

Comprehensive Study Notes: Understanding Language (Course-503, Block 1)

Unit 1: What is Language?

1.1 Understanding the Concept and Scope of Language

There are two primary ways of viewing language. The common view sees it simply as a means of communication, while the linguistic view defines it as a pairing of a grammar and a dictionary. Both perspectives, however, are restrictive. They incorrectly imply that grammars and dictionaries predate the speakers of a language. The most vital component of any language is its **speech community**—the people who speak it. It is this community that gives a language its shape and standard, and only through its speakers can grammars and dictionaries be created.

Language is a multifaceted human phenomenon with several key aspects:

- **Language and Identity:** Language identifies an individual's society, class, and social norms; for example, stating that one speaks Gondi reveals significant cultural and social context.
- **Language and Society:** Language is a medium for maintaining and moderating social hierarchies, expressing concepts like respect, love, and hate.
- **The Psychological Aspect:** Children possess an innate ability to master the complex grammatical rules of their language by the age of four, an untutored and universal phenomenon.
- **Language as a Medium:** It has the capacity to nullify physical distance, allowing for immediate emotional connection and communication over thousands of miles via a phone call.
- **Human Capacity for Language:** Humans have an innate capacity for multilingualism, enabling them to learn multiple languages spoken in their environment.
- **The Structural Aspect:** Language is a rule-governed system at every level, including sounds, word formation, and grammatical sentence structure.
- **The Evolving Nature of Language:** Language is in a constant state of gradual change, with notable differences often appearing between the language of grandparents and their grandchildren.

1.2 Language and Grammar: A Rule-Governed System

Every language and dialect, regardless of its perceived status, possesses its own grammar. This grammar governs its sound system, word formation, and sentence structure. Native speakers of a language rarely make grammatical mistakes, and when they do, they can typically self-correct immediately.

1.2.1 The Structure of the Sound System

Every language has a finite system of vowel and consonant sounds. The number of these sounds varies between languages.

Language	Vowel Sounds	Consonant Sounds
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English	20	24
Hindi	10	33

Within this system, languages have "**significant sounds**": the minimum meaningless sounds that can change a word's meaning. For instance:

- **English:** kil vs. pil
- **Hindi:** kal vs. pal

In the Hindi example, the substitution of the sound /k/ with /p/ single-handedly changes the word's meaning from 'tomorrow' to 'moment', proving both are 'significant sounds' in Hindi.

The combination of these sounds into clusters is also strictly rule-governed. In Hindi, for example:

1. **Rule 1:** If a word begins with a consonant cluster and the first consonant is /p/, the second consonant can only be /y/, /r/, /l/, or /v/.
2. **Rule 2:** For three-consonant clusters at the beginning of a word, the structure must be:
 - **C1:** Can only be /s/.
 - **C2:** Can only be /p/, /t/, or /k/.
 - **C3:** Can only be /y/, /r/, /l/, or /v/.
 - Examples include 'smriti' in Hindi and 'spray' in English.

1.2.2 Word Formation Rules

Word formation is also systematic. In Hindi, the form a noun takes changes based on its function and number. Consider the masculine nouns 'ghar' (house) and 'laRkaa' (boy).

ghar 'house' | Function | Singular | Plural | | :--- | :--- | :--- | | Nominative | ghar | ghar | | Elsewhere | ghar | gharoN | | Vocative | ghar! | gharo! |

laRkaa 'boy' | Function | Singular | Plural | | :--- | :--- | :--- | | Nominative | laRkaa | laRke | | Elsewhere | laRke | laRkoN | | Vocative | laRke! | laRko! |

As the tables show, a single form like '/laRke/' can be both singular and plural depending on its grammatical function. In 'laRke khel rahe haiN' (Boys are playing), it is plural. However, in 'laRke ne khaanaa khaayaa' (The boy ate food), it is singular *because it is followed by the postposition 'ne'*, which marks a specific grammatical case.

Another common word formation rule is the conversion of nouns into adjectives by adding a suffix.

- **English:** rain -> rainy
- **Hindi:** sarkar -> sarkarii

1.2.3 Sentence Construction Rules

At the sentence level, languages enforce strict rules, with subject-verb agreement being a primary example in Hindi. The verb changes to match the gender, person, and number of the subject.

