The Word And Not The Morpheme

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The Indian word and Bimal Krishna Matilal

What classical Greece is to geometry, classical India is to the study of words. Unlike geometry and its derivatives, the pursuit of verbal understanding has not been a major interest in the civilizational mainstreams. Only now do we see the beginnings of a minor take-off. And Bimal Krishna Matilal, gently drawing our attention to the lucid classical-Indian initiation of the study of words, especially in *Epistemology, logic and grammar* and in *The word and the world*, becomes a factor in this take-off. It is his accessible presentation of certain contributions from Nyāya and Vyākaraṇa that is likely to put a certain India on the map for readers who either hail from the West or depend on the western publication network for their understanding of India. Consequently, we may expect many such readers, later if not now, to turn to the Indian traditions not only for emotional solace misconstrued as spirituality, but more seriously for contact with aspects of rational inquiry which the Indian teams have developed more carefully than others in the game.

My goal in this text of homage is to focus on the fact that Matilal continued the Indian habit of choosing the word as the iconic representative of language. Given his personal interest in semantics and objects of knowledge, he could easily have chosen otherwise. He could, in particular, have decided to iconize the morpheme instead. The strategy then would have been to argue that the two kinds of *prakṛti*, namely the *dhātu* and the *prātipadika*, turn out to be essentially on a par with the various types of pratyaya, for all these pieces carry meaning. Such a strategy would not have had trouble with the evidence on the ground. But Matilal chose the word. And he chose, in my opinion, the right icon. Those of us in linguistics today who are struggling towards a word theory of language are thus immensely indebted to him.

The pragmatical word and the semantical morpheme

Let me unpack this a little. If one adheres to the Morrisian explication of the syntactical, semantical, and pragmatical breakdown of the semiotical, it becomes clear that a semantical approach to the basis of language inexorably leads the inquirer to the morpheme, the minimal interface between expression and content. In contrast, although the point is intuition-bound and therefore essentially contestable, a pragmatical approach is more hospitable to the idea that the minimal act of speaking is the uttering of a word, not the uttering of a morpheme.

A certain steadfast concreteness has driven Indian thinkers towards visualizations of language and other abstractions which, even at their most complex moments, never completely opt out of the active scene of language use. And that scene, socially and psychologically, is populated by people and words – not by morphemes. Hence, I would like to suggest, the Indian focus on the word, a focus that Matilal has remained loyal to.

This is not to say that such a view resists the analysis of the word into smaller items. On the contrary, much of Matilal is devoted to the Indian contributions to the task of such analysis. The anti-morphemic point is that a word breaks up into different types of entity – roots, derivational affixes, inflectional endings – which cannot be felicitously classified under a homogeneous category of minimal meaning-bearers called morphemes. And I am trying to suggest that when we pursue anti-morphemic initiatives today, we have classical India on our side, mediated by Matilal's path-breaking renarrations of some of India's classical discussions.

Continuing the debate

But the issue is not simply how best to appropriate all that was once made in India. We also wish to continue to seek valid, sustainable questions and answers, and to add Indian tools to the kit we use in this perennial task. It becomes imperative, then, to ask the word versus morpheme question in the contemporary context as well. For example, how do we pursue this inquiry with respect to data from languages other than Sanskrit, such as English?

I would like to visualize for public inspection a prototypical debate that brings out the modes of thinking involved.

Word *pakṣa*: We hold that, in addition to the English words North, South, East, West (using capitals rather than italics, for convenience,

to single out the Words), there are the words Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western.

Morpheme *paksa*: We submit that no economical lexicon can afford to store, for these examples, more than five entries, four for the CGDs (Cardinal Geographical Directions) North, South, East, West, and one for the derivational affix Ern which has stage directions attached requiring it to seek out and affix itself to a CGD. Parsimony requires that Northern, Southern etc. should have no separate lexical storage, i.e. no separate recognition as citizens of the language.

Word *paksa*: The economy argument is spurious. Consider what is involved. It is claimed that for Ern to say "I am affixed to a CGD" suffices to generate all and only the four words Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western. But this does not suffice. What guarantees that it attaches to all four?

Morpheme *paksa*: If the entry for Ern says quite generally that it attaches to a CGD, it trivially follows that it will attach to all and only the four CGDs. No separate guarantee is needed.

Word *paksa*: Consider an example where such principles fail. The inhabitant-forming affix Er attaches to Island, Highland, New Zealand, Iceland to form Islander, Highlander, New Zealander, Icelander. Your parsimony argument would require that we have a single Er instead for these entries for Islander etc. That Er would then say "I attach to region designations ending in *land*". But now you see that that stipulation does not work. For it fails to rule out the non-occurring words Englander, Scotlander, Irelander, Hollander. So you are not relying just on the stipulation carried by the affix itself. You are tacitly relying also on stipulations carried by the lexical entries of the base words like Iceland, New Zealand etc. vs. England, Scotland, etc. To go back, this means that not only must Ern say it attaches to CGDs, but even the CGD entries must say that they take Ern. Now that variant of your analysis is tantamount to our decision to report all eight words separately – Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western as well as the four CGD base words,. So your claim to have a parsimonious alternative collapses.

