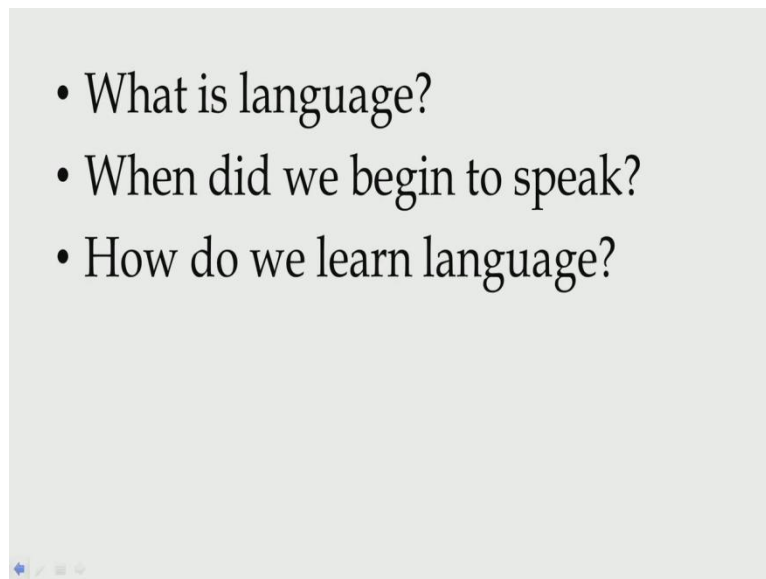


Language and Mind
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Module – 01
Lecture - 06
Language and Language Learning

Welcome back to the second week of this course. We are moving into the second week and by now you have gone through materials designed for the first week. We would like to begin the second week with the following that we would like to backtrack for a moment and summarize what you have done so far. We will do this for the first time to just help you that we are on the right track. We are doing what we promised we will be doing. So, what have we done so far? We have primarily talked about three things: we have talked about language, that is, what is language.

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- What is language?
 - When did we begin to speak?
 - How do we learn language?

We have looked at this question and we assume that you have developed a fair amount of understanding of language. We looked at development of language, that is evolution of language, and we have tried to understand the question, when did humans begin to speak. And then, we started looking at how do we learn language and evaluating, examining the role of human mind in the phenomena of learning of human language. We have looked at language, we will be looking at in details the role of human mind in this week.

We will be looking at human mind, what it does, what is the role of human mind in learning in more details, before we go to the structure. So, what do we know about language? What is language? Language as we would like to put is one of the fascinating and impressive human capacity. These terms are not merely interesting terms; when we say impressive and fascinating, they mean much - they are loaded terms. It happens to us in such a way that we do not pay much attention to language.

However, what happens to us, if we pay little bit attention to this; then, these two terms will make more sense. I mean think about it - how a child at the age of 3 or 4 starts speaking meaningful and grammatical sentences? We do not teach children to speak; and this happens for all the languages of the world; a child acquires language from the immediate society. Therefore, it is important for us to understand this whole phenomena and this is why we call it an impressive and fascinating capacity. Indeed it is a human capacity. It is not an ordinary thing; it is one of the most sophisticated products of human mind, in short. How it is one of the capacities of human mind?

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- Language:
 - Language is an impressive and fascinating human capacity.
 - Most sophisticated product of human mind.
 - Language is a system.
 - ‘How do we know so much given so little?’
(Plato’s problem)

We will look at it in more details; however, what we have seen so far is it is indeed one of the most sophisticated products of human mind. It is a system, it has patterns, it is rule governed, and it is a system; and this system is mathematical. Rules are inbuilt in us and we have looked at these things as well. So, at this time we can talk a little bit more in the sense that what led people to think about language in these terms is some of the

philosophers ideas which is known as Plato's problem - how do we know so much given so little.

This refers to the following. When we say given so little, we mean input. You have looked at the two terms input and output; children receive input from their immediate society. For example, a child born in Chennai will receive input from Tamil, because Tamil will be the natural language in the immediate environment. So, a child will receive input from Tamil and therefore, will end up speaking Tamil. What happens, how they figure patterns of Tamil? That you have seen and we will be talking about them again.

But, this input is very little; however, the output is so much so this is one of the philosophical ideas which has lead people to look at language in this direction. So, we would want to understand language in these terms and we would like to understand it as, not just as a tool for communication. Language definitely is a tool for communication; we talk to each other with language.

But, as an object of enquiry, as an object of study, it is a fascinating thing. It is a system, it is a rule governed system, it is, the system is patterned and mathematical in nature - is what we have seen so far as part of this study on language. Then, we moved on to examine, how did we... Well, we examined basically the origin of language.

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- Origin of Language:
 - Language has certainly evolved.
 - It was not planned.
 - Human language is very powerfully structured.
 - There is no evidence of time when language really started or humans began to speak.
 - Everything related to that is speculative.
 - The important part is to look at the power of this capacity.