- raam khaanaa khaataa hai (Ram [masculine] eats food.)
- siitaa khaanaa khaatii hai (Sita [feminine] eats food.)
- tuu khaanaa khaataa hai (You [informal, singular] eat food.)
- tum khaanaa khaate ho (You [plural] eat food. - masc.)
- tum khaanaa khaati ho (You [plural] eat food. - fem.)
- aap khaanaa khaate haiN (You [formal] eat food. - masc.)
- aap khaanaa khaatii haiN (You [formal] eat food. - fem.)
- maiN khaanaa khaata huuN (I eat food. - masc.)
- maiN khaanaa khaatii huuN (I eat food. - fem.)
- ham khaanaa khaate haiN (We eat food. - masc. plural)
- ham khaanaa khaatii haiN (We eat food. - fem. plural)

An exception to this rule occurs when the subject takes a postposition, such as the ergative case marker 'ne'. In this situation, the verb agrees with the **object**'s gender and number.

- laRke ne roTii khaayii (The boy ate bread.) - The verb khaayii is feminine, agreeing with the object roTii (bread).
- laRkii ne roTii khaayii (The girl ate bread.) - The verb remains the same, as it agrees with the feminine object, not the subject.

If both the subject and the object are followed by postpositions (e.g., 'ne' and 'ko'), the verb takes a neutral past form, such as 'maaraa' in laRke ne laRkii ko maaraa (The boy hit the girl).

1.2.4 Discourse Structure

Communication and dialogue are also rule-bound. Meaningful communication relies on principles of turn-taking, listening carefully, and using connecting words like 'isliye' (therefore) and 'kyonki' (because) to create logical and coherent discourse.

1.3 Standard Language

Language standardization is a socio-political process that typically occurs in four stages:

1. **Selection:** One language variety is chosen from among many others. This variety is often associated with a center of political or social power, such as Sanskrit in Brahmanic society or English under British rule.
2. **Codification:** Grammars and dictionaries are created for the selected variety to establish a formal standard. For modern Hindi, the Khadi Boli variety was codified for this purpose.
3. **Elaboration of Function:** The standard language is then used in official and high-status domains, including media, administration, the judiciary, and formal education.

4. **Acceptance:** The standardized variety is adopted by the wider community and used for cultural development in areas like cinema, literature, and music.

This process is closely linked to social exploitation, as the language of the powerful group is the one that is selected and promoted, often marginalizing other varieties. This demonstrates that standardization is not an inherent linguistic process, but a socio-political one imposed upon a speech community by those in power.

1.4 The Psychological and Social Aspects of Language

1.4.1 Psychological Aspects

Language is deeply connected to the human brain. Head injuries can lead to specific language imbalances, affecting a person's ability to understand, speak, or form words and sentences correctly.

This connection is explained by the concept of **Universal Grammar**, an innate linguistic faculty that all humans are born with. This faculty allows a child to acquire the highly complex rules of their native language untutored by the age of 3-4. This is an incredible cognitive feat, demonstrated by predictable stages of language development. For example, young children often simplify words (pronouncing 'scooter' as 'kooter') or use condensed sentences ('kul jana' for 'I have to go to school'), reflecting their internalization of grammatical rules.

This natural, untutored process of **language acquisition** in a home environment is distinct from the formal, tutored **language learning** that occurs in a school setting.

1.4.2 Social Aspects

Beyond learning grammatical rules, children also acquire **communicative competence**—the ability to use language appropriately according to the social context. They learn to adapt their language based on the person they are speaking to, the place, and the topic.

Language use reveals a great deal about a speaker's social identity, including their region, family background, and education level. For instance, in Delhi, the pronunciation of words like 'mazza' versus 'majja' or 'skul' versus 'sakul' can indicate a speaker's social background.

Multilingual behavior is a common feature of Indian society. For example, a college student may speak Marwari at home, use Hindi with her friends, study in English, and pray in Sanskrit, seamlessly switching between languages based on the social context.

1.5 Language, Literature, and Proficiency

The language of literature is stylistically different from ordinary, everyday language. The primary difference often lies in word arrangement and structure, as seen in the poetic line: 'karat karat abhyaas ke jaDmati hot sujaan'.

Language proficiency has a dual nature. A 4-year-old child is fully proficient in the basic grammar and vocabulary of their home language. At the same time, learning is a lifelong process, as one can always learn new words and expressions.

The context of learning significantly impacts proficiency:

- **Informal:** This is the natural, caring environment of family and friends, where children acquire language effortlessly without formal instruction.

- **Formal:** This is the structured school setting with teachers and materials. Despite these resources, children often struggle to learn a new language as effectively as they acquire their first language in an informal context.

In real life, language skills—Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing (LSRW)—are used simultaneously and are interdependent. Therefore, language proficiency should be assessed holistically rather than as a set of discrete, separate skills.

