

**Subject name: language and society**  
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In this course, we will talk about the relationship between language and society. We will see how language works in society and how society governs the use of language. There is a very strict and unique relationship between these two elements. Language is useful in society, it is meaningful in the society however it is one of the most sophisticated products of human mind. We will explore the relationship between language and society throughout this course.

Today we are going to be looking at the components that will be useful for us to understand in the beginning before we get into the details of elements that we will be discussing in this course. Two things that are important for us to understand is language and society. Such a discussion falls in the larger discipline called linguistics. So we will try to understand three terms language, linguistics and society. Let us start with first linguistics.

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## INTRODUCTION

- What is language, linguistics, and society?
- How do we study language systematically/in an organized fashion?
  - Sounds, Words, Sentences, Discourse
- What is language?
- How do we learn language?



Linguistics is a larger discipline that deals with the study of language. In short, we can say everything that we study about language falls in the domain of linguistics. In this case, we are going to be looking at language and society. Such a connection, such a relationship falls within the larger domain of linguistics and this is specifically called sociolinguistics. A look at language from its role in society is called sociolinguistics. Whereas when we look at society from the perspective of language such a thing

is called sociology of language.

We will be looking at sociology of language as well. We will not be making the narrow distinction between the two which is micro and macro distinction, but we will be looking at both together. So that is how we define linguistics, that is how we relate language and society and sociolinguistics. The next term is language as we know and has been established in various discussions and huge range of research that language is a product of human mind. Language is special purpose cognition.

Language is very different from all other activities that we do. It constructs humans. It is constitutive of humans and also language not only defines humans but language in the particular context of what we are going to be discussing becomes or happens to be medium of construction and dissemination of any kind of knowledge. The role of language in human life in society is huge. It is an accepted phenomena So much so that we understand and acknowledge that we cannot conceptualize humans, we cannot conceptualize society. Or for that matter, anything else without language such is the significance of language.

When it is called the medium of construction of knowledge and dissemination of knowledge, it is imperative for us or for anyone to understand what language is about, how language works and only then we can understand what we do with the language. So linguistics also deals with systematic study of language. It is the studied at the level of sounds, words, sentences and discourse. These are four fundamentals of the study of language. These are four blocks of knowledge.

We study sounds, we study words, then we study sentences and finally when we get to discourse that is the place where we can see the relationship between language and society. So and we have discussed the significance of the language. We have looked at components of language in terms of sounds, words, sentences and discourse. It is also important for us to very briefly touch upon how is it that we learn language? And then we will understand language in little bit more details before getting into the discussion its relationship with the society.

So keeping in mind what language is and what language does in the real world will follow to some extent, from how we learn language. It is very significant to understand the point about language learning, particularly when language learning is natural, automatic for humans. We will try to understand this very briefly. It is a much larger discipline. It has been discussed in details. But let us see

how we discuss it here.

There are fundamental ideas and fundamental things that we need to put in front and such things are, there is a hypothesis that all human children are born, equipped with the capacity to learn language. This has led people to say language is a biological capacity. And this happens only in the case of human children. So such a capacity is also called Language Acquisition Device. This is a hypothetical entity which is assumed to be the language capacity for every human child. This device this hypothetical device has been argued to have in simple terms blueprints of all the language. That is it has fundamentals of language atleast these two parts together. Together these two parts are called Universal Grammar.

So the blueprints or the fundamentals of language are what we know as universal grammar. Universal grammar will have two parts: Principles and Parameters. Principles are those elements which are common to all languages. That is language do not vary along the lines of these principles. In fact languages are similar to one another along the lines of these principles. Whereas, languages vary from one another along the lines of parameters. To take an example, all the languages will have sentences. This is a principle. All the sentences must have verbs. This is also a principle. All the sentences must have a subject. This is also a part of principle. And this will not vary language to language. This is going to remain constant.

However, what varies from language to language and that is known as parameters are the following: Some languages will have verbs in the middle of the sentence. These languages are called verb medial languages namely English. When we say a sentence, “John eats the pizza.” The word, “eat” precedes the object and therefore it ends up being in the middle of the sentence and this therefore language is called verb medial language.

On the other hand, a language like Hindi, we can say, the same sentence as, “John pizza khatha hai” ,the verb “khatha hai” is the final constituent in the sentence and such a language is called Verb Final language. So, according to the parameters of occurrences of verbs in sentence, there are three types of languages. And they are verb final languages like Hindi and many other languages, in fact most of the languages are spoken in South Asian sub-continent.

However, verb final language are not restricted to South Asian sub-continent alone. English, German

and many other European languages could be are verb medial languages. However, Arabic is verb initial language. So these are the three positions verbs could occur in natural languages. And that could be considered parameter. There are hundreds of parameters along which languages vary. To give you one more example of a parameter is the following, in some languages what we call preposition precedes nouns.

