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Topic - Socio-Linguistics - Language Variation - I

Language is a social-cultural-geographical phenomenon. There is a deep relationship between language and society. It is in society that a man acquires and uses language. When we study a language which is an abstraction of abstractions, a system of systems, we have to study its further abstractions such as dialects, sociolects, idiolects etc. So, we have to keep in mind the geographical area in which this language is spoken, the culture and the society in which it is used, the context and situation in which it is used, the speakers who use it, the listeners for whom it is used, and the purpose for which it is used, besides the linguistic components that compose it. Socio-linguistics is the study of speech functions according to the speaker, the hearer, their relationship and contact, the context and the situation, the topic of discourse, the purpose of discourse and the form of discourse. An informal definition of Socio-linguistics suggested by a linguist is that it is the study of: "who can say what how, using what means, to whom and why." It studies the causes and consequences of linguistic behaviour in human societies; it is concerned with the function of language, and studies language from without.

Socio-linguistics is a fascinating and challenging field of linguistics. It studies the way in which language

interacts with society. It is the study of the way in which the structure of a language changes in response to its different social functions and the definition of what these functions are.

The kinds of problems which are faced by the socio-linguist are: the problems of communities which develop a standard language and the reaction of minority groups to this as in Belgium, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Wales; the problems of people who have to be educated to a linguistic level where they can cope with the demands of a variety social situations (for example of problem of learning Hindi in the people of Tamilnadu if they want to have a communication with common people of North India); the problems of communication which exist between nations or groups using a different language, which affects their world view, the problems caused by linguistic change in response to social factors; the problems caused or solved by bilingualism or multilingualism (for example in India and Canada). By this however it does not mean that Socio-linguistics can or does solve all such problems as stated above. Yet it can identify precisely what the problems are and provide information about the particular manifestation of a problem in a given area, so that possible solutions may be found out or expedited.

The scope of socio-linguistics, therefore, is the interaction of language and various sociologically definable variables such as social class, specific social situation, status and roles of speakers/hearers etc. As J.B. Pride says, Socio-linguistics is not simply 'an amalgam of linguistics and sociology'. It incorporates, in principle at least, every aspect

of the structure and use of language that relates to its social and cultural functions. Hence there seems no real conflict between the socio-linguistics and the psycho-linguistic approach to language. Linguisticians like John Lyons and cognitive psychologists like Campbell and Wales advocate the necessity of widening the notion of competence to take account of a great deal of what might be called the 'social context' of speech.

• Language Variation ! —

Language with its different varieties is the subject matter of socio-linguistics. Language can vary, not only from one individual to the next but also from one sub-section of speech community to another. People of different age, sex, social classes, occupation or cultural groups in the same community will show variations in their speech. Thus, language varies in geographical and social space. According to socio-linguists, a language is a code. There exists varieties within the code. The major varieties that exist within the code are :-

- (i) Dialects
- (ii) Registers
- (iii) Idiolects
- (iv) Dioglossia
- (v) Pidgins
- (vi) Creoles

Dialect

A regional, temporal or social variety within a single language is a dialect. It differs in pronunciation,

grammar and vocabulary from the standard language, which is in itself a socially favoured dialect. So, a dialect is a variation of language sufficiently different to be considered a separate entity within a language but not different enough to be classed as a separate language. Regional dialects (or local or territorial dialects) are spoken by the people of a particular geographical area within a speech community e.g. Cockney in London but due to increase in education and mobility they are receding.

"Dialects is a specific form of a given language spoken in a certain locality or geographical area, showing sufficient differences from the standard of literary form of that language, as to pronunciation, grammatical construction and idiomatic use of words to be considered a distinct entity, yet not sufficiently distinct from other dialects of the language to be regarded as a different language."

(A Dictionary of Linguistics by A. Pie and Frank Grayson)

Dialects are dialects not because of linguistic reasons but because of political or cultural reasons. It is customary to describe them as varieties of a language according to users. For example, Brijbhāsa, Avadhī, Bhojpuri, Kharī Boli etc are some of the dialects of Hindi.

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