CONCEPTS, INTENSION, AND IDENTITY IN TIBETAN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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Indian Buddhist philosophers' task of accounting for the meaningfulness of language is perhaps most famously addressed in Dignāga's doctrine of *apoha*, which claims that general terms do not possess meaning by referring to positively existing universals, but instead impart meaning through a negative process of *exclusion*. As Mark Siderits points out, this Buddhist theory of language "forced [Dignāga and his followers] to say that there is more to linguistic meaning than just reference."[1] Siderits' own contention is that, beyond reference, Buddhist philosophers were "forced to recognize *sense* – the mode of presentation of the reference of an expression – as a distinct element of meaning."[2] There is something importantly correct about Siderits' remarks, but to the extent that Buddhist philosophical theories differ from school to school and time period to time period, more needs to be said about Buddhist theories of word meaning.

In this article I will examine one highly localized set of developments to the Buddhist doctrine of word meaning that was made by twelfth and thirteenth century Tibetan Buddhist epistemologists primarily schooled at gSaṅ phu Monastery in central Tibet. I will show how these thinkers developed the notion of a *concept* (*don spyi*) in order to explain how it is that words are capable of applying to real objects, and how concepts can be used to capture elements of word meaning extending beyond reference to real objects. In particular, I will focus on the developments made by Phywa pa Chos kyi seṅ ge in the middle of the twelfth century, as well as on reactions to those developments by Sa skya Paṇḍita in the first half of the thir-

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[1] Siderits (1986), p. 343.

[2] Ibid, p. 331. Italics mine.

teenth century. My investigation will begin by explaining how Tibetan Buddhist epistemologists make use of concepts in order to account for how it is that words are capable of applying to particular objects. I will then focus on one particular area where this appeal to concepts plays a central role in Tibetan accounts of word meaning – namely, with regard to the relation of sameness or identity (*gcig pa*). Finally, I will tie this discussion to the views of the Tibetan polymath Sa skya paṇḍita, showing how he reacts against earlier Tibetan theories of word reference.

1. bKa' gdams epistemologists on intentional objects and intensional objects

It is often asserted that Buddhist philosophers uphold the view that certain objects or experiences are ineffable, unable to be communicated in language. While many claims are made by Indian and Tibetan Buddhists about the limitations of language, one particular claim that was important within the Buddhist epistemological tradition was the declaration by the tradition's forefather, Dignāga, that verbalization can only occur in conceptual thought – thought that takes general entities, and not concrete particulars, as its object. Given this foundational assertion, how then can Buddhist epistemologists account for the referential nature of language? How is it that words can refer to objects in the external world?

In order to see how bKa' gdams Tibetan epistemologists were able to make sense of the referential capacity of language, it is important to locate these thinkers' theories of language within their general accounts of conceptual thought, for it is out of a more general account of cognitive objects that Tibetan thinkers construct their theories of language. Even though the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist epistemological traditions accept Dignāga's root assertion that conceptual thought takes general entities (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) – which are unreal – as its objects, thinkers as early as Dharmakīrti sought also to explain how conceptual thought can be grounded in reality. A major step is taken by the eighth century philosopher Dharmottara,

who delineates two different aspects of the objects of cognition.[3] These items are refined by Tibetan thinkers at gSaṅ phu Monastery in central Tibet in such a way as to expose both the phenomenal nature of thought and the intentional nature of thought. According to rṄog Blo ldan śes rab and Phywa pa Chos kyi seṅ ge, two major 11th and 12th century thinkers from gSaṅ phu Monastery, conceptual thought bears on two distinct kinds of objects.[4] The object that directly appears to a person's mind in conceptual thought is a mentally constructed – i.e., non-objective – *phenomenal object* (*gzuṅ yul* or *snaṅ yul*). Phywa pa provides a name for these phenomenal objects of conceptual thought. He calls them "concepts" (*don spyi*). The Tibetan term *don spyi* – or at least its Sanskrit equivalent, *arthasāmānya* – is present in the works of Dignāga, but this particular role as the phenomenal object of conceptual thought appears to begin with Phywa pa. While Phywa pa and his followers accept the existence of concepts, conceptual thought isn't typically *about* concepts. Thought typically bears on, or is directed toward, external reality.[5] The objects that conceptual thought is directed toward are called *intentional objects* (*źen yul*) – where these intentional objects are not mental constructions, but are, rather, (typically) objects or properties in the external world.