Unit 2: Indian Languages

2.1 India's Linguistic Diversity

India is a profoundly multilingual country, home to speakers of over 1600 languages from four different language families. The 1961 Census of India identified 1652 distinct mother tongues.

This multilingualism should be viewed as a **resource and a source of cultural richness**, not as a problem. As noted by R. K. Agnihotri, multilingualism is linked to "scholastic achievement, cognitive flexibility and social tolerance." India has historically demonstrated an acceptance of linguistic diversity, providing a home for speakers of Sindhi, Tibetan, Arabic, and French, among others. This contrasts with the monolingual approach often seen in countries like the United States.

Attitudes toward linguistic diversity are critical.

- **Positive Attitude:** The Naga community exemplifies a positive approach. They use their respective mother tongues within sub-groups, a link language called Nagameez between sub-groups, and Hindi or English when communicating with outsiders.
- **Negative Attitude:** In contrast, negative attitudes can lead to social conflict, such as the disputes over the status of Marathi and Konkani in Goa or Kannada and Marathi in Belgaon.

2.2 Language Families and India as a "Linguistic Area"

The languages of India belong to four major families:

- **Indo-Aryan:** Includes Hindi, Bengali, Sanskrit, Punjabi, Marathi, and others.
- **Dravidian:** Includes Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and others.
- **Tibeto-Burman:** Includes Manipuri, Bodo, Mizo, and others.
- **Austro-Asian/Munda:** Includes Munda, Santhali, Ho, and others.

Despite originating from different families, these languages have developed shared structural features due to thousands of years of close contact. This has led to the concept of **"India as a Linguistic Area."** Languages across families have borrowed from one another, resulting in common characteristics such as:

- **Echo words:** A word is followed by a rhyming, meaningless word to imply "and so on" (e.g., caay-vaay for 'tea and other things').
- **Reduplicated words:** A word is repeated to convey a sense of "every" (e.g., ghar-ghar meaning 'every house').

- **Post-positions:** Prepositional concepts are placed after the noun (e.g., *mez par*) rather than before it ('on the table').
- **Shared Sounds:** The presence of retroflex sounds (T, Th, D, Dh) is common across all language families in India.

2.3 Constitutional Provisions for Language

Provisions for language are outlined in Part 17 of the Indian Constitution.

- **Article 343:** Declares Hindi in the Devanagari script as the **Official Language** of the Union and English as the **Associate Official Language**.
- **Official Language Act (1963):** Solidified the status of English, allowing for its continued use as the associate official language indefinitely.
- **Article 345:** Allows individual states to adopt one or more of their regional languages, alongside Hindi, as their official languages for state-level administration. For example, states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar adopted Hindi, while Punjab adopted Punjabi, Maharashtra adopted Marathi, and Tamil Nadu adopted Tamil.
- **Article 351:** Assigns the Union the duty to promote the spread and development of the Hindi language.

Crucially, you must note that the Constitution of India does not specify a 'National Language'. This is a common misconception.

2.4 Categories of Indian Languages

2.4.1 Scheduled Languages

Scheduled Languages are those listed in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. This list has grown over time, reflecting the recognition of India's linguistic diversity. Initially containing 14 languages in 1950, the list was expanded as follows:

- **1967 (21st Amendment):** Sindhi was added.
- **1992 (71st Amendment):** Konkani, Manipuri, and Nepali were added.
- **2003 (92nd Amendment):** Boro, Santhali, Maithili, and Dogri were added. The total number of Scheduled Languages is currently 22.

2.4.2 Mother Tongue

The 2001 Census department provided a specific definition for "mother tongue":

“Mother tongue refers to the language in which a person’s mother speaks to him or her in their childhood. If the mother is not present then the language spoken at home will be the mother tongue. If there is still doubt then the language mostly spoken at home is the mother tongue.”

2.4.3 Classical Languages

The government of India has established three criteria for a language to be declared "classical":

1. It must have a recorded history or written literature spanning 1500-2000 years.

2. It must have a body of ancient literature or epics considered a valuable heritage by its speakers.
3. Its literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community.

The languages that have received this status are:

- **Tamil** (2004)
- **Sanskrit** (2005)
- **Kannada** (2008)
- **Telugu** (2008)

2.4.4 Language vs. Dialect

From a linguistic perspective, there is no difference between a "language" and a "dialect." Both are complete, rule-governed systems with their own grammar and structure.