Lot of people would ask questions like, what is the origin of language? What is the beginning point of language? How did language develop? How did language evolve? These are the questions sometimes people ask; naturally they come to people's mind when we speak something. We know language, everybody knows something about language, everybody can tell you something about language and what we know in our subconscious that language is not an static object, it is dynamic in nature, it keeps changing, it keeps evolving.

The way we speak whatever we speak, that is, whichever language we speak was not spoken in the same way several years ago and you can start looking at the chunk of years - 5 years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 100 years ago, I mean take an example. The way English was spoken during Shakespearean time, English is not spoken that way now, the reverse is also true. So is true for Hindi and many other languages. Then, therefore, this question is normal, this question is natural to ask. What happened, who were the first set of speakers of any given language? How did it happen that people started speaking?

However, how fascinating these questions are, all the attempts to answer this question have been merely a speculative; well, mostly a speculative. We do not have much to substantiate the origin of language and therefore, I did not go too much into the details of it. However, we have examined this question along the lines of Jackendoff suggestion. Jackendoff, as I have mentioned to you earlier, is one of the leading linguists and cognitive scientists of modern time.

And he rightly turns the question into the direction that when we wanted to understand origin of language and the fact that the history of humans is mostly speculative, when it becomes the question of language in particular, it is important for us, rather more important for us to look at how did humans become capable of using language? How did humans become capable of using such a complex system that we call language?

And in order to examine that we have seen many things, we have talked about many things that language has certainly evolved. It did not, it was not an outburst, it has evolved over a period of time and it keeps evolving all the time. It was not planned; few people did not sit down and created rules and words and what those words meant. This

did not happen; this does not happen anymore, this does not happen, this never happened.

So, therefore, we say language was not planned; it evolved, it is a very powerful system in a way that it is powerfully structured. We will be keeping at the structure of language, we will be looking at the structure of language pretty soon and then, we will refer back to this discussion on this structure, on language being very powerfully structured.

Well, like I said, there is no evidence of time when language really started or when humans began to speak. We have to accept these things and so, we can only talk about the capacity and describe the capacity and when we have done that, all the efforts that have gone in to understanding evolution of language and studying the structure of language and all various other parts of the study of language, they indicate a serious relationship between language and human mind and that is what we have been doing so far.

In order to continue looking at the relationship between language and human mind, we started looking at language learning and with everything that you have seen so far about language learning and you are going to see more about language learning, we need to understand that when we talk about language learning, we are talking about children's language learning, we are talking about speaking to learn. We are talking about spoken language, we are talking about learning to speak and that is automatic, that is innate, that is natural.

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- Learning/ Acquisition:
 - Language Learning is **NOT** a matter of habit formation or practice.
 - We do not learn by observing or copying others.
 - We are born with the capacity to speak.
 - Language grows in humans.
 - Children perform much better than grown up people in learning language.

So, therefore, we at this stage, we are not making a distinction between learning and acquisition. So, therefore, we call learning, acquisition as well and we use the two terms interchangeably. The important points that we have highlighted in our discussion so far is language learning is not a matter of habit formation; we do not observe others, we do not merely listen to others and repeat what they say and learn language; there is a whole lot of discussion behind this.

But, with whatever we have discussed so far, I would request you, I would want you to focus to try and understand, if needed read things about it, and try to understand the point that language learning is not a matter of habit formation; it is not a matter of practice, it is not that we copy others and then we speak. Just think if that happened, then we will be speaking only what we have heard.

However, empirical evidence suggests that we have the capacity to speak a sentence that we have never spoken before, that we have never heard before. We do not even know how many sentences we speak; we have capacity to generate in numerous sentences, infinite sentences. This is the capacity which is called generative capacity; this is the capacity which is important, this capacity involves lot of hypothetical understanding devices that have been proposed, like the fact that children are born with language acquisition device.

And language acquisition device contains universal grammar, which is basically blue print of principles and parameters, blue print of patterns of languages and form the immediate environment, when human mind receives input, based on the input, it starts figuring out underlying patterns of that language and rest of them remain dormant. On the basis of these things we have said and we can say, hypothetically speaking, children can speak, a growing up child can learn all the languages of the world at a time.

Again please understand, this is only a hypothetical situation. The fact that no children will receive input in all the languages of the world at a time; therefore, it is not going to be a viable situation; therefore, it is difficult to test that situation; but it is possible to make such a claim that if a child is given input in all the possible languages of the world, probably the child will end up speaking all the possible languages of the world. We deduce from this that the child ends up speaking languages that the child receives input in.

And therefore, if a child ends up receiving input in 4, 5 languages, then it is a normal for a child to end up speaking 4, 5 languages. Think about these ideas, read to substantiate these ideas. Then, we looked at these things in pretty detail so far. We will be looking at language and role of human mind in learning a language in little bit more details.

Thank you.