This distinction between phenomenal objects and intentional objects is quite sensible. When I think about something like the Potala Palace, what directly appears to my mind is a concept, or maybe even an image, of it. Nevertheless, my thoughts are not *about* the concept of the Potala, my thoughts are *about* the Potala Palace itself. Similarly, in the Buddhist context, when a person in conceptual thought infers the existence of a fire on a hill from having perceived smoke, even though what directly appears to the person's mind is the concept of a fiery hill, the inference is not *about* a concept. Rather, the inference is about a real fire on a real hill. As the thirteenth cen-

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[3] Dharmottara, 179a4: *śes pa rnams kyi yul ni rnam pa gñis te | gzuṅ ba daṅ źen pa'o |.*

[4] See Phywa pa (2006b), 1b–11a, and rṄog (2006), 8b–9a.

[5] Conceptual thought needn't necessarily be directed toward external reality. Thought can be about mental episodes (*śes pa*) or about concepts (*don spyi*).

tury Tibetan scholar Sa skya Paṇḍita (henceforth, Sa paṇ) sarcasti-
cally notes,[6]

> When someone says, "Pour water into pot!," I [automatically] understand the
> object of application [i.e., the intentional object] to be a real particular, and
> don't ask, "[Should I] pour the water into a real pot or [should I] pour the
> water into the concept of a pot?"

This distinction between the phenomenal objects and intentional ob-
jects of conceptual thought is projected by early Tibetan epistemolo-
gists onto their theory of language. Phywa pa and his followers agree
that when a person utters a word like "snake," what the word *directly
signifies* (*dṅos kyi brjod bya*) is the concept of a snake. Yet, these Ti-
betan thinkers also hold that, insofar as language is intentional and
attempts to describe reality, the word "snake" has as its *intentional
signification* (*źen pa'i brjod bya*) a real, objectively existing snake.[7]
It is a phenomenal object – a concept – that is directly signified by
words, but the words are not *about* the phenomenal object. Instead,
words are directed toward, or denote, the real object that is the
words' intentional signification.[8]

We can also, by drawing a comparison to Western philosophical
theories of language, identify an important link between directly and
intentionally signified entities. Georges Dreyfus understands the
distinction to be comparable to Gottlob Frege's famous distinction
between *sense* and *reference*.[9] The concepts that are directly

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[6] Sa skya paṇḍita, p. 122: *bum par chu blugs śig ces brjod pa na'aṅ raṅ mtshan gyi
bum par chu ldugs sam don spyi'i bum par ldugs źes mi 'dri bar 'jug yul don raṅ mtshan
ñid go ba yin te.*

Admittedly, Sa skya paṇḍita puts forward this quote within the context of how language
can be efficacious, and not exactly so as to distinguish phenomenal objects from inten-
tional objects. As such, he speaks of the object of application (*'jug yul*), which, in concep-
tual thought is equivalent to the intentional object (*źen yul*).

[7] In Phywa pa's *Tshad ma yid kyi mun sel* and *Tshad ma rnam ṅes kyi 'grel pa* there is
no full discussion of this distinction, though the distinction is clearly presupposed when he
uses the terms. My explanation comes primarily from Sa skya paṇḍita's much fuller
discussion of the terms.

[8] Of course, all this is consistent with there being a failure of reference. Sometimes I
can use a term, intending to signify a real object, and yet fail to do so.