Morpheme *paksa*: But you are bound by the rules of the sound-meaning contract to pursue each and every pairing of sound with meaning. You cannot fail to record the existence of Ern as a specific interface of sound and meaning.

Word *pakksa*; Two objections. (A) Only speakers can make and sustain contracts about their acts; sounds cannot. Speakers seem not to recognize meaningful entities smaller than the word except through their incipient (or residual) historical perception. If speakers

were dying to recognize the morpheme instead of the word, then nearly a century of modern men and women being exposed to a linguistics that advertises the morpheme concept would have led to at least a fashionable elite tendency to speak of morphemes just as the elite has started having neuroses instead of anxieties and feeling depressed instead of sad. But notice that no part of the non-technical public has appropriated the term Morpheme. To utter a word is then the minimal act.

(B) If you really believe in a sound-meaning contract of the kind you indicate, you are bound to accept counterintuitive morpheme cuts of the sort no linguist has ever accepted. Thus, you must then invent a morpheme Th, meaning 'Polar CGD', and cut North and South into Nor-Th and Sou-Th; correspondingly, a morpheme St, meaning 'Lateral CGD', appearing in Ea-St and We-St, so segmented!

Morpheme *pakṣa*: You are not reducing me to absurdity, but merely being absurd yourself. I see no basis for your Ea, We, Nor, and Sou, and therefore do not feel obliged to recognize the St and Th you attribute to me as a necessary postulate.

Word *pakṣa*: It was the inventors of your doctrine who said that even Cranberry and Boysenberry must be segmented into Cran and Berry, into Boysen and Berry, despite the lack of independent warrant for Cran and Boysen. It was your Hockett who created the inimitable term Cranberry Morpheme for the results of such segmentation. If you wish to chicken out now, you are welcome, but I do not accept the charge of absurdity. I submit that in your logic it is not just possible but necessary to postulate Ea, We, Nor, and Sou as cranberry morphemes residual to St and Th. If you do not like this, then you will see that you do not really like your own logic that leads to this outcome.

Morpheme *pakṣa*: Do you then accept no reality for morphemes?

Word *pakṣa*: We recognize the existence of morpheme-size units for historical discussion and other etymological exercises. But we regard morpheme-based thinking as merely a heuristic preparation preceding the synchronic account of a given state of a given language. And even in diachronic work, we see no reason to homogenize all roots, affixes, and endings into a uniform theory of morphemes.

Towards a new interrogation of classical India

With this general type of contemporary enterprise in mind, without necessarily bogging ourselves down in the details of this or that version of such an agenda, we may wish to return to Matilal's classical

India. It is unclear if we can hope to pin down a logical notion like *sanketa* vis-à-vis the competing focal notions of word and root. But we may be lucky in the texts surrounding Pāṇini and Bhartṛhari. The grammatical job seems to require, for practical reasons, a focus on roots and other pieces. But the metagrammatical job resituates the word in the sentence, as a situated pada and not a context-free *śabda*. However, the metagrammarian, in a hierarchical discourse where he must play handmaiden to the grammatical hegemony, is in practice obliged to invent little meanings for fragments, speaking of prefixes as co-signifiers and so forth. Thus, there is no readily reconstructible debate between a *dhātu* school and a pada school in the classical period; but we can catch traces of the tension that had once arisen around the *nitya* and *kārya* views of the *śabda*, when one was not sure if etymology would be adopted as the dominant approach to language. There is a sense in which the central thought of *Vākyapadīya*'s metagrammar goes back to a certain valorization of the pada as such, in contrast to the cut-and-classify game in the grammatical tradition it claims to comment on and epitomize. Those competent to reinterrogate the relevant traditions with such thoughts in mind may well begin to do so simply in order to explicate more precisely the *kāraka* view of sentence structure which Matilal has done so much to open up to contemporary students of language. If my hunches are right, this re interrogation will bear out the primacy that Pātañjali grants to the speech community's usage patterns rather than this or that detailed analytical proposal in Pāṇini. We will perhaps find ourselves relativizing the excessively formalistic grammatical achievements to the gentle taming powers of the metagrammar of the word. Such a reading of classical India will then be accountable to the intuitions of the speech community – and to the Matilal canon of illumination and rationality. That way conjecture lies. But perhaps the apparent rigour of empiricist scholarship is not what will illuminate, given the shape of our times? Perhaps we need to take a leap of faith – into conjecture?