

The Problem of Universals in the Word-Meaning Relation: With Special Reference to Nyaya-Vaisheshika Philosophy

Roopa Singh ¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the doctrine of universals (samanya or jati) developed by the Nyaya-Vaisheshika school of classical Indian philosophy and its bearing on the long-standing problem of how words relate to their meanings (shabda-artha-sambandha). The Nyaya-Vaisheshika system defends an unambiguous metaphysical realism in which universals are eternal, objectively existing entities that inhere in particulars through the relation of inherence (samavaya) and are directly received along with the individuals that instantiate them. Building on the foundational discussion in the Nyāya-sūtra of Gautama and its classical commentaries, the paper investigates the three-cornered analysis of denotative meaning offered by the school, namely the relation among the individual (vyakti), the configuration or form (akṛti), and the universal (jati) which a common noun is held to signify. The paper situates this theory within the broader Indian debate on universals by contrasting the Nyaya-Vaisheshika realist position with the Buddhist nominalist theory of exclusion (apoha) and with Bhartṛhari's grammatical philosophy of the word. Employing a qualitative, text-based hermeneutic methodology drawing on primary translated sources and secondary scholarly literature, the study argues that the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theory of universals supplies a metaphysically grounded and epistemologically defensible account of how a finite vocabulary can denote an infinite class of particulars, while also confronting genuine philosophical difficulties regarding infinite regress, the criteria for admitting a universal, and the relation between linguistic convention and ontological reality. The paper concludes that the Nyaya-Vaisheshika account, despite its difficulties, remains a coherent and historically influential contribution to the philosophy of language and offers a valuable comparative resource for contemporary debates on realism about universals.

Keyword: Nyaya-Vaisheshika, Word-Meaning Relation, Universal, Language, Samavaya, Apoha

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, U. P.
✉ Roopa Singh, E-mail: roopasingh43532@gmail.com

Introduction

In philosophy, the relation between a word and its meaning has occupied philosophers across both the Western and Indian traditions for over two millennia. Among the classical Indian schools, the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika system offers one of the most systematic and metaphysically committed treatments of this problem. The school's engagement with language is inseparable from its broader ontology, which divides reality into a fixed set of categories (*padārtha*) including substance (*dravya*), quality (*guṇa*), action (*karma*), universal (*sāmānya*), particularity (*viśeṣa*), inherence (*samavaya*), and, in later formulations, non-existence (*abhava*). Of these categories, *sāmānya*, or universal, occupies a pivotal position because it is the category through which the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika explains how a single word can apply correctly to an indefinite number of distinct individuals.

When a *vachaka* utters the word "cow," the term is understood to apply not merely to one particular animal but to every animal that has ever existed, exists now, or will exist as a member of that class. The philosophical puzzle this generates is well known: what, if anything, do all the members of a class have in common that grounds the applicability of a single general term to all of them, and what exactly does the word denote when it is used? Three broad answers have historically been proposed to this puzzle, namely realism, which holds that universals are mind-independent entities; nominalism, which denies any extra-linguistic universal and locates generality purely in names or concepts; and conceptualism, which locates universality in mental concepts rather than in external reality. The Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika school, together with the Mīmāṃsa school, is firmly committed to the realist position, holding that both particulars and universals possess objective, mind-independent reality. As contemporary overviews of the school confirm, this realist commitment is woven into Nyaya's broader epistemological program, which treats perception, inference, comparison, and testimony as the four genuine sources of knowledge through which the structure of an independently existing world, including its general features, becomes available to a cognizing subject (Ganeri, 2018).

This paper investigates how the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory of universals is woven into the school's account of the word-meaning relation. The central research problem may be stated as follows: according to the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika, what is the precise object denoted by a common noun, and how does the postulation of an eternal, really existing universal solve, or fail to solve, the philosophical difficulties surrounding linguistic generality? In pursuing this question, the paper draws on the analysis found in the Nyaya-sūtra and its classical commentarial tradition, which explicitly identifies three candidates for the meaning of a word, namely the individual (*vyakti*), the generic form or configuration (*akṛti*), and the class-universal (*jāti*), and proceeds to examine how the school relates and synthesizes these three elements (Dasgupta, as cited in Wisdomlib, 2021).