[9] Dreyfus (1997), pp. 261–74. Cf. Frege (1980).

signified by words are taken to be analogous to Frege's senses, whereas the real particulars that are intentionally signified are said to be analogous to Frege's referents. Now, for Frege, it isn't simply that word meaning consists of two freestanding elements. Rather, he contends that it is a word's sense that *determines* its referent. Each sense determines a unique referent. As such, identifying the referent of an expression is typically accomplished by grasping the expression's sense. Much the same idea appears to hold true in the Buddhist context as well. Words are capable of intentionally signifying real particulars by virtue of the relation that those particulars bear to the concepts that are directly signified by the words.[10]

By thus distinguishing the intentional signification of words from the words' direct signification, these Tibetan thinkers believe that they have successfully accounted for how language can apply to reality – i.e., how particulars can be effable – while still holding true to Dignāga's root assertion that verbalization can only occur in mental states that take universals (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) as their objects. In addition to particular objects in the external world, there are also mentally constructed concepts. It is these concepts that help link language to objectively existing particulars. Having established this, we can now examine a more specific role that concepts play in Tibetan Buddhist theories of language, in the development of a philosophical account of *identity*.

2. Identity and intensionality

To the extent that both Tibetan Buddhist thinkers and Gottlob Frege held the belief that a fully adequate theory of language requires an appeal to some sort of intensional element – either a concept (Tib: *don spyi*) or sense (Ger: *Sinn*) – it is not surprising that we can find similarities in these thinkers' views on identity. In fact, the stated goal of Frege's essay "On Sense and Reference" is precisely to explain just what we mean when we assert identity statements. His paper begins with the question of whether identity statements assert "a

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[10] See Siderits (1987) pp. 342–3 and Tillemans (1986) p. 215.

relation between objects, or between names or signs of objects."[11] Similarly, in the Tibetan Buddhist context much ink has been spilled in trying to explain the complex nature of the identity relation, and just like in Frege's case, Tibetans attempt to make sense of identity by appealing to something like a term's sense or intension. One notable contrast, however, involves the relata of the identity statements themselves. Frege's central concern is with proper names, whereas Buddhist thinkers are focused principally on identity statements constructed with general terms. The central question that I will be addressing in what follows is that of what conditions twelfth and thirteenth century Tibetan epistemologists, and Phywa pa Chos kyi seṅ ge in particular, held to be necessary and sufficient for the truth of identity statements involving two general terms.

Tibetan philosophers describe various types of identity relations – identical essence (*ṅo bo gcig*), identical substance (*rdzas gcig*), identical extension (*don gcig*), and so forth. Many of these forms of identity have been carefully discussed in articles by Tom Tillemans (1983 and 1986), and will not be addressed here. My concern in this section of the essay is with the relation of identity *simpliciter*, and focuses on the simple question: *when is an identity statement constructed with two general terms true*? Operating under the presumption that identity *simpliciter* (*gcig*) in the Tibetan Buddhist context is an identity between qualities or *dharma* (*chos gcig*), the question can be stated: *when do two general terms express the same quality*?

A natural reply to this question by Indian Grammarians would be to claim that such identity statements are true if and only if the two general terms pick out the same *universal*. This option is not open to Buddhist philosophers, however, as they generally reject the existence of universals. Given this rejection, one might be tempted to conclude that what a general term expresses is the class of particular objects formed through a process of exclusion – excluding all those objects to which the general term does not apply. This is, after all, the heart of Dignāga's *apoha* project. Were this interpretation correct, it would follow that statements of identity are true whenever the

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[11] Frege (1980), p. 56.

two general terms are coextensive. Indian and Tibetan Buddhist epistemologists overwhelmingly maintain, however, that two *different* qualities can be coextensive, thus showing that a term's extension alone is insufficient for determining a quality's identity conditions. That two different qualities can be coextensive is seen from the fact that there are non-trivial inferences involving coextensive qualities. When, for example, a person infers that sound is impermanent because it is a product, the two qualities, impermanence and being produced, are extensionally equivalent. Yet, the fact that this inference is non-trivial implies that these two terms possess distinct meanings. Needless to say, it is apparent that the meaning of a general term must indeed consist of more than the extension of that term.

