Language and Mind
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Module - 01
Lecture – 01
Introduction

Welcome to Language and Mind. In this course, we are going to look at relationship between language and mind. Language is a very interesting phenomenon by itself. You will get to think how much you know about language yourself. Let us explore this together.

What is the relationship between language and mind? In order to answer this question, we need to look at language and mind and then we can explore the relationship between the two. We will get back to this in a moment. Let me give you a couple of things about this course.

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          End Term Exam – 50
          10 Quizzes – 50

My name is Rajesh Kumar. I teach in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the IIT, Madras. This gives you my details, about my contact details, and some evaluation process for this course. What we need to look at in this course and where we will eventually reach through this course is for us to be familiar with the fundamental ideas in linguistics at the levels of sounds, words, sentences, cognition and learning of natural language. This will build a nice foundation for us to understand what language is

about and how it is related to human mind and what we know about human mind through understanding these issues.
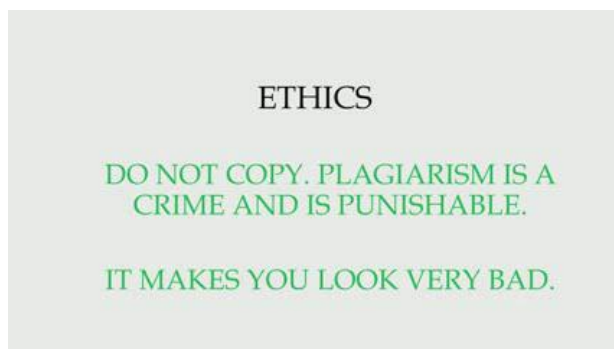
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TOPICS

- What is Language?

- Relationship between natural language and human mind?

- Generative Foundation of Language Acquisition; Language

- Acquisition Device and Universal Grammar

- Biological Foundation of Language; Critical period hypothesis/ Mother tongue/ First/ Second/Foreign/Heritage Language

- Structure of Language around Sounds, Words, and Sentences; Constraints on Word Formation; Introduction to Morphological Rules; Order of Words in Sentence (Subject-Object-Verb)

We will be looking at several broad topics like - what is language; the relationship between language and mind; generative foundation of language acquisition; language acquisition device and universal grammar; biological foundations of language such as critical period hypothesis, what do we call mother tongue, what is the difference between first language, second language and foreign language. If time permits, I will also introduce you to a new concept - heritage language.
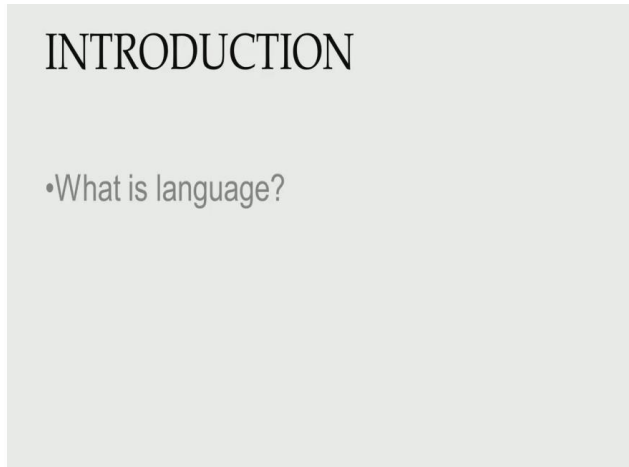
And, we will explore structure of language around sounds, words, sentences. We will also look at certain constraints on formation of words. We will look at the rules that allow us to make words and sentences, and then they will lead us to what we know about the relationship between language and mind.

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INTRODUCTION

•What is language?

Today we will look at this question - what language is all about? And then, I will take you to a different topic tomorrow, and then likewise we will build incrementally on this.

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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)

So, let us try and understand something about language. I invite you to think about language in a very serious sense. But, you will get to see how much you already know about these things. It just requires you to think a little harder. So, let us start with the question, what is language? Take a pause here. If you want to stop you can stop and then come back with your answers to see, what is it that we call language? In a very normal day to day affair, when we ask this question about language, we hear several interesting questions, several interesting answers.

One of the most common answers is, language is a tool for communication. That is true. But, that is not really the full answer to this question. Language happens to be much more than that. We will get to much more part, shortly. Language is a system by itself. True, it helps us communicate with one another. We will come back to that question also and we will try to see what is the system that is underlying language; and that will be one of the major goals that I have articulated to you about this course.

One of the famous philosophers of modern time writes about language; it is a… language is an impressive and fascinating human capacity. Humans are strikingly… One of the famous philosophers of our modern time writes about language in the following way: language is an impressive and fascinating human capacity. Human languages are strikingly powerful and complex system. This requires a little bit of explanation. We will come back to that too.

The other interesting question along the lines is how do we learn it? How does it happen that we start speaking? I bet it requires very serious thinking. Language is a phenomena that develops automatically to humans. I will explain this to you too. So, let us look at some of more generic aspects of language which relates us, which we are going to look at. What is it? What is it that we call language?

