

Psychology Of Bilingualism And Multilingualism
Professor Ark Verma
Dept. Of Cognitive Sciences
IIT Kanpur
Week - 01
Lecture – 01

Hello and welcome to the course this introduction to the psychology of bilingualism and multilingualism. I am Dr. Ark Verma from the Department Of Cognitive Sciences at IIT Kanpur. You know me from some of the courses that I have already taken earlier by the name of basic cognitive processes, advanced cognitive processes, introduction to cognitive neuroscience and introduction to psycholinguistics. This is another course in the field of language wherein I am going to talk about how people acquire multiple languages, how do you use multiple languages and what is the psychology behind it. So, join me in this journey of a 20 hour course basically exploring various aspects of bilingualism and multilingualism.

I will be using these terms interchangeably so whenever I am using bilingualism people who are multilingual may find themselves included and when I am using multilingualism you already know that I am talking about bilingual bilinguals as well. Let us start, now the first lecture typically in a course is basically about setting some of the ground rules, setting some of the basic conceptual features that we need to talk about and this is precisely what I am going to try and do in this lecture. Now in this course as I said we will talk about various aspects of bilingualism and as I said I am going to use these terms interchangeably. What I am going to basically talk about will be structured in four basic verticals where I am going to majorly stress let us say on the acquisition of bilingualism say for example how do acquire how do how does one acquire more than one language, how does one learn to use and produce in more than one language, how does one understand in more than one language and finally how does one control two sort of independence maybe interdependent linguistic systems within one single head because this is something that has intrigued people for the longest time.

Yet how does one person who knows let us say Hindi very well English very well maybe Tamil very well how does this person talk or choose to talk in just one of these languages do the other languages interfere if they interfere how does the how does the person manage this if they do not how is the system so smooth. So, let us start with some of the basic discussions. Now also I will talk about different social linguistic aspects of bilingualism for example once you know more than a single language you are part of maybe more than a single culture if I know Hindi very well and if I know English very well I am also party to the cultures and traditions and the traditional knowledge that sort

of gets imbibed within a language I am part of that as well it is in some sense a social linguistic phenomena it is also in some sense a phenomena wherein I partake or let us say I share my identity with these two let us say slightly different cultures it happens a lot it happens in many places where people are compulsively bilingual or multilingual do we have different personalities for different languages do we speak as different people when I am speaking in Hindi as compared to when I am speaking in English these are some of the questions that we will sort of ponder in this course. Finally I will also talk about the neural and cognitive consequences of bilingualism when I say neural I would probably give a disclaimer that I am no neuroscientist but I will tell you a little bit about the brain regions that are involved in controlling and the use and acquisition of more than one languages and also for example I will talk in some detail about how does bilingualism interact with different cognitive functions such as memory or perception for that matter and so on and so forth. So, we will basically see a good mix of cognitive consequences of bilingualism maybe some neural consequences here and there and understand this phenomena in a more holistic level understand also that bilingualism adds a certain degree of communicative proficiency to us it basically makes us capable of communicating to more than just one type of people it makes us capable of let us say traveling around the world because obviously not everywhere the language that is our mother tongue is spoken.

So, bilingualism adds certain aspects to our personal life maybe our professional life as well maybe it enhances our job prospects maybe enhances our likability people who know more than one languages are supposed to be or have a better chance to be liked by more than one people. So, those are also things that we will talk about. Now what are the questions that we can ask when we are talking about bilingualism? We can talk about what do we exactly mean by bi or multilingualism what does it mean when I say that oh Ram is a bilingual or sham is a multilingual what do these tags entail and we will talk about them is there only one kind of a bilingual is there only one kind of a multilingual and there is simply too many varieties say for example I can speak Hindi and English and I can write in there and I can read in them and I can understand them but I would probably say that I understand a little bit of Urdu as well but I do not write in Urdu I cannot read in Urdu but when somebody speaks to me or say for example when I hear a ghazal or a couplet I probably understand it. So and there are a lot of people who would say that oh I know this language but I cannot read or write in it I can understand it I can sometimes speak it but cannot write in So there are different varieties of bilinguals depending upon you know the different individual situations that we may encounter and I am going to talk to you about them as well. Finally is bilingualism an individual centric phenomena or is it a societal phenomena? Is it something that an individual sort of learns through their own motivation through being born in a bilingual family is it something that they strive for and they achieve and it becomes sort of limited to them or is it more

like a societal phenomena where in the society typically the trend is become to be bilingual say for example in the north or in the south of India that I am speaking of people typically learn more than one language say for example a law it is it is very common for people to be born to Hindi speaking parents but they go to English medium schools and learn English probably as well as they know Hindi similarly in the south there are multiple languages somebody was born in Tamil background family would also probably learn a little bit of you know Kannada or Malayalam but again may be going to school will learn English as well.