It is at this point where the developments made by the twelfth century Tibetan epistemologist Phywa pa Chos kyi seṅ ge help to provide a novel explanation of what this element of meaning is over and above the term's extension. As shown above, in addition to the particular objects falling within the exclusion classes of general terms, twelfth century Tibetan thinkers claim that for each term there is also a corresponding, mentally constructed *concept* (*don spyi*), and it is these concepts that provide us with something like intensional elements of meaning. Identity and difference of these intensional elements are captured with the relations of 'identical connotation' (*ldog pa gcig*) and 'different connotation' (*ldog pa tha dad*).[12] Two qualities satisfy the 'identical connotation' relation just in case the concepts that arise in one's mind when conceiving of the two qualities are identical.[13] Expressed linguistically, this is to say that the concept

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[12] The translation of "*ldog pa*" as "connotation" is, quite obviously, far from literal. Nevertheless, it is meant as a good approximation of the role played by the term in this particular philosophical context. Translating "*ldog pa*" as "distinguisher" or "isolate," as some have done, does produce a somewhat more literal translation, but does so by using words in English that have no standard philosophical meanings.

[13] This equivalence is never directly stated by Phywa pa himself. There are several places where he expresses half of this equivalence, by stating that *ldog pa tha dad* entails *don spyi so sor snaṅ pa*. For example, in *Tshad ma yid kyi mun sel* 6b3: *ldog pa tha dad pas don spyi so sor snaṅ par 'gyur te.* (This line appears within a hypothetical opponent's argument, but Phywa pa never questions the veracity of the claim.) In *dBu ma śar gsum*

that dawns in a person's mind when she cognitively entertains (and grasps the meaning of) the one term is the same as the concept that dawns when she grasps the other term.[14] When this condition is not met, the two qualities stand in the 'different connotation' relation.

The further question that needs to be addressed is how appeals to concepts and the 'identical connotation' relation can help solve the problem of when two general terms pick out the same quality. A natural thought at this point is that satisfaction of the 'identical connotation' relation might be sufficient for identity *simpliciter*. This would mean that if two terms give rise to the very same concept – that is, if they are intensionally/connotatively identical – then the two terms express the same quality. My own belief is that this is, in fact, the most philosophically tenable position to hold. While this view fits well with the commonly held belief that connotation determines denotation, it is not entirely obvious whether Tibetan philosophers actually accept this view, or whether they have an even more stringent requirement for identity *simpliciter*.

3. Ultra-intensionality

Tom Tillemans (1986) claims that Tibetan philosophers – and here, he is referring principally to dGe lugs thinkers – uphold a thesis of *ultra-intensionality* for terms – each term has a different intension from every other distinct term. Tillemans derives this thesis by analyzing the conditions under which Tibetans assert the identity

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gyi stoṅ thun 2a1: *rdzas gcig ñid la ltos sa log sa tha dad las log pa la ltos pas don spyi so sor śar te sgro 'dogs tha dad bsal nas ṅes par bya ba bum pa'i byas pa daṅ mi rtag pa ltar ṅo bo gcig la ldog pas byas pa'i tha dad pa'am | śiṅ daṅ ljon pa ltar chos gcig ñid la rnam graṅs pa'i sgras tha dad lta bur brjod pa yin.* In this longer quote, it is not only clear that *ldog pa tha dad* entails *don spyi so sor snaṅ ba* – which means, when stated in the contrapositive, that sameness of concepts (*don spyi gcig*) entails sameness of connotation (*ldog pa gcig*), it is also reasonable to think that sameness of connotation entails sameness of concepts.

[14] In some sense, these two phrasings of the 'same connotation' relation are not identical. The difference here arises in connection with the fact that there are *terms* – those like "son of a barren woman" and "horn of a rabbit" – that give rise to concepts but do *not* express qualities (*dharma*) at all.

relation. Tillemans' claim is essentially that, for any two qualities α and β,

(a) α is identical to β ($\alpha\,\beta\,daṅ\,gcig\,yin$)

if and only if

(b)   "α" is identical to "β."

