

## Language, Society and Culture

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### ABSTRACT

Language is considered to be the reservoir of Culture and therefore one can easily consider it as a sociocultural system which allows us to know about various attitudes, skills, and behavioural patterns of various cultures around. This paper attempts to look into various aspects of Language, Society and Culture by focusing upon Linguistic Competence, Communicative Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence, Variations in Language, Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Code Switching, Language Planning in the Social and Cultural Context and the views of Relativists and Universalists. It is an attempt to put forward all the aspects related to Language, Society and Culture for its applicational value in the real sense of the term.

**KEY-WORDS:** Language, Sociolinguistics, Cultural Competence, Culture

### 1. Language as a Sociocultural System

Language is a social phenomenon, and the product of culture. Hence, it is called a sociocultural system. A *sociocultural system* is a system of or involving both social and cultural factors. *Culture*, in turn, is the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thought, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group. Culture defines the preferred ways for meeting needs.

#### The Term 'Sociocultural'

Sociocultural is a word made up of *socio-* and *culture* wherein the former has to do with the society and the latter with culture. If the social make-up of a given society relates to human beings living together as a group in a situation in which their dealings with one another affect their common welfare, then its cultural composition is made up of the ideas, customs, skills, arts, etc of a people or group, and these are transferred, communicated, or passed along, as in or to succeeding generations, especially with regard to the training and refinement of the intellect, interests, taste, skills, and arts.

#### Sociocultural Nuances

Language as a sociocultural system is a reference to the social and cultural mores of a nation-state which get reflected in their use of language. For instance, the English do not recognise *co-sister* (a reference in India to a husband's brother's wife) and, therefore, there is no word for it in English, much like there is no equivalent in English to the concept of *ratikrida*, and the nearest word, if at all, one may call it so, it is *love-making*.

#### Cultural Competence

For this, we may have or need to develop *cultural competence* which refers to our ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. It is comprised of four components: (a) Awareness of our own cultural worldview, (b) Attitude towards cultural differences, (c) Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and (d) cross-cultural Skills.

*Awareness:* An individual's cognition or ability to perceive his or her personal reactions to people who are different.

*Attitude:* An individual's like or dislike for something called an "attitude object", ie a person, behaviour or event, and this may be a positive, negative or neutral view of the object concerned.

*Knowledge:* An individual's familiarity and understanding of something that is known, like his or her values and beliefs about equality, which may be inconsistent with his or her behaviour.

*Skills:* An individual's aptitude or talent lying latent in him or her, and specific abilities that enable him or her to understand something, for instance, like gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication that tend to vary from culture to culture.

### Sociolinguistics

*Sociolinguistics* is the name given to the branch of linguistics that analyzes the effects of social and cultural factors within a speech community upon its language patterns.

Much of the work in sociolinguistics was done in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, there is a long tradition in the general study of word-meanings and their relation to culture and in the study of dialects. Both these aspects are now subsumed under sociolinguistics.

It is necessary to distinguish between *sociolinguistics* and *sociology of language*. Hudson (1980) defines *sociolinguistics* as 'the study of language in relation to society' and *sociology of language* as 'the study of society in relation to language'. He admits, however, that there is great overlap between the two. Language is viewed, in sociolinguistics, as a system of communication, as an interactive (acting on one another; reciprocally active) process, as a tool by human beings in a variety of contexts, and as interpersonal and sociocultural activity.

Sociolinguistics is partly practical and partly theoretical. A sociolinguist tries to capture the use of language in actual as well as potential contexts. He or she not only studies the context-bound use of language... but also its context-free potentials and possible realisations. Sociolinguists try to find answers to the following questions: (a) How do formal and sociocultural organisations interweave (to connect closely or intricately, intermingle, or blend)? (b) How do social relations and patterns shape language patterns? How do language patterns shape social relations and patterns?

## 2. Linguistic Competence and Communicative Competence

One needs to understand that these are two different concepts. Chomsky (1965) defined competence as the perfect knowledge of an ideal speaker-listener of the language in a homogeneous speech community. Hymes (1971) pointed out that Chomsky's competence and performance model does not provide an explicit place for sociocultural features.

### Linguistic Competence

Linguistic theory, said Chomsky, is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (1965 p.3)

### Chomsky misses out

The *sociocultural situation*: the attitudes, values, conventions, prejudices, and preferences of the people who use the language.