The significance of this inquiry is twofold. First, it illuminates a sophisticated pre-modern theory of reference and meaning that anticipated, in its own idiom, problems that occupy contemporary philosophy of language, such as the relation between sense and denotation, the metaphysics of natural kinds, and the semantics of general terms. Second, situating the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory against rival Indian schools, particularly the Buddhist *apoha* (exclusion) theory and the grammarian philosophy of

Bhartrhari, allows the realist position to be evaluated comparatively rather than in isolation, thereby clarifying both its philosophical strengths and its unresolved tensions.

Review of Literature

The doctrine of universals in the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika system has attracted sustained scholarly attention, both within the indigenous commentarial tradition and in modern academic scholarship. The earliest systematic source is the Nyaya-sutra, traditionally attributed to Gautama or Akṣapada and dated to approximately the second century BCE to the second century CE. Within this text, the discussion of language occupies a significant portion of the second book, where, after refuting the doctrine of the eternity of sound, the text turns to the question of what a word actually denotes. As Dasgupta's classical survey notes, the Nyaya-sutra states that the meaning of words refers jointly to class-notions (jati), individuals (vyakti), and the specific configuration of limbs or parts (akṛti) by which the class-notion is made manifest, and it defines jati as that which produces the cognition of sameness across distinct individuals.

The earliest extant commentary on the Nyaya-sutra, the Nyaya-bhāṣya of Vatsyayana, elaborates this terse formulation and is regarded by scholars as indispensable for understanding the system, since, as one historical study observes, the bhāṣya functions as the key that unlocks the otherwise obscure sutras. Later commentators, notably Uddyotakara in the Nyaya-varttika and Vacaspati Mishra in the Nyaya-varttika-tatparyāṭika, further refined the theory, often in direct response to Buddhist logicians such as Dignaga, who challenged the realist account of universals.

On the Vaiśeṣika side, the foundational text is the Vaiśeṣika-sutra of Kaṇada, which organizes reality into six, and later seven, categories. Within this system, Samanya is treated as an eternal entity inhering in many substrata, and a special sub-doctrine concerns satta, or "being," which Kaṇada treats as the highest universal because it is the cause of the cognition of existence common to substance, quality, and action alone (Substance View, n.d.). Annambhaṭṭa's later digest, the Tarka-saṃgraha with its auto-commentary the Dipika, supplies the classical definition of samanya as that which is eternal and inheres in many things (nityatve sati anekasamavetatvam), a formula carefully qualified to exclude over-extension to relations such as conjunction (saṃyoga) or to entities such as the dimension of an atom.

Modern scholarship has clarified the structural relationship between Vaiśeṣika ontology and Sanskrit grammatical theory. According to the grammarian Patañjali, author of the Maha-bhāṣya, Sanskrit nouns are classified into four types corresponding to what they denote, namely words denoting universals (jati-shabda), words denoting qualities (guṇa-shabda), words denoting actions (kriya-shabda), and words denoting individuals (yadr̥ccha-shabda or proper names) (Guha, as cited in St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology, 2024). As the same source observes, the first three Vaiśeṣika categories of universal, quality, and action correspond directly to the meanings of the grammarian's first three word-types, showing that the Vaiśeṣika ontology was constructed partly on the basis of pre-existing linguistic intuitions about how nouns function (St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology, 2024).

A substantial body of scholarship situates the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory within the wider Indian controversy over universals. According to a focused study on this topic, the doctrine of Samanya or Jati marks the very starting point of the controversy over

universals in Indian philosophy, since the school adopts an extreme and uncompromising form of realism according to which universals are eternal and independent common characters inhering in all members of a class, and according to which, without such universals, no proper account could be given either of natural classes or of causal laws of nature. The same scholarship notes that the school's pluralistic standpoint commits it to treating universals as separately and objectively real entities distinct from, yet inseparably related to, the particulars in which they inhere.