Simply put, two terms express the same quality if and only if the two terms are themselves identical. Thus, on this account it is true that

(e_1)   Cordate is identical to cordate

but false that

(e_2)   Cordate is identical to renate.

Despite the fact (assuming, rather obnoxiously, that it is a fact) that the general terms "cordate" (creature with a heart) and "renate" (creature with a kidney) have the same extensions, the fact that these two terms are not identical gives us grounds for concluding that "Cordate is identical to renate" is false.

Expounding on this a bit more, it is important to note that there are two distinct readings possible for sentence form (b). On the first reading, we can take the expressions in quotes – "α" and "β" – to be instances of what Frege calls *indirect reference*, where the indirect referent of a term is taken to be the ordinary *sense* of that term. Replacing Frege's term "sense" with Carnap's term "intension," on this first reading of (b) we get,

(b_1)   the intension of α is identical to the intension of β

On the second reading of (b), what this condition requires is that the general terms "α" and "β" be two tokens of the very same sign. That is, (b) is claimed not to be stating an identity of the intensions of α and β, rather, it is stating the identity of the signs "α" and "β" themselves. On this reading we get,

(b_2)   The sign "α" is identical to the sign "β."

There is no question that these two readings – (b_1) and (b_2) – are not logically equivalent. Condition (b_2) entails (b_1) but not vice versa, since two *distinct* terms can possess the same intension, as for example with the words "horse" and "steed." We may suppose along

with Frege that the words "horse" and "steed" have not only the same extension but also the same intension. There may be aesthetic reasons for preferring the word "steed" over "horse" in certain contexts, but in point of *meaning* the two terms are identical. Nevertheless, the two signs "horse" and "steed" are obviously distinct.

Since the two conditions, (b_1) and (b_2), are logically distinct, the question of which of the two conditions is actually the right one for Tibetans to adopt for identity *simpliciter*, (a), is a pressing concern. Should we hold, as I suggested earlier, that connotative sameness is sufficient for sameness simpliciter, or should we say that two terms pick out the same quality only if the two terms are themselves identical?

Tillemans' contention is essentially that Tibetan philosophers do not distinguish these two different interpretations of condition (b). He believes that Tibetan thinkers uphold the view that (b_1) is, in fact, equivalent to (b_2), for he takes them to adopt the view that two *distinct* terms cannot possess the *same* intension. This is precisely the thesis of ultra-intensionality: each term possesses a different intension from every other term. As Tillemans puts it,

> For a Fregean "bachelor" and "unmarried man" would express the same sense (intension). But for a Buddhist, they would have different sense because the names are different. Hence, I will speak of the Buddhist entities as being "ultra-intensional."[15]

Indeed, there is a large quantity of textual support corroborating Tillemans' belief that Tibetan philosophers of the dGe lugs sect view language as ultra-intensional. Tillemans gives an extensive quote from the *Collected Topics* textbook of the nineteenth century writer Phur lcog pa,[16] in which the author not only sets condition (b_2) as a

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[15] Tillemans (1986), p. 213.

[16] In the Tibetan exile community this author – Yoṅs 'dzin phur lcog pa blo bzaṅ tshul khrims byams pa rgya mtsho – is commonly called "Phur bu lcog." This rendering of his name is derided as a linguistic corruption by scholars in Tibet itself where he is usually called "Phur lcog pa" or, sometimes, "Phur bu lcog pa." In any case, this epithet is given to the author due to his having supposedly lived, from ages 5 to 10, in the Phur bu lcog mountain range just north of Se ra Monastery.

necessary condition for identity – viz., "because if [two items] are identical, then they must be identical in both name and referent"[17] – but also contrasts this with cases in which two qualities (*dharma, chos*) are taken to be distinct precisely because a person can validly ascertain the one without ascertaining the other. But this ability to ascertain one quality without ascertaining a second quality that is coextensive with it is generally rooted in those two qualities having distinct concepts/connotations associated with them. In thus drawing the contrast between two elements ① being identical in both name and referent and ② having different connotations at least indirectly suggests that Phur lcog pa took conditions (b_1) and (b_2) to be equivalent.

