6 Focusing on Jaimini, already Scharf (1996, chapter 3.2) observes that the term *artha* conveys at the same time the idea that dharma is the meaning of Vedic prescriptions and that it is a purpose, that is, something to be achieved.
- 7 See PMS, 2.1.46 and ŚBh thereon.
- 8 See Freschi et al. 2017 and Freschi et al., forthcoming for a deontic analysis of the *śyena* conundrum.
- 9 *autpattikas tu śabdasyārthena sambandhaḥ. tasya jñānam upadeśaḥ. avyatiरेकाś cārthe 'nupalabdhe tat pramāṇam bādarāyaṇasyānapekṣatvāt.*
- 10 See, especially, PMS, 1.1.2 and the commentary thereon.
- 11 *atha gaur ity asya śabdasya ko 'rthaḥ? sāsñādiviśiṣṭā ākr̥tir iti brūmaḥ. nanv ākr̥tiḥ sādhyāsti vā na veti? na pratyakṣā satī sādhyā bhavitum arhati.*
- 12 *sādhyas ca jyotiṣṭomaḥ.*
- 13 *sāmānye hi padaṃ pravartate, viśeṣe vākyam.*
- 14 See (ŚBh, ad PMS 3.4.39): *asti jyotiṣṭomaḥ, jyotiṣṭomena svargakāmo yajeteti. tatra dīkṣaṇīyādayas ca yāgā vidyante, sautye cāhani somayāgaḥ. tatra saṃdehaḥ, kim atra yāgamātra pradhānam, uta somayāga iti. kim prāptam? jyotiṣṭome tulyāni sarvāṇi bhaveyuh. kutaḥ? aviśiṣṭam hi kāraṇam, yāgāt phalaṃ śrūyate.* Similar paraphrases can also be found in (ŚBh, ad PMS 3.4.40 and 6.1.3). See Kataoka 1995 for a comprehensive discussion of this topic.
- 15 On the *svataḥ prāmāṇya* theory, see Taber 1992; Kataoka 2011.
- 16 See Freschi, Ollett, and Pascucci, forthcoming for an introduction to the deontic logic presupposed by Mīmāṃsā authors.
- 17 But the distinction between the prescriptions and prohibitions is more complex. For further details, see Freschi and Pascucci, forthcoming.

- 18 This topic is discussed in PMS, 3.4.3, as well as in the ŚBh and *Tantravārttika* thereon.
- 19 This argument and the treasure example are discussed in more detail in Freschi, forthcoming.
- 20 Theoretically the same scheme could also be applied to the Prābhākara analysis, but I don't know whether it ever was applied to it.

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PMS	<i>Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtra of Jaimini</i> . In <i>Mīmāṃsādarśana</i> .
ŚBh	<i>Śābarabhāṣya of Śābara</i> . In <i>Mīmāṃsādarśana</i> .
<i>Seśvaramīmāṃsā</i>	Viraraghavacharya, Uttamur T., ed. 1971. <i>Seśvaramīmāṃsā and Mīmāṃsāpaduka of Veṅkaṭanātha</i> . Madras: Ubhaya Vedanta Granthamala.
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