So bilingualism and multilingualism are not merely individual phenomena they are also phenomena that entire societies participate in and they serve different purposes in different places. Finally what are the conditions and causes that you know lead to the emergence of bilingualism how does bilingualism come about is it typically that let us say I am born to parents who speak both Hindi and English and that is why I will learn Hindi and English together or maybe that I go to a school that you know is teaching in English medium that is when I learn English or there are other broader phenomena that may happen at you know larger scale at the societal scale at the national scale that make me you know a bilingual. So there are some of these questions we will talk about them in some detail you will see that when I go forward in these in this course in different lectures I will keep coming back to some of these phenomena because these questions are central to understanding what bilingualism is all about. Now let us approach these questions one by one let us start with very simplistic very you know moderate definition of a bilingual that one can take. Let us define a bilingual as a person who has knowledge and uses more than one language very simple alright if you know Hindi and in addition you know English or Urdu or Bhojpuri or something like that Bhojpuri although is more treated more as a dialect than a separate language but let us say you know Hindi and you know English in top on top of it it's probably enough for you to be called a bilingual.

Ideally however and again ideal in pragmatic and practical are slightly different terms ideally however a person should be able to speak write read and understand in both these languages alright. So, for us to be called a complete sort of bilingual and again these are slightly loose definitions one would be expected to be able to you know listen read write speak understand and all of that in both the languages with a certain degree of proficiency. Now remember proficiency is a very important aspect I may say that I just understand a little bit of English but I do not speak it or I do not write English but I can read it. So, there are these different levels of proficiency that we will you know continuously keep talking about but let us let us start with this very basic understanding that a bilingual is a person who knows to use more than one language at the same time. Let us let us go with that very minimal definition to begin with.

So, and as I have already said typically anyone who fits in the above criteria may be referred to as a bilingual multilingual but then again experts differentiate between the types of bilinguals based on various factors and we will see those factors as we go ahead. Also as I said bilingualism is not merely an individual phenomena rather it can be termed as a societal phenomena typically arising out of political and demographic changes as well as large scale migrations due to you know sometimes positive of jobs better opportunities etcetera. Now you know you might have heard a lot of people say that India has a lot of what they refer to as the colonial hangover. Why do Indians in the world are probably the second largest or probably the largest English speaking population anywhere in the world? It is because that we were colonized by the English and they sort of made some fundamental changes to our education system that made English a very inseparable part of our education and we have sort of in some sense benefited by it in an some sense that may have been disadvantageous and you can see that governments are trying to address those you know perceived lack in some sense. Say for example, the new education policy in announce in 2020 talks a little bit about the benefits of learning to read and you know learning to understand in our native languages.

So, there is obviously a political factor behind the fact that why do Indians typically take to English and how they have you know traditionally been taught in English in a in a large number of our schools across the length of the nation. Also, sometimes bilingualism happens or emerges due to large scale migrations from place A to place B. For example, a lot of people migrate to different countries in search of jobs. We know that there is you know a perception that there are better jobs in the English speaking developed countries of the world and lot of our people migrate to those places and they pick up some English on the way because they see better job prospects. It may be true, it may not be true, but it can be one of the factors that forces people to learn the second language because if you have migrated to a particular country that speaks a different language and I have lived in parts of Europe and I have seen people from India you know different from different parts of India coming there to earn their living and they eventually very successfully learn the language.

In Germany you can see that, in Belgium you can see that, you can see that in France, you can see that in parts of Italy and similarly you can see that in you know in the English speaking parts of the world whether it be the United States of America, Canada or the United Kingdom. Now different kinds of and again this is basically continuing the same discussion different kinds of economic, social, political events may lead to bilingualism from time to time and spur on the acquisition and use of multiple languages and this keeps happening because societies keep undergoing through you know range of changes and these range of changes sometimes make us let us say realize the importance of knowing more than one language and in the larger scheme of things people say okay

maybe that learning this language at this point in time is beneficial for our future prospects and they pick those languages up. It takes a lot of motivation by the way if you are deciding to learn a second or a third language at a later stage in your life but people do that. Children typically do not have a choice because let us say if they are born to multilingual parents say for example the mother speaks Tamil and the father speaks Hindi typically the child would learn both the languages and equally well and we will talk about this when we go ahead. How bilingual are we? Is it something that is there in limited parts of the world? Is it something that is a very widespread a far spread phenomena? Let us survey this a little bit and I have sort of borrowed from Tej Bhatia's book on the handbook of bilingualism and multilingualism from here.