Even before that, ask yourself a question: how many languages do you speak, how many languages are spoken around you, how many languages are spoken in this country, how many languages are spoken all across the world. Are these languages fundamentally different from one another? If yes, how are they different from one another? If not, then how are they similar to one another? Why do we speak so many languages if we need to communicate with others?

Would it not be nicer if we had just one language to communicate with the rest of the people of the world? It very usually happens that we face break down in our communications when we meet with people who speak other languages. We do not understand what they say. They do not understand what we say. If the purpose of language is to communicate, then why would that happen? We will be looking at this as well.

So, what are the answers? Let us look at some of the answers of the questions that I have just asked you. One of the estimates says that nobody speaks just one language. Please look at this statement very carefully - nobody speaks just one language. Think about yourself; how many languages do you speak? Do you speak just one language? If the answer is no then think about people around you, think about society around you.

And, you will come to the conclusion that you, your friends, people around you in your neighbourhood, in your society, and anyone else that you know, anywhere else, would not be speaking just one language. On the basis of that I repeat myself again - nobody speaks just one language. There is no limitation on how many languages a person could speak. Maybe you speak 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 languages. There are people in several parts of the world, and particularly in our country India, who effortlessly speak 7 to 8 languages. They effortlessly move around 7 to 8 languages.

Now, that means, and it tells us, which is the following: if nobody speaks just one language, then no society speaks just one language. And in, at no place in the world just one language is spoken. We will be evaluating this as well. And, at the end of the course

you will get to see whether this is really true or not. However, if you think little harder you would have figured it out by now.

So, let me use a term - multilingualism. This term is often meant for someone who speaks more than 2 languages. Without taking too much of time I would like to introduce this term as a synonym for language. Language is multilingualism. In other words, multilingualism is the definition of language. To study language, there are 2 parts that we study – language, that is part of human mind, and language that is spoken in society. Language that is part, that is a spoken in society is the actual language which we have as sample for us to study. And through that sample, we study language of mind, that is language in human mind.

I will take 2 more terms for you to understand the following. Language is actually the real product, the real tool in the society. And, language is one of the most sophisticated products of human mind. Language helps us understand everything around us. Such is the significance of language. We will look at them as well. Now, the first task to look at language was taken up by an American anthropologist, George Grierson. And, it took about 30 years of time to understand and come up with a comprehensive discussion on language. This is called linguistic survey of India.

According to Grierson's study in linguistic survey of India, India speaks around 1650 languages. The total number of languages spoken around the world, according to an estimate, is roughly 5800. You can do the math and see how many languages are spoken in India, and what is the percent of languagees spoken all over the world that is spoken in India. This was just a short and quick detour for us to understand the questions that I asked you - how many languages you speak, and how many languages are spoken around us.

The primary goal for us will be to understand the relationship between language and mind. And, to understand how language is the most sophisticated product of human mind, we need to look at human mind as well. Human mind is a complex device and we do not really know what is going inside human mind at any given point in time. There is no mechanism until the date for us to figure that out. Even for an individual, there are lots of things going on at a time in human mind. Now, in this course I will be discussing human mind only with respect to language. And, I will try to relate that language is really a phenomena of human mind.

Now, let us look at one more question which will help us understand the phenomena of language and human mind. We will look at this through the following questions - when did humans start speaking, when did we start speaking language, and when did we start making sense. And, answers to these questions can be very complex and too long.

To understand this a very famous cognitive scientist Ray Jackendoff suggests, given the significance of these questions, what is important for us to understand is, to understand how humans became capable of using a complex system like language. And, answer to this question helps us understand when, how and what happened to language. We will be looking at this question as well.(Refer Slide Time: 18:47)

Language: Innate Capacity

- "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.

- This innate capacity requires input from immediate society.

Now, we turn to a question of human mind with its innateness. Charles Darwin once wrote - man has instinctive tendency to speak as we see in the babbles of our children while no child has instinctive tendency to bake, brew, and write. It is pretty simple to understand. What Charles Darwin is looking at is to understand that language is a natural phenomena to humans. Like birds fly, fish swim, humans speak. Such is the relationship between humans and language.

We have been looking at language, we have been talking about language, and at this point it is important to clarify language and natural language. When we say language we mean natural language, we mean spoken language. Language as a human capacity is innate, language as a human capacity is automatic. Like nobody teaches birds to fly, nobody teaches fish to swim, similarly we learn to speak automatically. And, we will look at this question as well.

So, to conclude, we have talked about 2 things in the first lecture. I have introduced you this course. I have introduced this course to you. I have told you what we will be looking at very broadly. And, I have talked about what language is about. And, we have just started thinking about what language is all about.

And, to summarize what language is all about I want you to keep just 3 to 4 points in mind. First - language is not just a tool of communication; it is much more than that; in a way it is a system by itself. Language is not something that we need to know who started speaking first, where language was invented, who were the first set of people who started speaking a language. What is important for us to understand is how did humans get this capacity to speak.

Third - we have looked at so many languages around the world and in India; that is 5600 number roughly across the world and 1650 in India itself. And, we have also talked that nobody speaks just one language. Given such a system, given such a scenario, we want to understand the phenomena of language and how it interacts with human mind. We will see how we learn language in the next session.

Thank you.