The principal philosophical rival to this realism is the Buddhist *apoha*, or exclusion, theory associated with Dignaga and later elaborated by Dharmakīrti and Dharmottara. Recent textual scholarship on Bhaṭṭa Jayanta's *Nyaya Manjari* demonstrates that the clash between Nyaya realism and Buddhist *apoha-vada* centers precisely on whether the meaning of a word is the particular, the universal, or both, and that after refuting the Buddhist criticism, Jayanta proceeds to debate in detail which of the three candidates, *akṛti*, *vyakti*, or *jati*, is properly denoted by a word. This scholarship confirms that the three-fold analysis inherited from the Nyaya-sutra remained the organizing framework for the debate for many centuries after the sutra itself was composed.

A further important strand of literature situates the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory alongside the grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari, whose *sphoṭa* theory of language offers a distinct, though related, account of universal meaning. According to this literature, Bhartṛhari holds that a word such as "cow" first signifies the general class (*jati*) of cow-ness and only subsequently, through a process of particularization, comes to refer to an individual cow (*vyakti*). The same source notes that the Mimamsa philosopher Kumarila Bhaṭṭa identified as many as seven distinct elements simultaneously cognized upon hearing a word, including class, individual, their mutual relation, collectivity, gender, syntactic case-relation, and number, indicating the richness with which classical Indian semantics treated the problem of generality in meaning.

Among modern interpreters, the work of Bimal Krishna Matilal occupies a central place in bridging the classical Sanskrit commentarial tradition and contemporary analytic philosophy of language. Matilal's monograph-length study explicitly organizes its treatment of Indian semantics around the very problem this paper investigates, devoting successive chapters to individuals, universals, and perception, to the inseparable relation of *samavaya*, to universals as the meanings of general terms, and to what he terms the problem of the "real" universal, *jati* (Matilal, 1990/2015). His earlier and later works extend this analysis into Navya-Nyaya logic, where the precise definition of universal pervasion (*vyapti*) and the locus-locatee model of predication became central technical tools for stating, with much greater formal precision than the classical sutras themselves allow, exactly what it means for a universal to qualify a locus (Matilal, 1998). This modern scholarly synthesis confirms, from an independent analytic vantage point, that the tripartite *jati-vyakti-akṛti* framework inherited from the Nyaya-sutra was treated by the entire subsequent tradition, down to the Navya-Nyaya logicians of medieval Bengal and Mithila, as the unavoidable starting point for any serious theory of how general terms signify.

Taken together, the literature converges on several points of consensus: that the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika school is unambiguously realist about universals; that the school's theory of word-meaning is structured around the tripartite distinction of *jāti*, *vyakti*, and *akṛti*; that this theory was developed dialectically in opposition to Buddhist nominalism; and that it bears important structural affinities with, while also differing from, the grammarian and Mimamsa accounts of meaning. What remains comparatively underexplored in much general survey literature is a focused synthesis of precisely how the ontological category of *Samanya*, as defined in Vaiśeṣika metaphysics, is operationalized within the linguistic theory of word-meaning. The present paper aims to supply such a synthesis.

Methodology

This research paper adopts a qualitative, text-based hermeneutic and comparative-philosophical methodology appropriate to research in the history of philosophy. Rather than relying on empirical or experimental data, the research proceeds through the close reading, interpretation, and comparative analysis of primary philosophical material, supplemented by secondary scholarly commentary.

The primary sources consulted, in translation and through standard scholarly paraphrase, include the Nyaya-sutra of Gautama together with the Nyaya-bhāṣya of Vatsayana, the Vaiśeṣika-sutra of Kanada, and the later systematizing digest of Annambhaṭṭa, the Tarka-saṃgraha with its Dipika commentary. These texts were selected because they constitute the foundational and most authoritative formulations of the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika position on categories in general and on universals and word-meaning in particular.

The secondary literature consulted includes peer-reviewed and academically published studies on universals in the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika school, scholarly encyclopaedic treatments of Nyaya and Vaiśeṣika philosophy, and specialized studies of the Buddhist apoha controversy and of Bhartṛhari's grammatical philosophy, since an adequate account of the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory of word-meaning cannot be developed in isolation from the dialectical opposition that shaped it.