The *nature of the participants*: the relationship between speaker/s and the hearer/s, their occupation, interests, socio-economic status etc.

The *role of participants*: the relationship in the social network, like father-son, teacher-student, boss-subordinate, doctor-patient etc

The *nature and function of the speech event*: whether it is a face-to-face talk for persuasion, confrontation etc, or casual conversation, or a request in a formal situation, or a telephonic conversation etc.

The *mode (=medium) of communication*: spoken or written or reading from a script (=scripted speech) or unprepared speech etc.

### The Meanings of an Utterance

The meaning or meanings of an utterance (a sentence, a clause, a phrase, a word etc) do does or not depend entirely on its form; a lot depends on *who says what, to whom, when, where, in what manner, and with what effect*. In other words, the *context of situation* in which an utterance is said is very important in deciding its meaning.

### Central Characteristics of Competence in Communication

The dynamic, interpersonal nature of *communicative competence* and its dependence on the negotiation of meaning between two or more persons who share to some degree the same symbolic system.

Its application to both spoken and written language as well as to many other symbolic systems.

The role of context in determining a specific communicative competence, the infinite variety of situations in which communication takes place, and the dependence of success in a particular role on one's understanding of the context and on prior experience of a similar kind.

Communicative competence as a relative, not absolute, concept, one dependent on the cooperation of all participants, a situation which makes it reasonable to speak of degrees of communicative competence.

Hymes's (1971) original description of "communicative competence" reminds us of the multiple and potentially complex skills that await language learners: knowing when it is appropriate to open a conversation, and how, what topics are appropriate to particular speech events, which forms of address are to be used, to whom and in which situations, and how such speech acts as greetings, compliments, and invitations are to be given, interpreted and responded to (cited in Wolfson & Judd 1983, p. 61).

#### Communicative Competence

Whether (and to what degree) something is formally *possible*;

Whether (and to what degree) something is *feasible* in virtue of the means of implementation available;

Whether (and to what degree) something is *appropriate* (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;

Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually *performed* and what its doing entails.

We can sum up and say that the following are essentially the components of communication and go into the building of *communicative competence*.

#### A. Linguistic knowledge and paralinguistic cues

- Verbal elements (sentences, clauses, etc)
- Non-verbal elements (aspects of communicative behaviour such as facial expressions, body movement, eye gaze, gestures, proximity etc)
- Elements of discourse and their organisation in connected speech and writing
- Range of variants (other possible variations and their organisation)
- Meaning of variants in particular situation

#### B. Interaction Skills

- Norms of interaction and interpretation
- Strategies for achieving desired goals
- Perception of features (verbal as well as non-verbal) in communication situations
- Understanding appropriateness in any given situation

#### C. Cultural knowledge

- Social Structure
- Values and attitudes
- Cognitive scheme and the culture transmission
- Sociolinguistic Competence
- Appropriacy of language form
- Language function
- Interactional patterns
- Sociocultural values and constraints
- Speech acts
- Strategic Competence
- Strategic competence consists of verbal and non-verbal strategies of communication that may be employed to compensate for communication breakdown attributable to "performance variables or to insufficient competence." Communication strategies are of two kinds: those that are relevant, mainly to grammatical competence and those that relate more to sociolinguistic competence.
- Social Skills
- Person to person communication that involves giving, receiving, and interpreting messages. They are primarily developed through learning, and
- Include detailed verbal (semantic content of speech, the words and sentences) and nonverbal or para-verbal behaviour (posture, use of eyes, tone of voice, and facial expressions).

- Are influenced by the person's culture and the particular social group he/she belongs to.
- Increase with social reinforcement from others. Such rewards might include being pleased, intrigued, calmed, or motivated in the presence of others, which usually results in increased self-esteem and worth.
- Are mutually interactive in nature, and require appropriate timing and reciprocity of specific behaviours.
- Reflect environmental factors that include age, sex, and status of the other person.