This view was certainly not universally accepted by twelfth and thirteenth century Tibetan philosophers, however. There are several cases of twelfth century Tibetan philosophers unmistakably distinguishing condition (b_1) from (b_2). In two different texts[18] Phywa pa Chos kyi Seṅ ge briefly describes a number of different forms of identity and difference. In each case, he claims that it is possible to have two distinct terms that pick out the very same quality/*dharma* (*chos gcig ñid la rnam graṅs pa'i sgras tha dad*). Moreover, it is apparent from the context in which these claims are made that he takes these two terms to have exactly the same intensions.[19] That is, the very same concept dawns in one's mind when thinking about each of the two terms. Phywa pa's example of two distinct words having the same intension are "*śiṅ*" and "*ljon pa*" – both of which carry the same meaning as the English word "tree." One of Phywa pa's successors, the author of *The Summary of the Quintessence of Epistemology* (*Tshad ma'i de kho na ñid bsdus pa*), makes a similar claim.[20] He states that there are cases in which two distinct terms

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[17] Yongs 'dzin (2000), p. 31.

[18] For the quote from the *dBu ma śar gsum gyi stoṅ thun* see footnote 13. *Tshad ma yid kyi mun sel* 11b8: *śiṅ daṅ ljon pa ltar ldog pa cig ñid la rnam graṅs kyi sgras brjod pa*.

[19] These cases are contrasted with cases in which the terms have distinct connotations (*ldog pa tha dad*) and distinct concepts arising.

[20] Klong chen rab 'byams, p. 51: *ldog pa daṅ dṅos po gñis ka tha dad med pa zan daṅ bśos lta bu*. This text is credited to the fourteenth century scholar Long chen pa. However,

have the same connotation (*ldog pa*) and refer to the same material thing(s) (*dṅos po*). As an example, he offers the terms "*zan*" and "*bśos*," both of which carry the meaning of the English word "food."

These illustrations of a theory of word meaning in which distinct linguistic signs possess the same connotation or intension go a long way toward helping us to understand some key issues in early Tibetan philosophy of language. First, we can see that, *pace* Tillemans, not all Tibetan philosophers accept the thesis of *ultra-intensionality*. It would have been a remarkable historical fact about Tibetan philosophical thought had they never recognized the possibility of two distinct terms possessing the same meaning. Nevertheless, Phywa pa's recognition of this possibility appears to have largely fallen on deaf ears with his Tibetan successors. While a close examination of the philosophical writings of other twelfth and thirteenth century Tibetan thinkers may yet yield many more examples of a rejection of ultra-intensional word meaning, Tillemans is quite right that in the more recent philosophical texts of the Tibetan epistemological tradition many of the most famous authors do adopt this thesis of ultra-intensionality.[21] Another moral we can draw from this discussion is the fact that, in Phywa pa's opinion, the actual requirement that must be met in order for two terms to pick out the same quality (*simpliciter*) is that the two terms be intensionally identical. The two terms need not themselves be identical. In this

as van der Kuijp (2003) has documented, this attribution is highly dubious. Many contextual clues suggest that this work was composed shortly after Phywa pa's famous *Tshad ma yid kyi mun sel*.

[21] One contemporary writer, however, is very explicit in his rejection of the ultra-intensionality thesis. In a book (derived from his MA thesis) written by a young Tibetan scholar named 'Bum skyabs a very provocative account of concepts (*don spyi*) is put forward. The author straightforwardly proclaims that multiple terms can give rise to the same concept. His example is of the five terms "*gtan tshigs*," "*rtags*," "*rgyu mtshan*," "*phyogs kyi chos*," and "*de sgrub kyi bsgrub pa'i chos*," all of which carry the meaning of the English terms "evidence" or "reason." Explicitly, he claims, ('Bum skyabs, p. 43): *don spyi gcig la miṅ du ma 'jug pa yod de / rtags rigs kyi skabs su gtan tshigs daṅ / rtags / rgyu mtshan / phyogs kyi chos / de sgrub kyi bsgrub pa'i chos rnams la don spyi gcig las med kyaṅ miṅ lṅa yod pa lta bu'o //.*

way, Phywa pa adopts the view that (b_1) is the correct requirement for identity *simpliciter*, not (b_2).