The distinction is purely **social and political**, determined by which group holds power. The language spoken by the powerful and elite is typically labeled a "language," while similar varieties are demoted to the status of "dialects." This dynamic is a direct reflection of the 'Selection' stage in language standardization, where the variety associated with power is elevated to the status of 'language'. The historical status of Khadi Boli, Braj, and Awadhi illustrates this: each was considered a "language" of literature when its region was the center of political power, only to be reclassified as a "dialect" when power shifted elsewhere.

2.5 Status of Hindi and English

2.5.1 The Status of Hindi

Historically, the term "Hindi" has encompassed various forms, including The Hindi, Khari Boli, and Hindustani. Modern Standard Hindi is based on the Khari Boli variety spoken around Delhi and Meerut.

Hindi's development as a literary language was enriched by contributions from other languages now considered its dialects. The literature of Braj, Awadhi, and Maithili, including masterpieces like Jayasi's 'Padmawat' and Tulsidas's 'Ramcharitramanas', forms a significant part of the Hindi literary heritage.

As an administrative language, Hindi's role grew over time, culminating in its adoption by the Constituent Assembly as the official language of the Indian Union on September 14, 1949.

2.5.2 The Status of English

English was introduced to India by British missionaries and became the language of administration and education during colonial rule. After independence, it retained its prominence and was designated the associate official language.

Its continued importance in modern India is due to several factors:

- It is a primary language for commerce and business.
- It holds significant international status.
- It is the dominant language of science, technology, and higher education.

2.6 Language Education Policy in India

Several national policies have addressed language in education:

- **National Policy of Education 1968:** Stressed the importance of developing Indian languages to foster educational and cultural progress.
- **Ramamurthy Committee (1990) Review:** Pointed out that the dominance of English in higher education served as a barrier for children from rural backgrounds.
- **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005:** Recommended that India's multilingual character be treated as a resource. It strongly advocated for using children's mother tongues, including tribal languages, as the medium of instruction.

The **Three-Language Formula** is a key policy strategy designed to promote multilingualism in schools. The implementation varies between Hindi-speaking and non-Hindi-speaking states.

State Type	1st Language	2nd Language	3rd Language
Hindi-speaking states	Mother tongue or regional language.	Any modern Indian language or English.	English or any modern Indian language not taught as the 2nd language.
Non-Hindi-speaking states	Mother tongue or regional language.	Hindi or English.	English or any modern Indian language not taught as the 2nd language.

Unit 3: Language Learning and Teaching

3.1 First Language Acquisition: The Process

The experiences of children like Genie (deprived of language), Sandhya (whose language was affected by a brain injury), and Homna (a fluent multilingual) establish a core principle of language acquisition: it requires both an innate biological capacity (**nature**) and sufficient exposure to a language-rich environment (**nurture**). Both elements are essential for a child to learn to speak.

3.1.1 Biological Adaptation for Language

Humans are biologically adapted for language in two key ways:

- **For Speaking:** The physical organs used for speech are specifically adapted for sound production. When we speak, our lungs regulate our breathing rhythm to allow for long periods of speech. The human tongue is thick, muscular, and mobile, and our lips have well-developed muscles, allowing for a wide range of articulate sounds that other primates cannot produce.
- **For Comprehension:** For most right-handed individuals, the left hemisphere of the brain functions as the language center. Evidence for this comes from the **Dichotic Listening Test**, where subjects hear different words in each ear simultaneously. Most people report hearing the word from the right ear, as its signal goes directly to the left hemisphere. The sound from the left ear takes a longer route, demonstrating the left

hemisphere's specialization. Specific areas within this hemisphere have specialized functions:

- **Broca's area** is primarily responsible for speech production.
- **Wernicke's area** is primarily responsible for speech comprehension.

3.1.2 The Role of Environment and the "Critical Period"

While biology provides the capacity, a language-rich environment is essential to activate it. Language acquisition is most effective during a "**critical period**," which spans from approximately age 2 to 14. During this time, children can learn language naturally and almost effortlessly.

The cases of Genie and Isabella powerfully illustrate this concept. Isabella, who had no speech at age six, caught up rapidly once exposed to language and was indistinguishable from her peers by age eight. Genie, however, was not exposed to language until age 13, past the critical period, and never developed the ability to produce fully grammatical sentences.

Children do **not** learn language through simple imitation. Evidence for this includes:

- Direct correction of a child's grammar by parents has little to no effect.
- Parents are more likely to correct the truthfulness of a child's statement rather than its grammatical correctness.
- Children frequently produce novel forms they have never heard from adults (e.g., "goed," "comed"). This shows they are actively testing and applying grammatical rules, not just repeating what they hear.

