

The Need for Linguistics

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Linguistics is not altogether a new science to Indians. It is simply a modern grammar, founded on certain objective principles. Linguists of the Western world consider an Indian, Panini, as their fore-runner. They owe Panini the concept of zero in linguistic analysis and the algebraic brevity which characterize their linguistic descriptions. Linguistics unlike old grammars is not intuitive. The grammarian of olden days did not explain how he arrived at the various sets of rules. It may have been by trial and error. But in all these years we have faithfully followed his prescriptions not knowing how he has prescribed them. For the first time in the history of grammar, linguistics demonstrates clearly the objective method of evolving a grammar. In this method, the linguist does not imitate or project one grammatical system on another language, but arrive at a grammar according to the nature of the language.

In the U.S.A. this science has acquired an unprecedented importance in recent years. The Government, particularly the Defence Department of that country, encourages linguistic studies for two reasons. They feel that the army personnel should know foreign languages for effective contacts with foreigners. The teaching programmes designed by linguists being easy, they are immensely popular with soldiers. The second reason is that linguistic principles help the secret service men to break the secret codes which are important for military purposes. Another institution which helps in the growth of linguistic studies is the Church. Still there are quite a number of tribal languages in distant jungles of Africa and South

America or Australia, unknown to scholars. Evangelists in America have a strange attraction towards these people, and most of them go there after a sound training in linguistics. Invariably a tape recorder operated on battery would also accompany them. They establish contacts with the natives and lure them through a contact man to speak into the microphone. Slowly and steadily these missionaries pile up words of the strange language and evolve a grammar. They devise a script also if that language did not have one before. The very first thing they do after this is to bring the word of God to the people by translating the Bible. The third institution which promotes linguistic studies in U.S.A. is the University. It feels that the old type English grammars in use in schools are a result of the projection of Greek and Latin grammars. They are not based on actual facts found in the English language. Teachers attribute the unnaturalness of the grammatical categories and irregularities in the English grammars to their imitation of Greek grammatical models.

It is also said that an equal importance is given to linguistic studies in Russia as in the U.S.A.

Linguistics though greatly developed in the 20th century, has roots in the 18th and 19th centuries. It has grown out of comparative and historical studies of languages. The chief contributors to its theoretical development are mostly from America, Switzerland, Denmark, Czechoslovakia and Russia. It has developed a rigorous method for describing languages useful for further linguistic research and technological advancement.

What then is its descriptive method? A linguist to start with, undergoes training in certain basic courses. He is taught the different set up of languages, their sounds and their morphemes, their words and their grammatical categories. He may not know these languages in the sense we now use that term i.e. to read and write but he will

know their structures. To become a linguist it is not necessary to know many languages. Once it was so believed but not now. One fundamental idea which is drilled into a linguist is that the structure of each language differs from the other and the grammar of one cannot be extended blindly to another. He will have none of the common phobia that a language other than his cannot be comprehended. The Swahili language of distant Africa or the Maori language of New Zealand tribes form as much an important subject for his study as English or Sanskrit. To him no language is superior to the other and no dialect inferior to the other. Sometimes an unimportant dialect spoken by a few on the fringes of a language-area may throw light on a linguistic riddle presented by a fully developed language.

His main concern is the spoken language at a particular time level. Even in his analysis of written language he adopts the same technique on the assumption that it was also once spoken.

The linguist with his training and background goes to a language community, usually speaking a strange language and selects a man of clear speech as a sample for his study. He speaks through a contact man in the initial stages and records the basic words like face, nose, hands etc. of the new language. Usually he carries with him a tape recorder to record at once the words with their meaning. From the tape he transcribes those words in a special script called phonetic script. This is a special kind of script devised by the International Phonetic Association for recording speech forms as accurately as possible. The recorder provides him with certain advantages for transcription. He can play and replay the tapes to verify his transcription without recourse to the human speaker. The human speaker might hesitate and sometimes even refuse to repeat the same word several times. The repeated forms of the human speaker, may sometimes vary and

thus cause embarrassment to the investigator. If the nature of the place is such that a tape recorder could not be carried then the linguist takes down the words *in situ* in phonetic scripts. Thus he gathers a fairly large number of words and sentences and arranges them in the necessary order for further analysis.

