


**Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics**  
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**Lecture 5**  
**Language and Culture**

Welcome to class. Today we are going to talk about the relationship between language and culture. The relationship between language and culture is intertwined. They have a symbiotic relationship; an interdependent relationship. The issue of the influence of language on culture, or the influence or impact of culture on language has been long debated. It is a long tradition of debate with counter arguments in favor and against it.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf's idea, and then Franz Boas' idea for that matter, has got a long tradition. John Gumperz, for that matter. All these people have contributed a lot in understanding the relationship between language and culture. Anthropologists like Tyler are very vocal about this debate. Then a series of anthropologists, a number of anthropologists have been contributing to this debate.

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**Language and Culture**

- Language and Culture are intertwined.
- The influence goes in both the directions.
- We discover distinct set of people with distinct set of cultural patterns and beliefs.
- Difference in language is not simply structural and semiotic differences, it also represents difference in belief, value system, customs, and practices.
- Language is socio-culturally rooted.
- Values, fundamental assumptions, social behaviour, attitudes, and communicative patterns of a group constitute a distinct culture.



So today, we will talk about the relationship between language and culture. Now language and culture are intertwined and they both influence each other. Culture influences language and language influences 'culture'. When we say culture for that

matter, or if you look at the growth and the birth, growth and development of human civilization, culture was born the day we started interacting and sharing. Culture was born because we started interacting and sharing.

So it is very difficult to establish which is superior, which came first, which is important, and which is influential. Because they grow hand in hand. The growth in culture has led to changes in language, and excessive interactions, sharing, and socialization developed the culture. So it is very difficult to take a single position. We have to see language and culture in totality and how they are intertwined.

What kind of symbiotic relationship do they have and when we say different culture, different language? The differences in language in terms of vocabulary, sentences, utterances, structures and word usages are not merely differences of linguistic items, but they also represent a different value system. They represent a different cultural norm. They represent a different belief system, customs, traditions, conventions, and practices.

So we can say that language is socio-culturally rooted. It grows like an organism in the fertile land of social and culture. So values, fundamentals, assumptions, social behavior, attitudes, and communicative patterns of a group constitute a distinct culture of that group. So we cannot outrightly reject the idea that, we know the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, we know that they talk about language and culture. They talk about linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity.

Language may not determine our cognitive abilities, but definitely language and culture do share a common ground. They are interdependent, and the influence goes in both directions. So language does influence culture and culture does influence language. So that is the relationship between language and culture.


Look at English for that matter, English is spoken in the United States, English is spoken in the UK, English is spoken in Canada, Australia, Caribbean islands, and in India in a huge majority. Now the language is the same, but do we have the same cultural orientation of the language all over? These cultures are different, but we always use the

same language. So difference in language, do we have differences in grammar rules of English?

But there are certain cultural items. There are certain cultural components which are specific to the Indian variety of English. We call it Indian English because certain elements of Indian-ness are attached. Certain elements of American society are attached to American English. The spelling systems for that matter, or choice of words for the similar object 'Bonnet' versus 'Dickey', or 'Bonnet' versus 'Hood' for that matter. 'Lift' versus 'Elevator' for that matter.

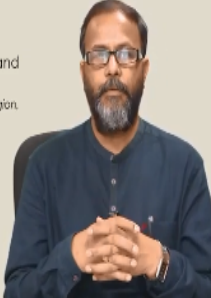
So objective realities remain the same, but choice of expressions change. Norms of socialization change. The context of huge changes so with the change of culture we find change of language. With the change of language we also record and register differences of culture. So language and culture are intertwined. They have a symbiotic relationship. They are inseparable and it gets accentuated and underlined when we talk about second or third language learning. We will come to that in a while.

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### Interaction, Socialization, and Sharing

- Alfred L. Krober:
  - Culture started when speech was available, and from that beginning, the enrichment of either one led the other to develop further.
  - Culture is the consequence of interaction and the act of communication is their cultural manifestatory/assertion.
  - Culture in a complex definition includes beliefs, arts, skills, moralities, laws, traditions and behaviours that an individual, as a member of a society, gets from his own society.
    - Taylor, E.B. (1974). *Primitive Culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*. New York: Gordon Press



Moving on, Krober says that culture started when speech was available. And from that beginning, the enrichment of either one led to the further development of the other. So, they are interdependent. Culture is the consequence of interaction and act of


communication is their cultural manifestation or recession. If you look at Taylor, he says that culture in a complex definition includes beliefs, arts, skills, moralities, laws, tradition, and behaviors that an individual as a member of a society gets from his own society.