The analytical procedure followed three steps. First, the relevant doctrinal content concerning the categories of *Samanya*, *viśeṣa*, and *samavaya* was reconstructed from the primary and secondary sources. Second, the specific textual locus in which the Nyaya-sutra addresses the denotative meaning of words, namely the tripartite analysis of *jāti*, *vyakti*, and *akṛti*, was identified and examined in light of commentarial elaboration. Third, this reconstructed theory was placed in comparative dialogue with the Buddhist apoha theory and with Bhartṛhari's *sphoṭa-vada* in order to clarify, by contrast, the distinctive philosophical commitments of the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika realist position. Throughout, care was taken to distinguish claims that are explicitly textual from claims that represent later interpretive synthesis, and all interpretive claims are supported by citation to the secondary scholarship from which they are drawn.

Samanya as Ontological Entity

In Vaiśeṣika metaphysics, *Samanya* is treated as a distinct and irreducible category of being, standing on a par with substance, quality, action, particularity, and inherence. The school's realism is described in the secondary literature as taking an extreme form, since it holds not merely that classes of similar objects exist, but that the very ground of their similarity, the universal itself, exists as an eternal, objective entity independent

of any mind that may or may not apprehend it. Three defining features of Samanya recur across the textual tradition. First, a universal is eternal (nitya); it does not come into being when the first member of its class arises nor perish when the last member perishes, an important point because it is what allows the same general term to be applied correctly to new individuals born long after the word itself was coined. Second, a universal resides in many substrates simultaneously (anekanugata or anekasamaveta); it is one and the same entity inhering, through the relation of inherence, in every individual member of its class, rather than being multiplied into numerically distinct copies for each member. Prasastapada's classical enumeration of the marks of Samanya makes this point explicit, holding that the universal is entirely present in each individual and yet simultaneously present in all individuals of its class, without itself being confined to any one location, and that the universal resides in identically the same form wherever it inheres, a feature distinguishing genuine universality from a merely contingent shared quality, or upadhi. Third, only one universal is held to inhere in the members of a given natural class, and a quality or action peculiar to a single individual does not qualify as a universal at all.

Kanada's own treatment introduces a further refinement that proved consequential for the philosophy of language, namely the distinction between the highest universal, Satta or "being," and the lower or intermediate universals such as cow-ness or jar-ness. According to the textual evidence, Kanada restricted full ontological standing as "Artha," or objective reality in the strict sense, to the first three categories of substance, quality, and action, and treated Satta as the universal that inheres exclusively in these three, thereby grounding the cognition that substances, qualities, and actions are all, in their different ways, "existent". Lower universals such as cow-ness, by contrast, are restricted to a single category, namely substance, and to a single natural kind within that category. This hierarchical structuring of universals allowed the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika to explain both maximally general predications, such as "a cow exists," and maximally specific predications, such as "this is a cow," through a single, unified ontological apparatus.

It is important to note that the relation by which a universal is connected to its particulars is not, on this theory, a relation of identity or of mere resemblance, but a sui generis relation called samavaya, or inherence. As one source explains, inherence is conceived as a permanent, inseparable connection, distinct from the merely temporary relation of conjunction (samyoga), and it accounts for how a whole inheres in its parts, how a quality or action inheres in a substance, and, crucially, how a universal inheres in its particular instances. Historically, the concept appears to have originated within the school's theory of causation, where it explains how an effect subsists in its material cause, and was only subsequently extended to cover the subsistence of qualities, actions, and universals in their respective substrata. Visvanatha and other later Nayikas defended the postulation of a single, unique relation of this kind on grounds of economy (laghava), arguing that without it, the relation between each substratum and what inheres in it would have to be accounted for separately, leading to a needless multiplication of relations.