3.1.3 Stages of Language Acquisition

Children around the world pass through a series of fixed, predictable stages as they acquire their first language(s):

- **Cooing/Gooing** (approx. 6 weeks): Production of vowel-like sounds.
- **Babbling** (approx. 6 months): Production of consonant-vowel clusters like 'ma-ma-ma' or 'gi-gi-gi'.
- **One-word Stage (Holophrastic)** (approx. 1 year): The child uses single words to convey complex ideas. This stage is marked by **over-generalization**, where a word is applied too broadly (e.g., calling all four-legged animals 'doggie').
- **Two-word Stage (Telegraphic Speech)** (approx. 1.5 years): The child begins combining two words to form simple sentences. This is called **telegraphic speech** because it consists mainly of content words (nouns, verbs) while omitting function words (prepositions, articles).
- **Longer Utterances** (2-4 years): Sentences become longer and more grammatically complex. The acquisition of grammatical forms follows a predictable order; for example, the '-ing' ending and the plural '-s' are typically learned before the possessive '-s'.

3.2 Second Language Acquisition and Learning

When discussing languages learned after the mother tongue, it is useful to distinguish between a *second language* and a *foreign language*. A second language is one that has a presence in the learner's immediate environment (e.g., Hindi for a Bhojpuri speaker in Bihar), whereas a foreign language may not (e.g., English for a child in many parts of India).

3.2.1 Acquisition vs. Learning

According to linguist Stephen Krashen, there are two distinct ways to develop competence in a second language: acquisition and learning.

Feature	Language Acquisition	Language Learning
Process	Subconscious "picking-up" a language.	Conscious "knowing about" a language.
Environment	Natural, communicative situations.	Formal classroom, explicit teaching.
Focus	Using language for communication.	Learning rules, grammar, vocabulary.
Awareness	Not aware of learning rules; develops a "feel" for correctness.	Aware of rules and able to talk about them.

3.2.2 How to Facilitate Second Language Acquisition

The key to fostering second language acquisition in a classroom is to provide '**comprehensible input**'. This means exposing learners to language that is slightly beyond their current level but still understandable, delivered through meaningful, natural, and communicative situations.

Speaking fluency is not taught directly; it "**emerges**" over time as the learner receives more comprehensible input. Several affective factors also influence acquisition:

- Motivation
- Self-confidence
- Anxiety

The teacher's role is to provide input in a **low-anxiety situation** to foster these positive factors.

Conscious 'learning' of grammar rules plays a limited role, according to Krashen's **Monitor Hypothesis**. This learned knowledge acts as an "editor" or "monitor" to correct utterances. This is most useful in planned activities like writing, but is generally too slow to be used in spontaneous speech.

3.2.3 The Myth of First Language "Interference"

The idea that a learner's first language "interferes" with learning a second language is largely a myth, particularly regarding grammar and vocabulary.

- **Grammar:** Research shows that learners of a second language follow a 'natural order' of acquiring grammatical structures, regardless of their first language. A native Hindi speaker learning English does not produce sentences like "I an apple am eating."

- **Vocabulary:** Using words from one's first language (e.g., *diwali*, *kurta*) or adapting second-language words to new cultural contexts (e.g., the broad use of 'uncle' in India) is a natural result of language contact and cultural expression, not a form of negative interference.
- **Phonology (Sounds):** This is the one area where first language influence is significant, especially for learners past the critical period. The sound system of one's first language can make it difficult to perceive and produce sounds that do not exist in it. For example, a Hindi speaker may struggle to differentiate the sounds in 'van' and 'watch', while an English speaker may find it difficult to produce aspirated sounds like 'kh' in 'khargosh'.

3.3 Methods of Language Teaching

Over time, various methods have been developed for teaching second languages, each with a different focus.

- **Grammar Translation Method:** This is the oldest method, focusing on the memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary lists. The primary goal is to enable students to read literature and translate texts from one language to another.
- **Direct Method / Audio-Lingual Method:** These methods emphasize listening and speaking skills. They use dialogue and pattern drills as primary teaching tools, often discouraging the use of the learner's native language in the classroom.
- **Communicative Method:** This approach focuses on developing communicative competence. The goal is to teach learners how to use language appropriately in various social contexts, with lessons often structured around real-life situations like 'At the railway station'.
- **Natural Approach:** This is a modern, learner-centered method based on theories of language acquisition. It prioritizes providing learners with abundant comprehensible input in a low-anxiety, tension-free environment to facilitate natural acquisition.