Whereas in some languages, they follow the noun. For example, when we say “On the table” the element “On” which is considered, which is a preposition in the language English precedes the noun “Table” whereas “Table par” in a language like Hindi, preposition, in this case, is post positioned “par” follows the noun “Table”. So along the lines of these things, languages vary from one another. These are parts of Universal Grammar and they are all in built in Language Acquisition Device. And that has been argued and it has been argued that human children are born with this capacity. What happens is, human children interact with their immediate society. That is the society where they are born. The society for them constitute the people who interact with them. The language that people who interact with young children provides input and on the basis of that limited, fuzzy, unclear input children get triggered and Language Acquisition Device gets triggered and the capacity which helps them develop the capacity to generate infinite number of grammatical and fully acceptable sentences. At the age of four, human children becomes linguistically adult.

So the role of input that they receive from their immediate surrounding serves a critical role in learning of language. When what they receive from their immediate surroundings triggers, what exists in human mind that is Language Acquisition Device together develops the capacity to speak the capacity to generate sentences. And then there are further details of this. So in short the society plays an important role in learning of languages as well.

It is highly unlikely that the child born in Chennai or New Delhi will be speaking a language like Spanish or French. However, what is normal is a child speaking, a child born in Chennai will be naturally speaking Tamil and child born in Delhi will be speaking the language of the surroundings where she is born. This is how, in short, we understand how we learnt language. To define a language is one of the most complex thing, because the nature of language.

# What is language?

- Language is an impressive and fascinating human capacity. Human languages are strikingly powerful and complex systems.

(MARK CRIMMINS, Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)

- Logical Problem of Language Acquisition:  
'How do we know so much given so little?'  
(Plato's problem)



There are two parts in understanding language. One is the nature of language and the other the structure of language. We have just discussed the principles and parameters on the basis of structure of language. The Nature of language is equally important for us to understand. We will be looking at the nature of language in great detail in its relationship with the society shortly.

While we say, the nature of language is such that there are two terms which can help us define the nature of language two terms are continuum and fluidity. In fact, we will see in great details that language does not seem to be accountable entity. In fact, the nature of language is fluid and that fluidity constitutes a continuum which helps us understand internal variations within the language. Therefore when we say, a language Hindi and just with this much, Hindi, it is not unfair to assume that everyone speaks the Hindi the same way. However, that is not true. In fact, Hindi is spoken in lots of different ways, hundreds of different ways.

Similarly all other languages are spoken in many ways. These are that is because of internal variation. That is because the nature of language is fluid and each of these varieties constitutes becomes a point on continuum that helps us understand the nature of language .In short the language has been defined in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, as one of the impressive and fascinating human capacity. It has also been termed as strikingly powerful and complex system. We just discussed the phenomena of language learning.

The phenomena of language learning helps us understand what language is about. The complex system

it is called a complex system because it is highly structured and rule governed. It is powerful and complex both at the same time because we learn to speak language without knowing, without putting constant efforts. Therefore it is very simple to conclude that learning language is totally effortless. And here we mean learning language at a very early stage. We are talking about learning to speak first language.

Therefore the terms like human capacity and human languages being powerful and complex, these are important things to understand and they follow from our understanding of how we learn language.

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## What is Linguistics?

- We study all aspects of language in linguistics in a systematic fashion.
- Core areas of Linguistics (Theoretical Linguistics)
  - Phonetics/Phonology
  - Morphology
  - Syntax
  - Semantics
  - Sociolinguistics



We have talked about linguistics. We have talked about sounds, words, sentences, and discourse. The fundamental ideas of sounds are studied in phonetics/phonology, words are studied in morphology. sentences are studied in syntax, meaning is studied in semantics. These are some of the fundamentals of understanding language. These sub- disciplines of linguistics help us understand different details of language, different components of language. These are interfaces within them as well. But we leave them aside. Then we get to discourse and that becomes a part of sociolinguistics where society comes into play.

Now, why we want to understand what linguistics is about, in the context of our understanding of how we learn languages what language is about is following and simple. We want to emphasise that as much

language is a phenomena of human mind, language is a social phenomena as well. The role of society in us, learning language is a vital primary input that comes from society. And the society is the element that decides what we speak. The underlying system gets elaborated gets clarified when we talk about Universal Grammar and principles and parameters.

However the rules of use of language would come from society. And they happen if not at a time almost simultaneously one after the other soon after the rules of the language gets clarified in human mind. Therefore it is important to understand language, what we call language in society is actually a language of discourse language of learning. That people speak human mind is concerned with the units of language, parts of language. But society is with all of them together at the level of discourse. So for the study of sentences, any individual sentence works; John eats the pizza, Delhi is a big city, Taj Mahal is beautiful and Chennai is the capital of Tamil Nadu.

All these constitute units and they are sentences. However when we try to put them together they do not generate discourse. They are random sentences. Our constitutes are discourse around something is what constitutes the use of language in society and that is what we need to understand in this course. With these fundamental ideas of how we learn language, what the components of sentences and language are and how we study them, we will need to understand how the two things work in the society.

Tomorrow we will be looking at relationship between language and society in more details. With terms like language and dialects and how they work in society on continuum with fluidity. Thank you.