The postulation of samavaya as an irreducible relational category is, in effect, the metaphysical price the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika pays for its realism about universals: having insisted that the universal is a really existing entity numerically distinct from each

particular, the school requires an equally real relation to bind the two together, since a mere collection of unconnected particulars and an unconnected universal would not by themselves yield the unified cognition of "cow" that ordinary perception in fact delivers. Uddyotakara's analysis of perceptual contact (*sannikarṣa*) makes the epistemological stakes of this commitment explicit, since he distinguishes several distinct kinds of sensory connection required to perceive substances, qualities, and universals respectively, including a special variety of inherence-within-inherence (*samaveta-samavāya*) posited specifically to explain how a universal instantiated in a quality or sound can itself become an object of perception.

Jati, Vyakti, and Akṛti: The Tripartite Analysis of Word-Meaning Relation

The Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika account of how a common noun signifies is most explicitly stated in the second book of the Nyaya-sutra, in the context of the school's broader discussion of *sabda*, or verbal testimony, as a valid means of knowledge. Having argued at length against the rival doctrine of the eternity of sound, the text turns to the question of denotation and states that the meaning of words is to be understood with reference to three elements together: the class-notion (*jati*), the individual (*vyakti*), and the configuration of parts (*akṛti*) by which the class-notion is outwardly manifested, with *jati* itself defined as that which produces the cognition of sameness among distinct individuals (*samana-prasavatmika jatiḥ*).

This tripartite formula addresses a genuine difficulty that any theory of common nouns must confront. If a word denoted only the individual, *vyakti*, then strictly speaking each individual cow would require its own private name, and the word "cow" could never correctly be applied to a newly encountered animal not previously named, since nothing about the word itself would connect it to that new animal. If, conversely, a word denoted only the universal, *jati*, then it is unclear how a speaker, upon hearing the word, comes to think of, or act toward, any particular cow at all, since universals as such are not located in space and time and cannot themselves be eaten, milked, or led to pasture. The Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika solution is therefore not to choose among the three candidates but to hold that proper understanding of a common noun requires apprehension of all three together: the universal supplies the ground of classification and explains why the same word correctly applies to indefinitely many individuals; the individual supplies the concrete object toward which practical activity is actually directed; and the configuration, a *kṛti*, supplies the perceptible, structural arrangement of parts, such as the characteristic shape of horns, dewlap, and hooves, through which the universal is recognized as present in a given individual on a given occasion of perception.

The role of *akṛti* deserves particular emphasis because it performs an epistemological function that the bare postulation of an eternal universal cannot perform by itself. Universals, being eternal and supersensible in their own nature, are not perceived in isolation; according to Nyaya epistemology, a universal is perceived only as qualifying a particular substance with which the perceiver's sense organs are in contact. The recognizable external configuration, *ākṛti*, is therefore the perceptual cue by which the cognizer infers, or directly intuit, the presence of the relevant universal in the substance being perceived. This is significant for the philosophy of language because it shows that, for the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika, the comprehension of a general term's

meaning is never a purely conceptual or wholly abstract event; it is anchored, at every occasion of use, in the perceptual recognition of a structured particular.

Later commentators, particularly Bhaṭṭa Jayanta in his *Nyayamanjari*, devoted extensive argument to determining the precise relative weighting of these three elements, debating which of *akṛti*, *vyakti*, or *jati* should be regarded as the primary object directly denoted (*mukhyartha*) by the word, with the other two understood as denoted secondarily or as concomitantly cognized. This sustained debate indicates that the tripartite formula of the *Nyaya-sutra* was not treated by the tradition as a final, settled answer but as a framework generating further internal disputes about the precise mechanics of denotation, disputes that were sharpened considerably by the need to defend realism against the Buddhist alternative.

Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika Vs Apoha: The Realist-Nominalist Confrontation

The *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* theory of universals become clearest when set against the Buddhist *apoha*, or exclusion, theory of meaning, articulated first by Dignaga and refined by Dharmakīrti and Dharmottara. Because Buddhist metaphysics generally denies the existence of any eternal, unchanging entity, on the ground that all conditioned phenomena are momentary (*kṣaṇika*), Buddhist logicians could not accept an eternal universal inhering identically in countless particulars across time. Their alternative proposal was that a general word such as "cow" does not positively denote any common real entity at all, but rather functions by excluding its object from the class of all things that are "not-cow," so that the apparent unity among cows is merely a unity of mutual exclusion from other classes rather than a unity grounded in any shared positive nature.

