

Subject name: Language and Society
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Let us begin understanding the relationship between language and society. To do so, we would want to understand first about language situation in India. And this will also constitute as generic introduction about languages in this country. Language and an understanding about it has to be prerequisite for doing anything. Let us hear this out again - for doing anything a prerequisite must be understanding something about language. Now, here is the reason why anyone would say so. We have seen and in general, this is one of the established facts that language is not only medium of the construction of knowledge and dissemination of knowledge, it constitutes human.

Anything that we do or anything that we think about mediates through language. Given the significance of language, to such an extent, it is only imperative for anyone to understand something about language. And in particular while understanding the relationship between language and society, to add one more point to our understanding of languages, language happens to be one of the most significant and striking markers of our identity. In a way, lot of times it is stronger a marker of identity than religion etc. Such is the significance of language. In one of the seminal works around thirty years ago a famous anthropologist - anthropological linguist, Shirley Heath has mentioned, in fact has predicted that the knowledge of language, knowledge about language which is understanding about language, will become part of the general knowledge that we have about many thing else. It will become elementary knowledge about physics and chemistry or biology.

Such is the significance of language that has been predicted so long ago. That was also in the context of education and we will see the role of language in education little later, when we establish different domains for the relationship between language and society. For the time being let us see how it works in India and then we will start talking about some of the generic things about language.

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Innateness and Language

- “Man has instinctive tendency to speak as we see in the babbles of our children while no child has an instinctive tendency to bake, brew, and write.”

- Charles Darwin

- Birds fly, fish swim, and humans speak.



Another important point for us to understand which has been established during the times of Charles Darwin noted something very significant. It is like saying language to humans is like flying comes to birds and swimming comes to fish. Along the same line humans speak. It simply implies that the fact that humans speak is very natural. Humans' speech is natural development of human language is natural development among humans and to give these two examples again it comes, that is, language comes to human as naturally as swimming comes to fish and flying comes to birds, jumping comes to monkeys and we can count many more examples.

So establishing the connection between language and innateness rather establishing innate ability, innate feature of language, Charles Darwin says, “man has intrinsic tendency to speak as we see in the babbles our children while no child has intrinsic tendency to bake, brew and write.” This definition from Charles Darwin's simply establishes differences between different types of learning and different types of activities human children perform. Anything such as baking, writing, singing, dancing, riding would come with an effort.

And what separates speaking - the capacity to speak - is the innateness nature of language. That is, speaking comes naturally. It is innate to humans. Along these lines we have also established two parts

of language, one is the innateness, one is how it is part of human mind - how it is product of human mind and what happens to language in human mind; how a system or the capacity for generating language develops in human mind - that is one part of study of language. The other part is about what we do with that capacity - how we put that capacity to use, and the rules that govern such a capacity, such a use. The rules that govern the use of language, how the set of those rules come to us is also part of innateness or could be argued to be part of innateness that we will elaborate on little later.

So we will be focusing on the part of language use and what helps us study the connection between the two. In order to do that, some of the things that we must keep in mind are few points. Few simpler terms like society, social context, function of language, language and varieties, continuum, and fluidity. The two terms continuum and fluidity could be used interchangeably, however, with a slight difference in the perspective. We will elaborate on these things shortly. Let us look at society.

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Some important terms to keep in mind:

- Society
- Social Context
- Function of language
- Language and varieties
- Continuum and fluidity



It is one of the complex things to define once again. However, for our purpose, we will define it in a very simple term. We define society as follows: anywhere at any point two people talk, that constitutes society for the study of language. That can be a very extreme micro view on the definition of society. Lot of things could be added, but I am trying to simplify the definition of society for the purpose of the study of language in a simpler terms. That is “two people together and two people talking to each other constitutes society”. Whatever roles operate while two people are talking to one another, how what one person says the other person understands, and how the speaker knows what she should or should not speak for about the other person or anybody else at that moment in time. All these things are part of the study of language and society. We will be looking at those things.

The immediate context or what is being talked about is called social context. And what we mean by the term function of language is how, why, when we should say something or we should not say. And understanding about these things and what governs these things is part of the function of language.

Language as we have been trying to define is definitely a cognitive ability, of course, a special purpose ability. However, when we look at language, we look at it as an absolute thing. We have examples like Hindi, English, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam - these are examples that anyone will give when we ask examples of language or languages. However, it becomes much easier to understand when we talk about varieties and also a relationship between the two. And an understanding of language with an idea or understanding of varieties within the language will help us understand how it constitutes human in a better way.