You can see that there are large parts of the world which are bilingual and multilingual. For example Canada has two official languages say for example French and English in different parts of Canada are spoken maybe not exclusively but predominantly. Say for example French is very common in the cubic Montreal region and English in other parts of Canada is spoken significantly a significant chunk of their population speaks exclusively English and a significant chunk of the population speaks exclusively French. Similarly Belgium where I have lived and completed my PhD I saw that certain parts of Belgium say for example the northern parts spoke Flemish more predominantly than in French and certain parts of Belgium spoke French more predominantly than Flemish and Flemish is a variation of Dutch which is spoken in regions of Belgium and there are different cities which will be entirely French speaking cities and there are cities which are entirely Flemish speaking cities. So these kind of political or let us say demographic distributions do exist when we talk about you know certain places.

In India for example if you look at the north if you look at the south there are distributions of population who speak more than one language and these distributions are arranged according to linguistic line sometimes according to different demographics as well. Now in the same way most of African countries because there is a lot of interchange and the initial languages were the languages of the different tribes. So typically what you will see when you go to Africa is that most of these you know most of the cities and places people have a basic a more native tribal language that they speak but because Africa was colonized by the European countries you know Belgium and Netherlands and France for larger periods of time you will see that typically a lot of African cities have one tribal language which they you know used to converse amongst themselves but they also have a very strong flavor of let us say French in some parts of Africa, Dutch in some parts of Africa and so on all right. And as I said India exhibits a very strong flavor of bilingualism mainly most states have their own native language but typically you will see that all of these states of India have English as a second language that we learn. In the southern states there is a lot of interchange between Tamil, Telugu,

Malayalam, Kannada, Urdu maybe in some places in the northeast there are a lot of you know language groups in the north typically Hindi is the more predominantly spoken language but again a lot of people speak Hindi along with this speaking and learning Urdu and along with the speaking and learning English for that matter.

It is part of our culture to be bilingual it is not an exception anymore because if you look around if you talk to your friends and family you will see that there are hardly people who speak just a single language almost everybody would say that I know at least two languages whether it be Hindi or Urdu whether it be Hindi or English whether it be Hindi or Bangla for that matter. Now, let's move slightly ahead and see whether we can sort of understand this you know landscape of bilingualism. Different types of bilingualism exist and different types of bilingualism exist in different areas of the world due to different contact situations due to different reasons through which bilingualism has emerged in those places. For example and to sort of look at this there are certain theoretical frameworks that may help us. Now White for instance offers three major distinctions or three types of bilingual situations that emerge there are cases where there are language minorities which are unique to one state for example Breton in France Breton is a particular language non-unique but subordinate language say for example in Spain Basque is spoken in Spain and Spanish as well and say for example local only minorities where these languages are just limited to very specific regions say for example French in Canada but they for example in different places maybe majority languages French in Canada might still be relatively you know minority language but it is a majority language in France alright.

And then also different kinds of connections exist between you know speakers of the same language say for example adjoining distributions of speakers say for example Basque in Spain and France again non-adjoining when French spoken in Canada is non-adjoining to French spoken in France right. Now degree of spatial cohesion also is a place a you know bit of a factor in how bilingual speakers are organized in different places say for example, Cree in Canada is situated in a very small region everybody is there together who speaks Cree it is a smaller region in the country and where it is non-cohesive is say for example Spanish in the United States of America there are different pockets of people who speak Spanish and they might not be organized in the same place they might not be all living in the same locality. Another very important aspect of bilingualism and this is something that I would sort of like to stress and emphasize a lot is that bilingualism does not operate in isolation it operates in a sense where basically we are talking about different situations the speakers may learn a second or a third language but who do they talk to they basically talk to say the listeners and if you see bilingual speakers are very aware of who they are talking to in what language even if say for example take an example of a school going child where the child is going

to a English medium school but parents and family speaks Hindi. So you will see children are very good at switching in and switching out of languages when they are school when they are in school they had more predominantly using English almost you know as comfortably as the natives and when they come to home they start speaking in Hindi without any problem at all. So speakers and listeners this is something very very important the language that they are speaking when they are speaking in English they will speak in a certain manner in a with a certain formality if I may say so and then what is the third part that is important is the setting where is this conversation happening you might meet your class teacher even at older ages you might meet your class teacher in a marketplace and suddenly you will you know without realizing you start addressing them in English because although it is a non formal setting it is an informal setting and you might as well speak to them in Hindi but in some sense you will see that people are attuned to speaking to certain people using a certain language.