Now let us look at this act of acquisition of language, when we acquire a language we acquire a language in a socio-cultural context in a linguistically rich environment as a human child. When we say acquisition of language, what actually are we referring to? Are we referring only to structures, vocabulary, grammatical rules, or does that acquisition process also include the manner and the context in which these are used?


So what Chomsky says linguistic competence and countered by Dell Hymes as communicative competence. So we not only acquire rules of grammar. We not only acquire vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation. But we also acquire the manner and the context in which they are used. So those functional properties of language are equally important and the formal properties of language are not alone important.

So when we say I know the language, we do understand that we are talking about the formal properties of language; knowledge of formal properties of language at the same time, knowledge of functional aspects of the language, and its uses. So structure and its use and the use of languages is strictly socio-culturally determined.

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- "Every cultural pattern and every single act of social behaviour involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense" (p. 104).
  - Sapir, E., (1956). *Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- "Language is a systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression".
  - Crystal, D., (1971). *Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- "If words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true." The concept of a sound-image or symbol in different languages is different.
  - Saussure, F. de, (1974). *Course in General Linguistics*. tr. Wade Baker, London: Fontana.



I will simply quote a few statements from various scholars who have contributed to this idea of ‘understanding’. One is Edward Sapir and he says every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense. So if you go to Krober’s idea, culture started when speech was available.

So when we say culture, it is a composite collective idea. Language inherits our shared history. Language encodes our shared history, shared culture, shared belief system, shared practices, and shared norms. So when a child acquires a language, a child requires a language in a social environment. A child becomes a member of that particular group by subscribing to the patterns of communication, conventions, and cultural practices of that group.

So we become individuals, at the same time part of that collective identity. If you look at Crystal, he says that language is a systematic, conventional use of sound, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression. So for all cultural performances and representations, we require language.

Referring to Saussure’s writings, if words stood for pre-existing concepts they would all have exact equivalence in meaning from one language to the next, but it is not true. The concept of a sound, image or symbol in different languages is different. So if you look at

the sound or image, the signifier was signified. The objective reality remains the same for all languages but the expression changes.

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## Encoding of Culture

- Cultural Knowledge
- Tradition
- Conventions
- Values
- Morality
- Taboo
- Social Behaviour, Manner
- Socialization
- Association
- Group Norms
- Expressions
- Shared Meaning
- Shared Understanding
- Social Hierarchy
- Power
- Shared History
- Social Group
- Acquisition of Language and Culture



So if you look at the way language functions, what is the cultural knowledge that we receive or learn through oral instructions or closed observation in a particular group? A shared knowledge about the culture. So when a human child is born, it is a biological fact. The biological reality of birth of a child remains the same across cultures, across languages.

But the way he or she becomes an individual, it happens in a particular socio-cultural context. These cultural norms are taught or given to the child through oral instructions in the presence of adults around. So a child inherits cultural knowledge through closed observations, oral instruction, and dos and don'ts. I mean you recall your own childhood and the way you are today. The person you are today is the product of a consistent structured instruction.


Cultural instructions that you received all around; about the traditions, conventions, values, morality, what to speak, what not to speak, when to speak, who it is supposed to speak, what should be the genre of speech, how to disagree, how to agree, how to greet, how to socialize, how to meet, all these skills we acquire, all the knowledge of such things we acquire is within a culture.

Our own social behavior, our manner, the patterns of our socialization, our association to our cultural group or social group, our subscriptions to group norms, ethnocentrism, all our expressions that we learn, we understand them, we practice them, only because we have a shared understanding and shared meaning. We understand about social hierarchy, our role, our social roles that we play.