#### Social Competencies

Effective communication in various social relationships

Social problem solving and decision making ability

Constructive resolution of conflicts

Effective use of basic social skills, e.g., starting a conversation

Accurate identification and understanding of the social cues/rules present in one's social environment

Self-control and self-monitoring of one's behaviour and how it impacts others

Perception of self-efficacy

A belief in the capacity to influence one's social environment

Respect for individual differences based on gender and ethnicity

Ability to solicit and utilize social support

Effective coping ability

Future-orientation, e.g., setting and working toward goals

Sincere interest in the well-being of others shown through socially responsible behaviour

Empathy and perspective-taking ability

Ability to initiate and maintain relation-ships

Maintaining an attachment to school

Ability to distinguish between positive and negative peer influences

### 3. Variations in Language

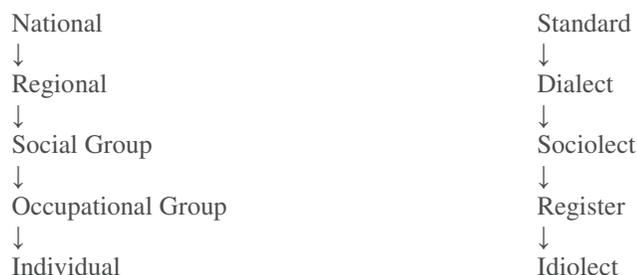
Social variation in language may be due to *social class, ethnic origin, age, and/or gender*, and within these, to the level of formality employed at any time. Sometimes this variation remains stable, but is often the forerunner of a change. Variation within a community leads to one variant being increasingly used in terms of frequency and in its distribution, and this is called *language shift*.

#### Varieties

Varieties fall into two types:

*User-related varieties*, associated with particular people and often places, such as *Black English* (English as used by blacks, however defined and wherever located, but especially African-Americans in the US) and *Canadian English* (English as used in Canada: either all such English or only the standard form). In this sense, the term *variety* is similar to but less likely to carry emotive and judgemental implications than *dialect, patois*, etc.: compare the phrases *speaking the local patois* and *speaking the local variety*.

*Use-related varieties*, associated with function, such as *legal English* (the language of courts, contracts, etc.) and *literary English* (the typical usage of literary texts, conversations, etc.). In this sense, the term *variety* is conceptually close to *register* and in practice is a synonym of *usage*, as in *legal usage, literary usage*.



## Levels of Society

## Levels of Language

The following are the variations within a given language:

*Standard* – A model. A standard is one which is regarded as having social status and prestige, serving as a ‘model’ for various functions, and transcending the usual boundary lines as a result. It is the model for educated written and spoken usage throughout the nation, is used as the basis for producing modern grammars of the language concerned, and subscribes to a standard pronunciation, such as RP in case of British English.

*Dialect* – A *region-specific variant*. It is not a distinct language but a variety of a language spoken in a particular area within a given country.

*Sociolect* – A *social group or class-specific variant*. It is a variety of language which is distinctive of a particular social group or class.

*Register* – A *subject-specific variant*. It is that aspect of usage which has to do with vocabulary, pronunciation, level of formality, etc, chosen by a user in a particular social context.

*Idiolect* – An *individual-specific variant*, which should not be confused with *style*, which is a manner or mode of expression in language, as distinct from the ideas expressed, or the way of using words to express thoughts.

*Diglossia* – A situation wherein two language varieties exist side by side in a community, and each one is used for different purposes. Usually, this is in the form of *high variety* and *low variety*.

*High variety* – A diglossic variety used in government, the media, education, and for religious purposes, it is known as formal variety of language.

*Low variety* – A diglossic variety used in the family, with friends, while shopping etc , it is known as informal variety of language.

A *mixed language* is one in which elements from two or more languages have become so intertwined that it is unclear which is the *basic* language.

*Pidgin* – A mixed language, or jargon, incorporating the vocabulary of one or more languages with a very simplified form of the grammatical system of one of these and not used as the main language of any of its speakers with rules of its own, used for communication between people with no common language, eg Baniya Hindi.

*Creole* – A form of language that develops when speakers of mutually unintelligible languages remain in persistent and long-lasting contact with each other, with one of the contributing languages typically dominant. A creole is a pidgin which has become the first language of a community.

## 4. Languages in Contact

When two languages are in contact, there is a contact between two cultures too. At the linguistic level, this process is called *bilingualism* and at the cultural level *biculturalism* or *acculturation* (the process of becoming adapted to a new or different culture with more or less advanced patterns and the mutual influence of different cultures in close contact), and this plays an important part in second language acquisition.

However, if that does not happen, then an individual ends up *learning*, and not *acquiring* (as some of us have done) the second language (as you have).