The *Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika* response, carried forward most fully in Jayanta's *Nyayamanjari*, was to argue that the exclusion theory is parasitic upon, and therefore cannot dispense with, the very notion of positive commonality it seeks to eliminate, since to know that something is excluded from the class "not-cow" one must already possess some positive criterion for what counts as a cow. As the textual scholarship summarizes the dialectical situation, although both the *Nayikas* and the *Mīmāṃsakas* mounted sustained challenges against *apoha-vada*, the Buddhist side recognized that establishing a coherent semantics purely in terms of negative exclusion was a genuinely difficult task, which is precisely why the *Naiyayikas* pressed their case so persistently. For the *Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika*, the existence of objectively real universals is not a piece of unmotivated metaphysical extravagance but is presented as the only way to explain, without circularity, why indefinitely many distinct particulars are correctly classed together by speakers who have never encountered most of those particulars.

This confrontation illuminates the deeper methodological commitment of the *Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika* school: language is treated as a reliable guide to the structure of reality, rather than as a merely conventional or pragmatically useful overlay upon a reality that is, in itself, devoid of general structure. The school's epistemology, which recognizes perception, inference, comparison, and verbal testimony as four valid means of knowledge, commits it to holding that if ordinary perception genuinely delivers the cognition "this is a cow, and that is also a cow," then there must be something real, accessible to perception, that grounds this recurring cognition; postulating *samānya* as a perceptible, inherent universal is the school's considered answer to that demand.

Samanya: Comparison with Bhartṛhari and the Grammarian Tradition

Moreover, illuminating point of comparison is supplied by the grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari, whose theory of language, while sharing the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika's emphasis on *jāti* as central to word-meaning, develops the idea within a markedly different metaphysical framework rooted in the doctrine of *śabda-brahman*, according to which the entire manifold universe is ultimately a manifestation of a single underlying linguistic reality. According to this view, a word such as "cow" is held to refer in the first instance to the general class, with reference to the particular individual following only as a secondary specification of that prior universal meaning.

While this ordering, universal-then-particular, bears a structural resemblance to the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika's insistence that *jāti* is essential to denotation, the underlying philosophical motivations diverge sharply. For Bhartṛhari, the priority of the universal ultimately serves a monistic metaphysics in which the diversity of particular words and things is a kind of differentiation of an underlying non-dual linguistic absolute, whereas for the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika, the universal is one really distinct category among an irreducibly plural set of categories, with no suggestion that universal and particular are, at a deeper level, identical or non-different. The Mīmāṃsā philosopher Kumārila Bhaṭṭa's analysis, identifying seven simultaneously cognized elements of meaning including *jāti*, *vyakti*, their relation, collectivity, gender, case-relation, and number, further demonstrates that the bare *jāti-vyakti* distinction inherited from the Nyaya-sutra was, across the wider tradition, elaborated into increasingly fine-grained accounts of the multiple dimensions of linguistic meaning, even as the core realist commitment to an objectively existing universal remained, for the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsa schools alike, non-negotiable.

Philosophical and Internal Difficulties of Samanya

Instead of its systematic coherence, the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory of universals faces several difficulties that the tradition itself recognized and attempted to address. One difficulty concerns the criteria for legitimately positing a universal at all, since an unrestricted readiness to posit a new *samanya* for every apparent common feature threatens both infinite proliferation of categories and circularity, as a universal would then be needed to explain the commonality among universals themselves. Annambhaṭṭa's careful qualification of the definition of *samanya*, restricting it to what is eternal and inheres in many things while explicitly excluding cases such as the dimension of an atom or the relation of conjunction, reflects a deliberate effort to police this boundary, though the underlying problem of specifying a fully general, non-question-begging criterion for genuine universals as opposed to merely nominal classifications remains a point of ongoing interpretive difficulty in the secondary literature.