Finally, this discussion provides us with clear examples of early Tibetan philosophers making use of concepts in order to capture elements of word meaning extending beyond extensionality. Not only can two different terms express the same quality – by virtue of those two terms giving rise to the same concept – two different qualities can be distinguished from each other by way of these associated concepts. Thus, even when two terms are coextensive – such that any object instantiating the one term also instantiates the other term, and vice versa – the qualities they express can be distinguished in a person's mind through the different concepts to which they give rise.

4. Sa skya Paṇḍita on concepts and reference

Stepping back from the specific case of identity and returning to the central theme, what all of this serves to show is that by employing the notion of a concept (*don spyi*) bKa' gdams epistemologists were able to explicate certain elements of cognition and language use in a clear and interesting manner. In what follows I will raise one difficulty with this bKa' gdams Tibetan account as it plays out in the writing of the thirteenth century polymath Sa paṇ. The claim by bKa' gdams Tibetans that word meaning consists of both direct signification and intentional signification makes it possible to explain how Buddhist philosophers can connect language to external reality without falling into the Indian Grammarians' trap of granting that words directly express particulars or universals. Sa paṇ cannot accept the details of the bKa' gdams account, however, for he rejects the existence of concepts (*don spyi*).[22] Insofar as this is the case, Sa paṇ cannot accept that concepts are the entities directly signified by language. In fact, Sa paṇ explicitly denies that there is anything at all that words directly signify. He states, "Ultimately, what is called 'signified' (*brjod bya*) is not established at all."[23] This would not be a

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[22] For more on this, see my article, Stoltz (2006).

[23] Sa skya paṇḍita, p. 121: *don dam par na brjod bya źes bya ba grub pa ci'aṅ med de /.*

big deal, except that, as was pointed out above, words are capable of successfully applying to real things only indirectly. On the bKa' gdams account, language directly signifies concepts, and these concepts in turn make it possible for language to apply indirectly to real particulars. Once one eliminates concepts from this theory of language, as Sa paṇ desires to do, it is difficult to see how words could still be capable of intentionally signifying real things.

What we have here is an apparent conflict between Sa paṇ's preferred accounts in the philosophy of mind and philosophy of language. When presenting his theory of mind and mental content at the beginning of his *Tshad ma rigs gter* (*Epistemology: Treasure of Reasoning*), Sa paṇ goes through pains to argue that concepts (*don spyi*) do not exist. Yet, when he presents his own positive theory of language later in the same text, Sa paṇ wishes to make use of the bKa' gdams distinction between direct signification and intentional signification, even though the former requires an appeal to a category of entities whose existence he rejects. The challenge that Sa paṇ faces is that of explaining how language is capable of intentionally signifying particular objects given that concepts do not exist – that is, given that there is nothing at all that language directly signifies.

Sa paṇ's preferred method for dealing with this challenge is to look back to the Indian Buddhist tradition. Whereas Phywa pa Chos kyi seṅ ge's mode of operation is to account for the meaningfulness of language by inventing a new role for concepts (*don spyi*), Sa paṇ rejects this bKa' gdams pa creativity and instead seeks to provide an explanation of word meaning that is modeled after that given by the Indian Buddhist masters. That said, the actual explanation given by Sa paṇ blends elements of the traditional Indian view together with elements of the bKa' gdams pa account. On the one hand, he repeatedly acknowledges that there are, in fact, no objects directly signified by language (since the entities directly signified by language would be concepts, whose existence he rejects). Yet, at the same time, when he attempts to explain how it is that language can be di-

rected toward real things and how words can be used efficaciously, he repeatedly appeals to concepts. Sa paṇ states,[24]

> Insofar as conceptual thought is essentially mistaken,
> An image, which is the object [indicated by] words (*sgra yi don*), dawns.
> Through that one longs for an external object,
> And that is posited as what the words signify.