We must remember, at the same time, that language is an integral part of *enculturation* (ie the process causing us to adapt to the prevailing cultural patterns of our society)

### *Enculturation*

Two major reasons

Language is a part of culture so much so that the two cannot be separated.

Language is the medium through which the users explore and manipulate the sociocultural environment.

### Bilingualism and Biculturalism

Hall’s categorization of *formal*, *informal*, and *technical* levels of culture is useful in understanding the distinctions clearly.

*Formal learning*: through observation and admonition, using authority.

*Informal learning*: through non-verbal channels of communication, unwritten conventions, indirect responses etc.

*Technical learning*: through rules at the conscious level, as in learning etiquette.

*Bilingualism* – A language situation wherein a person can use or is capable of using two languages with equal or nearly equal facility.

*Coordinate bilinguals* – People who know two languages and use them or are capable of using them but only slightly better than monolinguals.

*Subordinate bilinguals* – People who know two languages and use or are capable of using L<sub>2</sub> with varying degrees of proficiency.

*Incipient bilinguals* – People who can use or are capable of using two languages with a near perfect mastery of the two systems.

**Multilingualism** – A language situation wherein a person can use or is capable of using several languages with equal or nearly equal facility. A multilingual is also called a *polyglot* (a word formed from *poly-* for many and *glot* for language because *gloss* used as a synecdoche in *glossary* also means language).

*Code switching* – An instance wherein a speaker (or a writer), who is a bilingual or a multilingual, switches from one language to another, and this happens when the speaker (or a writer) and the listener (or a reader) belong to different language communities.

*Code mixing* – An instance wherein a speaker (or a writer), who is a bilingual or a multilingual, mixes one language with another quite unconsciously.

## 5. Code Switching as a Communicative Strategy

Socially determined situations the ability to use one's language correctly in a variety of socially determined situations is as much and as central a part of linguistic 'competence' as the ability to produce grammatically well-formed sentences. The actual product is a rule-governed realization of a complex network of situationally and culturally determined.

Role relationships, types etc

Participants (addresser and addressee)      Their sociopsychological behaviour; their mood and relative position

Sociocultural setting      Its distinguishing features

Topic of discourse

Situational Shifts

Members of social networks sharing a linguistic repertoire (ie the stock of special skills, devices, techniques, etc that they have of a particular field) must (and do) know when to shift from one variety to another.

Consequences of a shift

A shift in situation may require a shift in language variety. A shift in language variety may signal a shift in the relationship between co-members of a social network, or a shift in privacy or locale of their interaction.

Code-switching

Code-switching cannot simply be a matter of free individual choice. It is a verbal strategy (a plan for directing large-scale operations of manoeuvring things into the most advantageous position) used by speakers as much creative artists do in switching styles and levels, and this is dependent on topical and situational features giving rise to it.

Situation in India

English has been until very recently the language of instruction, administration, technical education etc. It is even now used as a medium of instruction in higher education, technical education. It is the language of participation in All-India Seminars, Work-shops, Conferences, Symposia etc. It is the language of our textbooks, reference material.

Indian Bilinguals

English-using bilinguals in India keep on switching from one or more Indian languages to English according to different performative occasions and the role(s) they are playing, especially while dealing with issues in technical education. This kind of registered bilingualism may be labelled as 'registral bilingualism'.

Some features of code-switching

Intralinguage and interlanguage switching are sociolinguistic universals.

Code-switchers use English words even if equivalents exist in Hindi or their L<sub>1</sub>.

Some formulaic expressions in English are so deeply embedded in urban bilingual societies that they come out naturally in informal conversations.

Educated speakers tend to switch freely from one language to another.

Code-switching is context-governed.

Code-switching is directed by emotional and intellectual attachment to the code.

## 6. Linguistic and Social Inequality

Three major problems

Absence of language planning

Lack of political will to implement and organize policies and programmes

Lack of coordination among various agencies (the governments at the centre and the states, universities, the Directorates, and other agencies working in the area of language teaching and language planning.

Language Planning

“Language planning,” notes Crystal (ed) (1980), “is a term used in sociolinguistics to refer to a systematic attempt to solve the communication problems of a community by studying the various languages or dialects it uses and developing a realistic policy concerning the selection and use of different languages.”