A second difficulty concerns the relation between the supposedly eternal universal and the historically contingent, evidently conventional character of actual vocabularies, since different languages carve up the same domain of particulars using different words and, on occasion, different classificatory boundaries, a fact seemingly in tension with the idea that the universal corresponding to a given word is a fixed, mind-independent feature of reality awaiting discovery rather than a product of convention. The Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika response, implicit in its treatment of *śabda* as a form of testimony resting on convention (*saṃketa*) overlaid upon a real, independently existing referent, is to

separate the question of how a particular sound-sequence comes to be conventionally associated with a meaning, which is admitted to be a matter of convention, from the question of whether the meaning so associated, once fixed, corresponds to something objectively real, which the school answers affirmatively. Whether this separation fully dissolves the tension, or merely relocates it, remains a live question for comparative philosophical assessment.

A third difficulty, sharpened by the Buddhist critique, concerns whether the postulation of an inherence relation (*samavaya*) to bind universal and particular together generates an infinite regress, since if inherence itself is a real entity distinct from both its relata, a further relation would seem to be required to relate inherence to the universal and to the particular, and so on without end. The classical Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika response is to treat *samavaya* as a unique, self-linking relation that does not itself require a further relation to connect it to its relata; on this view there can be no universal of inherence itself, since universality would require a further inherence relating it to inherence, which the system disallows precisely in order to halt the regress. The Advaita Vedānta tradition, represented above all by Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra*, pressed exactly this objection, arguing that if substance, quality, action, universal, and particularity are treated as so many genuinely distinct entities, some further relation must always be invoked to unite them into a single perceived thing, a demand that, once granted, has no principled stopping point short of infinite regress. This move secures internal consistency for the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika but is regarded by critics, particularly from the Buddhist and Advaita sides, as an *ad hoc* exception inconsistent with the school's own general demand that every connection between distinct entities be metaphysically accounted for.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the discussion above indicates that the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory of universals in the word-meaning relation is best understood not as a naively dogmatic assertion but as a carefully constructed response to a genuine semantic puzzle, developed dialectically over centuries in direct engagement with sophisticated nominalist alternatives. The school's insistence that perception itself delivers cognition of universals, its hierarchical structuring of universals from the highly general *Satta* down to specific natural kinds, and its tripartite analysis of denotation into *Jati*, *Vyakti*, and *Akṛti* together constitute a theory of considerable internal sophistication, even where particular details, such as the precise mechanics of *samavaya*, continue to invite philosophical scrutiny.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this paper has examined the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory of universals as it bears on the classical problem of how words relate to their meanings. The school's realism commits it to the view that *Samanya*, or universal, is an eternal, mind-independent category of being, distinct from yet really related to the particulars in which it inheres through the unique relation of *samavaya*. Applied to language, this ontology yields a tripartite theory of denotation according to which the meaning of a common noun is properly understood only through the joint apprehension of the universal class (*jati*), the concrete individual (*vyakti*), and the perceptible configuration (*akṛti*) through which the universal is recognized in a given particular. This theory was forged and refined through sustained dialectical confrontation with the Buddhist *apoha*, or exclusion, theory of meaning, and it exhibits both points of convergence with and

significant points of divergence from the grammarian Bhartṛhari's sphoṭa-based account and from the Mimamsa analysis of Kumarila Bhaṭṭa. The Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika position is not without internal difficulty, particularly regarding the criteria for legitimately positing universals, the relation between linguistic convention and ontological reality, and the threat of infinite regress in the analysis of inherence. Nevertheless, the theory represents a historically significant and philosophically serious attempt to ground the generality of linguistic meaning in an explicit, perceptible, and metaphysically articulated feature of reality rather than in convention or in mere mental construction alone. For contemporary philosophy of language and metaphysics, the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika account remains valuable as a fully worked-out instance of realism about universals, offering both a model to be tested against and a set of dialectical objections, drawn from the historical Buddhist response, that any realist theory of general terms must still be prepared to answer. Future comparative research might productively extend this analysis by examining in greater detail the Navya-Nyaya refinements of samavāya introduced by later logicians such as Gangesa, and by placing the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory in direct dialogue with contemporary analytic debates on natural kinds and the semantics of general terms.

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