So take a look at the example, for a simplistic understanding of, what we mean by varieties. If we take the example of Hindi, the term Hindi means one language. However, language Hindi is not spoken the same way wherever it is spoken. To give an idea of the spread of Hindi, it is spoken all the way from Kabul to Lahore, to Punjab, Delhi, Lucknow, Varanasi, Kolkata, Agartala and probably in some context, making a semicircular boundary in North Eastern States and Rangoon. This is not a geographical description. This is not any assertion either. And the list of names that we have just mentioned is not to exclude other places where the language is spoken.

The language Hindi is spoken probably all over the world in one form or the other in the sense that wherever the speakers of Hindi live. But the names that I have suggested is easy to understand that on a straight or semicircular line, the language Hindi is spoken in many places. Now, why is it important for us to understand the significance of the places that we have mentioned?

Let us cut down the list of the places and start from Punjab to Agartala. The way Hindi is spoken in Punjab is very different from how it is spoken in Haryana, yet very different from how it is spoken in and around Delhi and Western Uttar Pradesh. Keep moving east-ward we will see differences in how people speak the same language differently. So much so that to some extent at some point it could become very easy to put our fingers on the differences. Now all these points where we can figure out the differences and a group of people share such a speech behavior is called variety.

Therefore, what we can say is, a language constitutes many varieties within. It will be difficult to count

how many of those varieties. We will leave this discussion for the time being. However simple point for us to understand that a language contains many varieties within and that helps us understand what we mean by variety. This applies to all languages of the world. However big the spread of that language may be and however small the community of the speakers of that language could be. The varieties within, appears to be universal pattern of language. Therefore, we can also say, language is a superstructure term and what people speak is definitely varieties.

The mapping of these varieties and trying to understand the differences of these two or many varieties is possible only on a continuum. And the way we have looked at Hindi from Punjab to Agartala and every single place - Delhi, Lucknow, Allahabad, Patna, Kolkata - in between could constitute a continuum. And at this continuum, when two varieties are spoken next to one another, the differences are minimum, marginal. And the farther we move towards to two end on this continuum the differences grow up, the differences become bigger, larger. And that is what I mean when I say continuum. Therefore the term continuum helps us understand variety, And therefore eventually it helps us understand language.

Finally the term fluidity is again related. If we understand what we have seen about language, varieties, and continuum, then it is easy for us to understand fluidity. The interconnections between all these varieties is really because of the fluidity. This helps us all understand the fact that the boundaries of these varieties or for that matter the boundaries of different languages are not a thick boundary, a thick line rather, it is highly porous. Languages merge within one another, varieties merge within one another and that happens because of the shared nature of different varieties and different languages.

Varieties naturally and definitely share features and so does a language. So do different languages. And this happens the porous nature of language is what constitutes language as a fluid material, and this is what is called fluidity of language. Language therefore is not really a countable entity. So in the context of the discussion that we have seen these terms may not have their literal meaning. However, they are there to help us understand the nature of language. And to mention it once again, the idea of fluidity within language, the idea of continuum, and the two together would define and help us understand varieties within the language in a better way. And therefore the language which is superlative, superstructure term is really giving us a picture of how it functions, how it stays in the society. And on the basis of this we can say, nobody speaks language rather, people speak varieties.

And at this point, it will be again simpler for us to understand that when people speak varieties, then the ability to negotiate between different varieties of language is the same as the ability to negotiate between different languages. Therefore the term multilingual or multilinguality makes this clearer and such a capacity is termed multilinguality. Such a situation is called multilinguality when speakers have ability to navigate and negotiate with different varieties of the language within, because it is same or similar to that of the ability to navigate and negotiate within, or between different languages. Therefore it can also be defined as multilinguality. Therefore language equals to multilinguality and we can say every human is a multilingual.

Given this micro definition of language, given the understanding of language what we have just elaborated on we can say two things: the language could be defined as multilinguality and nobody speaks just one language because they have the capacity to negotiate between different varieties of language. And technically different varieties of languages are also similar to different languages. Alright. So that is an understanding of language which we want to arrive at and that is an understanding of language what exists within the society. We will be talking about more of the interconnections and more roles, examples of things which help us understand these interconnections.

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Number of languages

- 1652 as per 1961 Census of India
- According to an estimate, one third of total languages spoken in the world is spoken in India alone.
- Five language families?