Not all sounds recorded in the phonetic script are meaningful in that language. There may be sounds which are produced by the speaker due to physical indisposition. There may be sounds which can be displaced by another word *pavalam* — coral which can be pronounced as *pavalam*. Still there are sounds which occur only in certain positions. To illustrate this the famous English phonetician, Daniel Jones refers to the Tamil sound *k*. Pronounce clearly and naturally the following Tamil words and see how the *k* sounds in *kaarru* — wind, *nakam* — nail, *tanku* — to stay, *paakam* — division, *aruki* — rare. If you hear minutely the sound of *k* when you pronounce the five words given, k^1 is without voice i.e. there is no humming noise when you pronounce with your ears closed. In *nakam* for k^2 the air stream does not stop but comes out with a friction noise and it is voiceless. In *tanku* — to stay, k^3 is voiced and the breath stops. In *paakam* — division k^4 has friction with voicing. In *aruki* — rare, k^5 is also a fricative but distinctly fronter than k^2 and voiceless. All these five sounds are actually altered forms of one sound. Note their positions of occurrence and environments. Each one is different from the other and no two sound segments occur in the same environment. k^3 occurs after the nasal in the medial position. k^2 occurs after monosyllables containing short vowels and k^4 occurs after monosyllables containing long vowels. k^5 occurs before the front vowel “i” and k^1 in other places not specified above. All these sounds can be written by one symbol for they are actually one sound in different manifestations. That sound is called phoneme and its manifestations are called allophones or related sounds. No

alphabet is and can be phonetic. If it is so then it will be quite unmanageable for human beings as a writing system. If you were to provide a letter each for every sound we utter, the letters of our alphabet would be innumerable. It is not a defect if an alphabet is not phonetic. But it would be a serious defect if an alphabet were not phonemic i.e. if it did not represent all meaningful sounds of a language. When a linguist says "meaningful sounds" he includes also the pitch level of the sentence, the stress etc. Here is an English sentence, "He is a boy." If it were a statement, the pitch level would be uniform until the last word and then drop below. The same sentence could be converted into a question if the falling pitch were raised in the final word. If you listened to a Chinese you will observe ^{that} he speaks his language in a sing-song fashion. It is called tone. In their language it has meaning. The pitch, stress and tone which play a significant part in languages were not taken seriously by old grammarians : but linguistics does.

After discovering the phonemes of a language the linguist proceeds to the next level of analysis called morphology. In this he tries to find out the sequence of phonemes which are meaningful in that language. The method he adopts is similar in nature to the previous analysis. He usually arranges the words having similar shape and meaning into paradigms like walks, walked, will walk, walking (participle), walking (gerund). In this paradigm a part of each word has similar shape and similar meaning. It is the portion up to k — to step slowly. But, walks — step with reference to present time, is different from walked — step with reference to past time by its indication of past and present time. When you subtract that which is similar in form and meaning in the two words, -s and -ed remain denoting present and past time respectively. In other words, the linguist looks for the same item having identical meaning in the group of words and cuts them. Thus he gathers all meaningful items of a language.

Applying the same principle he followed in grouping sounds into phonemes, he groups these word-bits into item or morpheme and related items or allomorphs. In morphology the linguist limits himself to the analysis of words. He talks about bits of words and their relation. But in syntax which is the next level of analysis he deals with the inter-relations of words. In syntax the Americans have not advanced very much. There is a school of thought in that country which does not differentiate between morphology and syntax. The early Tamil grammarian Tolkaappiar too, seems to have had such a view.

This completes the grammar of the language. A necessary concomitant to linguistic analysis is a lexicon. Usually it takes two years for a linguist to produce a good grammar.

The science of linguistics is not limited to describing languages only. It includes other studies. Description is only one part of linguistics. Other branches are study of the language of children, aphasics and analysis of the language which is in contact with another. The development of the language of children throws light on the development of phonemes and morphemes of the language. The study of the language of aphasics enlightens the nature of language in its dissolution. It is said in aphasics the manner of language dissolution is just the reverse of the language acquisition in children. The last branch of linguistic study is about the change a language undergoes when it comes into contact with another language. Malayalam spoken in Kasarkode is different from Malayalam spoken in Trivandrum. It is mostly because of its contact with Konkani and Tulu and probably also with Kanarese. Changes in the history of languages, to a great extent, are due to the influence of other languages through direct or indirect contact.

