

Varieties of Language

U.G. Semester IV

MJC - 06

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There are a handful of ways linguists categorise varieties of languages; some definitions refer to word usage and rules, or merely to vocabulary, while others refer to the way language adapts culturally, in broader strokes. If we take the example of India, within the span of Indian Territory there are about 1652 languages spoken, which only points to the linguistic diversity of our land. It is not only that there are these many languages, but at the same time one has to keep in mind that these languages are used in different settings by different individuals in different ways. For example, a Bhojpuri man may use his Bhojpuri at home, but when he is in a formal setting he would prefer to use standard Hindi, and if he knows English he may use that in a much more formal setting. He may even mix the two languages while speaking to friends, while when he writes he may be using any one of the three languages but his language will be much more formal. Thus in different settings, according to the listener or some other parameter he may choose to use different language. Sociolinguistics studies this aspect of language in detail.

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Variation Studies

In Variation studies, Noam Chomsky's (a famous linguist and a political thinker of the twentieth century) distinction between Competence and Performance is very significant. Chomsky differentiates competence, which is an idealized capacity, for performance being the production of actual utterances. According to him, competence is the ideal speaker's hearer's knowledge of his or her and it is the 'mental reality' which is responsible for all those aspects of language use which can be characterised as 'linguistic'. Performance refers to the specific utterances, including grammatical mistakes and non-linguistic features like hesitations, accompanying the use of language. For example, the Hindi spoken in Delhi and the Hindi spoken in eastern UP or in Haryana are very different. Similarly, the English used in India is very different from the English used in United States of America or Caribbean or England. English is often different not only across the borders, but even within India.

to be continued

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