To get an idea about the linguistic situation of this country is again fascinating. In general terms, India is called “linguistic gold mine”. Here is why probably people would say something like that. According to estimate, almost one third of the total languages of the world is spoken in India alone. Nobody knows the total number of languages spoken around the world. And such a thing would follow from an understanding of language that we have just developed. When the whole nature of language is fluid and

can only be seen on a continuum because it constitutes different varieties within. And the fact that further we move on the continuum the differences between the varieties keep growing and probably at one point it merges into something else, some other language or it just develops as some other language. In that case counting number of languages is really very difficult task to do. Even if we want to that would be the reason and rightly so that will create difficulties and nobody would really know the exact total number of languages spoken around the world, in the country, or in a small geographical land. So given that, there is still, and there has been attempts to count languages - and again that is not impossible- we are only trying to establish that it is difficult and therefore it is not so hard to understand that nobody knows the total number of languages around the world. However the estimate is one third of them are probably spoken in India alone. That is because 1961 census of this country records 1,652 languages spoken in this country - people getting recorded these many languages as their mother tongues in one of the columns of the census, therefore, this number.

Now what is again interesting in this context is all these languages come from five different major language families. And these language families are: Indo-Aryan family of languages, Dravidian family of languages, Austroasiatic or Munda, Tibeto Burman, and Andamanese. We will go through each one of them in the reverse order. The group of Andamanese languages which is recorded in one of the recent attempts to study Andamanese is in the Andaman Nicobar Islands - these languages are spoken in Andaman Nicobar Islands of India. There are lot of them and again it is difficult to count them. However in such an attempt led by Professor Anvita Abbi from JNU, the team has recorded features of different varieties and different languages spoken in the island in the great details.

Tibeto-Burman languages are largely spoken in the Himalayam regions and North Eastern parts of the country. Again, there are several of them. These languages are largely spoken in the upper hills of Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and to some parts of Tripura as well. An estimate will establish roughly three hundred and fifty plus such languages. In one of my personal interactions from the speakers of Nagaland, they informed that there are approximately thirty five mutually unintelligible languages spoken by different tribes of Nagaland in Nagaland alone. And then they constitute different varieties within.

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Language Families

Indo-Aryan

Dravidian

Austro-Asiatic (Munda)

Tibeto-Burman

Andamanese



Look at the spread of these languages. Austroasiatic and Munda languages are spoken in the areas which will cover parts of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, West Bengal, Orissa and some parts of Madhya Pradesh. The names of some of these languages will come shortly. Then we have Dravidian languages. Dravidian languages are spoken in the southern part of this country particularly in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Goa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Apart from the major languages of these places there are several other languages which are called Dravidian which form part of this family of languages. And some of them are located in pockets in Munda-speaking regions and also in the Hindukush Mountains as well.

Rest of the languages spoken in this country in the places beginning from Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam are Indo-Aryan languages. Just to put it on record, another Indo-Aryan language, Sinhalese is spoken in Srilanka as well. So that is the spread of languages. Most of the languages that we come across are Indo-Aryan languages. They are largest in number spoken in this country. And then definitely and not in any insignificant ways, lot of the languages from other families are also spoken in this country. And probably that would be reason why it is called the “gold mine” for linguistics.

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Language in Constitution of India

- No national language of India
- In the VIIIth schedule of the Indian Constitution, there is a list of 23 languages recognized as official languages.
- Hindi is recognized as the first official language of the union.
- English is recognized as an associate official language.



To briefly understand the situation of the language in the Constitution of India, probably it is one of the unique constitutions which has a chapter, a very small one but a chapter known as the Eighth Schedule in the Constitution. The Constituent Assembly debate concluded it when it came in effect on 26th of January, the summary of it was the Union of India will have no national language. However the language Hindi in Devanagiri script and English are recognised as official languages of the country. And then in a unique development, it has a list of languages. The list is open, unnumbered. At the moment it is twenty three and this list keeps growing time to time when the government through due process decides to add more languages to this list.

In the last so many years of Post-independent India, lot of languages have been added to this list. However, what has not happened is, no language has been deleted from this list. That is a brief summary of linguistic situation, the situation of language in the Constitution of India. This understanding, these parts of what we have discussed will definitely give us an understanding about languages in the country. More on languages in India and their interrelationship with the societies they are spoken in and little bit more on the definition of society, next time. Thank you.