McArthur (ed) (1992) is more specific when he says that it is “the attempt” made “to control the use, status, and structure of a language policy developed by a government or other authority” in a given country. It is usually the government of the day that makes the decision either on the basis of ‘expert’ advice, or on its own without seeking such an advice, and in the event of its seeking such advice, it “may or may not take note” of it. For, a government in a democratic setup is voted to power by a popular mandate.

A language policy, according to Bell (1981), specifies quite clearly as to which language/s will be (a) the Official Language/s, (b) used for what purpose, (c) taught, and at what level, and (d) taught to what category of learners, and for what duration of time. The policy decided upon may not be a practical one or it may be aimed at satisfying a particular political constituency due to the pressure brought to bear upon the government. For instance, the recent announcement that the Government of India was planning to add Bodo language to the list of languages in the VIII Schedule of Constitution of India was apparently made in view of the Bodo Movement.

Four major issues

How many languages should be learnt or taught and in what order?

What should be the medium of instruction? Should it be the same for all subjects in the curriculum?

How should we help learners move from ‘dialects’ to the standard variety?

Should we have the same programme for the privileged as well as the weaker and deprived sections of the community?

Parameters for Language Planning

*Selection:* Specification of a particular language variety.

*Codification:* For the purpose of stabilising this variety, some agency produces reference materials etc for the purpose of teaching and learning.

*Acceptance:* Once the codification receives popular acceptance, it becomes a symbol of patriotism and unity.

*Elaboration of function:* Expansion of language functions, assigning of new roles, modernisation.

Problems in the process

Can languages and varieties be standardised?

How can languages and varieties be used for exploitation and manipulation by interested groups?

Are standard languages and varieties unreal and pathological since they lack vitality, diversity, and creativity?

A review of history of the times before the British colonised India, we were a nation divided against ourselves. There were small and big princely states in the country. Each of these had a language of its own because the language of the rulers became the language of the masses. There was no nation in the sense in which we understand the term today. Hence, India of those times never really had a common language accessible to its masses. Some classical languages thrived due to princely patronage as was the case with Sanskrit, which remained “a common medium” for a very long time in Indian history but only for “the learned” class of our people. With the British

colonial rule came English “a sort of lingua franca” but true to the Macaulayan dictum, it was restricted in access to “the educated few”.

#### Language Deficit

The theory of *language deficit* assumes that the working-class children do not do well at school because they suffer from cognitive (involving cognition, artificial intelligence, etc) deficiencies in the absence of the elaborated code; they cannot organise their experience and interpret the world the way the middle-class children do.

## 7. Language and Culture

Cultural Reservoir language is the most common and dynamic form in which culture is preserved and through which it is transmitted.

*Culture* has been defined as the sum of transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thoughts characteristic of a community or population.

#### Ethnocentricity

*Ethnocentricity*, the belief in superiority of one’s own ethnic group, nation, or culture is manifested in the use of language, and *ethnocentrism* is maintained through language by creating myth. Every culture has the process of myth creating through language.

*Culture* has been defined as the sum of transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thoughts characteristic of a community or population.

Socially acquired knowledge a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members... Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist at the end product of learning: knowledge in a most general sense of the term. (Goodenough 1957).

#### Cultural Knowledge

Hudson (1980) makes the following distinction:

Cultural knowledge – which is acquired from people.

Shared non-cultural knowledge – which is shared by all human beings but not learned from others.

Non-shared, non-cultural knowledge – which is unique to the individual.

#### Relativists’ View

According to the relativists, each language imposes its own grid on language users’ experience and it provides a set of pigeon-holes in terms of which the users of a particular language reduce the world of experience and knowledge to order. The principle *linguistic relativity* or *linguistic determinism*, popularly known as *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, tries to relate thought and conduct to language.

#### Universalists’ View

The *universalists*, on the other hand, propose that all languages share basic common features; this implies the rejection of the assumption that languages differ in innumerable and unpredictable ways.

Their basic assumption is that a child has an inherent, inborn, innate, or genetically-programmed capacity for learning any of the human languages.

## 8. Conclusion

After looking into the perennial aspects of the interrelationship between Language, Society and Culture one can say that all the three are to be taken together and in a seamless manner. Studying them in isolation would deprive us from attaining a comprehensive understanding about all of them. Society and Culture are to be understood through language. Language in a way is a bridge which allows us to transport ourselves in order to develop our understanding about Societies and Cultures at large

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