Most formal conversations having a conversation with your supervisors with your bosses with your teachers may typically happen and for the large part in the language that the office works in say for example English in a lot of cases and a lot of informal conversations with your friends and with your family it is very awkward sometimes if you try and speak English to let us say your friends if you are in certain situation and you are talking to your friends who are you know native Hindi speakers or native Tamil or native Bangladesh speakers as it may be it becomes interesting that that you know people start feeling awkward to talk to them in anything other than the native that we have shared. So the speaker the language and the setting are three very important aspects of this whole bilingualism setting of this whole bilingualism conversation that we you know are going to talk about again and again and going forward. Now similarly if you want to understand bilingualism and you will see in future lectures that when I talk about this in more detail that you can study a particular phenomena using different disciplinary perspectives or different disciplinary lenses. For example you can talk about bilingualism from a neuroscience perspective that okay what really happens in the brain that allows us to pick up more than one language what happens in the brain when we produce in a second language or a third language. How does the brains let us say there are regions in the brain that may be linked to comprehension of language what really how do those regions change do these regions actually change is the brain different in bilingual multilingual people than in monolingual people again these are questions that I am leaving open for now and we will talk about them as we go ahead but you can take a particular perspective to study any given phenomena.

So neuroscience perspective can be one a perspective could be a more sociological perspective say for example you know what are the societal factors that lead to bilingualism what are the factors that govern the motivation of people in learning a

second language or a third language in continuing to use a second or a third language and in some cases stopping to use a particular language. Say for example a certain sociological changes demographic changes may have happened that people in India who were probably predominantly speaking Sanskrit for the longest time went away from speaking Sanskrit to variations of you know Hindi and eventually the kind of language that we speak is called Khadiboli. So how did it happen that we were speaking a particular type of Sanskrit many many years ago and we switched to different kinds of Hindi and then we sort of now speak what is called a very loosened sort of form of Hindi which is called Khadiboli but if you look at the current generation they speak not only not merely in Hindi but they speak in something called hinglish which you know people refer to is a mix of Hindi and English at least for the northern part. A linguistic analysis would say for example if you want to study this as a linguist you will probably you know spend a little bit more time in understanding the structural changes that come along with bilingualism. For example what happens when speakers mix Hindi and English? What happens when in one single mind both Hindi and English reside together? Do their Hindi remain as pure as it remains in native Hindi speakers language? Does their English remain as pure as it were in native speakers language? So what really happens? How do these languages interact with each other? Do their structures sort of collide? Do their structures influence each other? Do they modify each other? And you can see you know around you that you know there are very interesting instances when somebody would be speaking in English but sometimes using the syntax of Hindi totally.

Syntax is the grammatical property. So for example you start to frame a sentence but you are using words of English but using the syntax of English using the sentence of English using the syntax of Hindi or vice versa. So what kind of changes happen to these languages? Say for example a lot of Hindi has borrowed terms from English. English has also in essence borrowed terms from Hindi for example the words pajama this and that are there in the Oxford dictionary. So what really happens to languages structurally speaking when two languages come in contact with each other would be the subject of you know analysis of linguists and social psychological analysis for example what does it do to our identities? What does it do to our group belongingness? What does it do to our social cohesion? Does it basically influence us you know in order to sort of oh I will speak it is a matter of pride for me to be able to speak in good English you know and in India it is sort of I would say a bit unfortunate but it is very common for people to attach a lot of pride to be speaking in English and not knowing their own language in a lot of cases.

So is it that it is a matter of self-esteem? Does it raise your position in the society? Does it make you seem that you are coming from an extremely high social class that you speak purely in English but not in Hindi and I have heard a lot of people say that oh I am

not very comfortable in Hindi even though it is my native language. Oh I am not very comfortable speaking in Tamil or Bangla because but you know although it is my native language I speak more or less in English exclusively almost. So there are some of these factors which you know need our attention and we might sort of dwell upon them a little bit here and there as we go ahead all right. So that is all that I wanted to say in this initial lecture and join me in the next lecture when we sort of start you know delving a little bit deeper into the phenomena and the different aspects of bilingualism. Thank you. .