The view presented here is quite similar to his predecessors'. Two different sorts of entities are at work. There is both a mentally constructed image (or 'reflection') dawning in one's mind and a real external object. As becomes clearer in subsequent passages, however, the image dawning in one's mind is none other than a concept (*don spyi*).[25] For Sa paṇ, this concept is required in order for language to be applicable to reality, for he contends that it is only by virtue of conceptual thought mistakenly conflating concepts with real objects that language can be directed toward real particulars. This exposes even more clearly the conundrum that Sa paṇ faces. He wants to hold that concepts do not exist, and yet at the same time he wants to hold that language is capable of applying to reality only because of a mistaken conflation of concepts with external objects. But how can concepts be conflated with real particulars if concepts don't even exist? It seems that Sa paṇ can't have it both ways. I will conclude by offering one possible explanation for how Sa paṇ's theory of language can be rendered sensible, and how this explanation shows quite clearly that Sa paṇ rejects the notion that external reality is ineffable.

The explanation that I think Sa paṇ would offer in reply to the above problem is one involving a nuanced understanding of the ontological status of concepts. I've mentioned above that Sa paṇ spends the first several pages of his *Tshad ma rigs gter* arguing against the existence of concepts. This is true, but it also glosses over important details about the very notion of existence. For Sa paṇ, to

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[24] Ibid, p. 121–2: *rtog pa ṅo bos 'khrul pa la // sgra yi don gyi gzugs brñan śar // de la phyi rol don du źen // de ni sgra yi brjod byar btags //.*

[25] Ibid, p. 126: *'jig rten pa rnams don spyi la raṅ mtshan du 'khrul nas raṅ mtshan ñid blaṅ ba daṅ dor ba la 'jug pas na tha sñad rgyun ga la chad /*

say that something is existent (*yod pa*) is equivalent to saying that it is an object of epistemic evaluation (*gźal bya*). Thus, what he is specifically denying is that concepts could be objects of epistemic judgment. This does not preclude the possibility that concepts "exist" in a more minimal way. Concepts might "exist" as mere fleeting images in one's mind; images incapable of being evaluated in judgment. By granting such a minimal status to concepts it would then be possible for these entities to be mistaken for real objects in the external world, thus making Sa paṇ's theory of language comprehensible. Ultimately, what this amounts to is an account of the efficacy of language that on the one hand calls upon concepts in order to explain how the mind works so as to provide semantic content to language, but on the other hand does not postulate the genuine existence of concepts.

Why is it, though, that Sa paṇ argues against the existence of concepts? It is in answering this question that our investigation comes full circle. Sa paṇ offers two arguments against the existence of concepts, with his second argument much more detailed and sophisticated than the first. This second argument focuses in on the absurd consequences that he believes would follow were one to accept the existence of concepts. At the heart of his argument is the contention that inasmuch as concepts are mind dependent entities, they are, therefore, private objects, incapable of being communicated to others. Sa paṇ states, "If they are dependent solely on an individual's mind, although one could, through introspection, express [concepts] to another person, they would not understand."[26] Language could not be used to communicate the existence of these private concepts to others. In short, Sa paṇ's argument is essentially that concepts do not exist because if they did they'd be ineffable. What this means is that, on Sa paṇ's account, far from it being the case that language is incapable of referring to real particulars, just the opposite is the case. Words *can* be used to reference real things, but *cannot* be used to reference mentally constructed items such as concepts.

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[26] Ibid, p. 42: *raṅ raṅ gi blo kho na daṅ 'brel na raṅ rig pa bźin du gźan la bstan kyaṅ go bar mi 'gyur ro //*

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