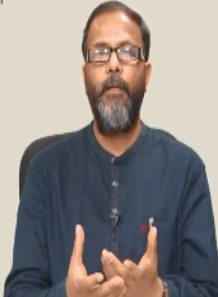
The distribution of power, status, position, so all these things we learn and all these things together are composite. We create culture, and all these things we learn in terms of learning linguistic instructions, understanding linguistic instructions through language. All these are inherited and transferred through language. All such knowledge is transferred through language.

So we not only acquire language, but we also acquire knowledge of culture and the ability to use linguistic expressions and structures in a particular socio-cultural context. So that is how our learning is complete. That is how our acquisition of language is complete. Because language encodes culture and when we say linguistic structures, we are also referring to the function of it. And the function of a structure is purely cultural and social.

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- Bilingualism
- Multilingualism
- Same Language but Different Culture: Case of English
- An infant is exposed to its surroundings that it becomes individual in and of its cultural group. This is a largely unconscious and involuntary process.
- The understanding of a culture and its people can be enhanced by the knowledge of their language.
- Children are brought up within a social group and they learn the dialect/variety and communication patterns of that group along with the rest of the subcultural and behavioural traits and attitudes that characterizes the group.
- Cultural understanding in second language acquisition/learning.





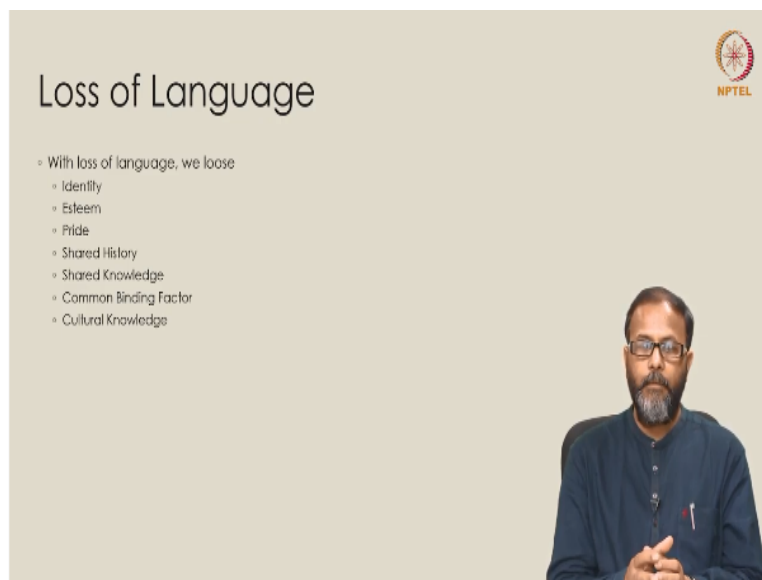
So this learning takes place in both ways. This becomes very prominent when you look at bilinguals. With the choice of language, with the choice of code, the speech patterns change. The communication pattern changes. People who are multilingual have the same language like English but different cultures and different representations in that language.

Assertions in that language; an infant or a newly born baby is exposed to language in the rich environment, but that newly born baby is also exposed to a series of cultural elements all around. And this understanding, this acquisition of language along with the functional properties of language take place together. They are not separate.

Children are brought up within a social group and they learn the dialect or variety and communication patterns of that group along with the rest of the sub-cultural and behavioral traits and attitudes that characterizes that group. And that is why it is important to emphasize on learning cultural context specifically in a structured classroom teaching of a second language.

When you learn English you not only learn English rules, grammar rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, conventions, but you also learn about the English culture, about the English society through language, through literature. So language and culture are very closely intertwined.

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The slide features a title 'Loss of Language' in a large, dark font. To the right of the title is the NPTEL logo, which consists of a circular emblem with a star-like pattern and the text 'NPTEL' below it. Below the title is a bulleted list of factors:

- With loss of language, we loose
  - Identity
  - Esteem
  - Pride
  - Shared History
  - Shared Knowledge
  - Common Binding Factor
  - Cultural Knowledge

In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark blue shirt, speaking with his hands clasped.

And it becomes more visible when we look at the loss of language. Because when you lose the language, what do you lose? Identity, esteem, pride? You lose the shared history. The difference between other species in the animal kingdom and human beings is that we have our history. We have our collective history. And how is it possible? If we have the knowledge of our collective history, it is possible because of the language.

