In considering the relation between the meaning of a sentence and the meanings of the words that make up that sentence, Indian philosophers were guided by two distinct and seemingly conflicting intuitions. The first intuition is that only in the context of a sentence does a word have a meaning; a word which is uttered alone is meaningless, unless some context is supplied which places it in an implicit sentence. The second intuition is that the meaning of a sentence is wholly a function of the meanings of the words that make up that sentence. These two intuitions became the bases for two competing doctrines on the question of sentence meaning: the doctrine that the sentence is the primary unit of linguistic meaning, word meaning being a mere construct; and the doctrine that the individual word is the primary unit of meaning.

The school of Grammarians advocated the first doctrine, that sentence meaning is primary and word meaning is nothing more than the product of syntactic and semantical analysis. The meaning of a sentence is an impartite whole, and is grasped as such; it is not just the totality or aggregate of the meanings of the words that make up that sentence. Indeed not only is the meaning of a sentence not the sum of the meanings of its parts; its parts have themselves no meaning apart from the sentence in which they occur. This is not to say that the individual word plays no part in the apprehension of sentence meaning. Words may be thought of as playing a role in the determination of sentence meaning analogous to the role which articulate phonemes are usually thought to play in the apprehension of word meaning. Just as we would say that there is no grasping of the meaning of a word without the apprehension of the phonemes, themselves meaningless, which manifest a token of that word, so the Grammarian claims that the individual words, themselves meaningless, manifest the sentence, which is grasped as bearing a single partless meaning. This would seem to be the point of the analogy of the painting: The painting, a complex object made up of a number of distinct parts, causes a cognition which is itself partless; by the same token, a string of articulate words may bring about apprehension of a sentence.
meaning which is itself partless. It is only subsequent analysis of the phenomenon of sentence meaning which leads to the postulation of words as independent meaning-bearers, just as it is only subsequent analysis of our cognition of the painting which might lead us to suppose that it is a complex made up of a number of discrete cognitions of the different color-patches which make up the painting.

The Naiyāyikas and the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsakas hold the second position, that the word is the primary unit of linguistic meaning. Their view on the question of sentence meaning is known as abhīhitānvavāda, that is, the ‘words plus syntax’ theory. As this name suggests, it is their position that the meaning of a sentence is a complex of word meanings arranged in accordance with the syntactical relations which obtain among the words. To understand a sentence is to grasp the objects (substances, qualities, actions, universals) denoted by the individual words, and to grasp the relations among those objects which are indicated by the syntax of the sentence. They argue that since one cannot understand a sentence unless one understands the meanings of the words that compose that sentence, individual words must be the fundamental units of linguistic meaning; sentence meaning is constructed out of these basic building blocks, much as a painting might be constructed out of patches of colored paper. Of particular significance to our investigation is one argument which upholders of the ‘words-plus-syntax’ view use against the Grammarians’ theory of sentence meaning: They claim that since we have the capacity to understand an indefinitely large number of sentences, the meaning of a sentence must be constructed out of independent word meanings, since otherwise our ability to understand novel sentences would be unintelligible.

The worlds-plus-syntax theory is perhaps most clearly seen when it is contrasted with yet a third position on sentence meaning, the position formulated by the Prabhākara Mīmāṃsaka. He holds the view known as anvitābhidhānavāda, the ‘related designation’ theory. Prabhākara does not accept the Grammarians' view that sentences and sentence meanings are impartite wholes. He does, however, attach importance to the intuition that underlies this view, that individual words have no meaning in isolation. He points out that when we first learn our language, it is not utterances of individual words but utterances of complete sentences to which we are exposed. What we learn to do, he claims, is correlate the linguistic activity of our elders — their use of sentences — with other sorts of behavior, both