These four branches constitute linguistics and it is unnecessary to say here that a wide range of knowledge,

training in allied disciplines and a particular kind of personal capability are essential for a linguist. This is also an expensive branch of study. One may legitimately ask here whether such a study is worth its expense. Indeed it is. Its varied uses will justify the need for recognizing and encouraging this study.

A general knowledge of linguistics will create an atmosphere of language tolerance in our country. A professional linguist or a dilettante cannot have any linguistic narrowness just as a medical doctor cannot distinguish between his patients say, on the basis of caste. We have to-day developed a secret pride for our language. It is good if it does not lead us to look down on other languages. But in actuality it does. Linguists treat all languages as media of communication and their preference for a language is only on the basis of its effectiveness in communication at maximum efficiency and minimum cost of labour or money.

Some of the prevalent conceptions about language such as the concept of purity of language will vanish by the spread of linguistic knowledge. No linguist will think that languages can exist without borrowing. It is the inherent nature of languages to borrow and there is no language known to man which has not borrowed.

Translation of official papers and scientific treatises has become a necessity in India. Human translations are slow and cost heavily. Machine translations attempted in the western countries have as their basis an accurate and thorough description of the language to be translated and the language into which it is translated.

With the aid of the sound changes that occur in the basic vocabulary like 'face' 'nose' and 'hand' in related languages, a linguist in America has devised a method of determining the age of languages. This method commonly known as Lexico-statistics is now being tested widely in

that country. It can throw some light on the history of our languages.

Language is a reliable marker of culture. The race migrations on the basis of language evidence have been traced fairly successfully by American linguists particularly, in the countries speaking the Malayo-polynesian languages. This procedure may serve some useful purpose in ethnological and historical research in our country.

To enhance the effectiveness of communication linguistic knowledge is extensively made use of in the western countries. It is said that the Voice of America in the Czech language is very popular because even in minute details it is very near to the standard speech of Czechoslovakia. Our radio organisation can take this hint and make their relays more effective at home and abroad.

In coded communication the code consisting of symbols play a large part in the effective transmission of the message. The organization of these codes are largely based on linguistic principles. To break these codes also linguistic knowledge is necessary.

The success in the treatment of stuttering, loss of word power and difficulty of speech depends to a great measure on how the individuals react to their respective languages. Knowledge of linguistics is as essential for the physician who treats these diseases as his training in medicine.

Among the various uses of linguistics, its utility in language teaching stands foremost. The teaching methods devised by linguists have been tested in other countries and found efficient.

By this method, the teaching of any foreign language is organized in the following way. Let us take the teaching of Russian. A good linguist, making use of his own or others' analysis will explain to the class phonemes, morphemes and word order of the Russian languages. In some

cases this linguist may not know to converse fluently in that language. This does not affect the efficiency of his teaching provided he knows the nature of the language well. This class of his is supplemented by a class for drill in which a native Russian will be asked to give words and sentences from his language which will be imitated and memorized by the students. This drill class generally will be for six hours per week and the linguist teacher will guide it. It is called the mim-mem method. A student spending three to four hours in daily lessons could speak Russian as naturally as the native Russian and write fluently within the short period of nine months. Is it not well worth considering for our schools and colleges where we currently face an acute problem of teaching English and Hindi ?

This method can be extended even for the teaching of the mother tongue where the dialect differences are pronounced. The Malayalam taught in schools at Trivandrum is very near to the dialect spoken by the members of the Nayar community. A student of the Pulaya community having a distinct dialect of Malayalam would carry over his dialect habits when he speaks his school dialect. If the teacher is a linguist he can easily help the student to divest him from his native speech habits. This is possible by undertaking an analysis of the speech of the Pulaya and finding out the difference in the phonemic and morphemic set-up in that dialect. The differing elements would indicate the spot where the young Pulaya student may experience difficulty in adjustment. The teacher can explain to the student the causes of his difficulties and the method of correction. Linguistics thus holds a great promise for teaching.

In a country where there are 14 major languages and over 450 dialects, with a constitution assuring protection and preservation of all languages and cultures, is not the popularization of linguistics a matter of necessity ?