If we have a shared culture, and we are inheriting and transmitting it to the next generation, it happens because of language. So when you lose the language, you lose everything, you lose your own identity, who you are. The moment you lose your identity, then your esteem, your pride; I mean recall that famous Macaulay statement. In his minutes of 1835, what he says is that we want to create a class of Indians who are Indian in bone and flesh, but English in morality. That is the power of language he is referring to. And look at the linguistic conflicts all around, the political conflicts all around.

So these conflicts have some genesis in some linguistic regions. For example, the creation of Bangladesh was a linguistic conflict. The linguistic conflict that started between Bangla and Urdu led to the division of Pakistan. So it all started with a linguistic conflict and that flared up to political conflict. Look at the English only campaign in the United States where a group of people demand that in order to have assimilation in the society we need to have only English in society; one language.

However, the United States has not declared any languages as their official language. So when you lose a language, you lose your identity, esteem, pride, your shared history, and the shared knowledge that language encodes. We lose the common binding factor of the group and the members, and we lose cultural knowledge because they are all encoded in language. A loss of language becomes almost like a loss of culture.

So finally we do understand that language and culture are closely connected, intertwined, and both influence each other. They have a symbiotic relationship. Language encodes culture and language use is governed by socio-cultural norms. Culture is expressed and asserted in terms of linguistic expressions, that is the relationship between language and culture.

We will talk about the Sapir Whorf hypothesis or linguistic relativity as it is known popularly in our next class. And we will see that even if you do not buy this strong version of the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, language as a determinant of our cognitive capabilities, we do understand that we cannot outrightly reject that as well.

So there is a degree of influence and that is a bidirectional relation. Both influence each other. And going by Krober's idea, culture happened because language was available, speech was available. So with this, this is it for now. Thank you.

Cultural practices, cultural beliefs, and social norms have a deep influence on linguistic structures. Look at the idea of politeness for that matter.

Politeness is a cultural thing. It is a culture specific thing. Look at the patterns of socialization in different cultures, look at the patterns of association in different cultures. And when we try to translate those concepts in a different language, translations offer us a deep insight into variation in culture and limitations of language in accommodating those variations. Because these differences are not only linguistic, their cultural differences and cultural items are very difficult to translate from one language to another. That is the relationship between language and culture.

The moment we start using another language like a bilingual, our entire communication pattern, our entire socialization pattern changes. We do not endorse the strong version of the Sapir Whorf hypothesis which says that our worldviews are constrained by the language we speak or language determines our cognitive abilities. But at the same time we cannot deny that language is influenced by culture.

Look at the cultural items, for example, the food items, the rituals, the expressions for rituals, expressions for food, expressions for traditions, customs, mode of address, socialization, intra-group socialization, inter-group socialization patterns, these are all expressed in terms of linguistic structures.

So that is the relationship. Symbiotic relationship between language and culture, and these differences are seen when we look at multilingual or bilingual societies very closely. So when we say loss of language, we talk about loss of a shared history. We

understand the loss of a shared culture. Those particular characteristics and distinct characteristics that characterize a particular group.

If you look at the metaphors in the language, look at how language represents class. How language represents a group? How language represents gender? So, you can find the connection between the two very clearly. For example, sexism in language which denotes the social attitude towards a particular gender. The collective attitude towards a particular gender and how it is in a certain way expressed in linguistic structures.

Look at the requests, look at the demands, and look at these structures available. They follow the cultural norm. So linguistic structures and social structures are intertwined; that is the relationship between language and culture, language and society. Social stratification of language was emphasized by William Labov in his studies.

How class influences the choice of expressions, choice of words, sentences, stress, his (( ))(29:06) as well. So study was equally prominent. If you look at various studies carried out in sociolinguistics, they all underline one fact that language is a social reality. It is deeply rooted in socio-political context. It cannot be studied or it cannot be understood and learned as an object.

So the influence between language and culture is bi-directional. Language influences culture and culture influences language. So we will talk about relativity, cultural relativity, and linguistic relativity in our next class when we talk about the Sapir Whorf hypothesis. This is it for now. Thank you very much.