

CHAPTER 2

LANGUAGE AND THEORIES OF LANGUAGE CHANGE

In this chapter of my research I shall focus on trying to define language, learn its characteristics and explicate theories of Language change. The first part of this chapter attempts to define language and explicate its characteristics. The second part of the chapter tries to analyze the concept of language change and look at theories that explain the causes and types of language change.

2.1 Defining Language

It is said that ‘language is a species-specific and species-uniform possession of man’ (Varshney 1). It is believed by most people as a ‘special gift of God to humankind.’ The human civilization as we know it today would have remained a distant possibility without the existence of language (Varshney 1). Language is present everywhere, it is present in our thoughts, dreams, prayers, meditations, rituals etc. Besides being a means of communication and store house of knowledge, it is an instrument that enables us to think (Varshney 1).

Language helps us to transfer knowledge from one person to another as well as from one generation to another. It is our ability to communicate through words (in other words our ability to use a sophisticated language) that makes us different from animals. However, because of its omnipresence language is often taken for granted. Nevertheless, since time immemorial Linguists, Philosophers, Logicians, Psychologists, Scientists and

Literary critics have been trying to explicate the concept of Language and have been intrigued by it (Varshney 1).

Many people have speculated about how language as we know it came to emerge in the species, and how the present form of language developed. There is the ‘Bow-wow theory,’ that presumes that human language evolved from animal cries; the ‘Heigh-ho theory,’ tends to suggest that language developed from grunts of socialized effort and the ‘Ouch theory,’ says it all developed from cries of pain. Very little evidence is available for such proposals, and it is difficult to see the relation between cries of pain and the very specific properties of Universal Grammar Linguists speak of (Lightfoot 228; Nordquist; Wikipedia contributors; “6 Early Theories About the Origin of Language”). Thus, though these theories may suggest the possible reason for the origin of language these theories have been found inadequate to explain the complexity of language.

Another idea is that the crucial element in the emergence of language was physiological. It is sometimes claimed that the throat of Neanderthal man was constructed in such a way that it was impossible to articulate a variety of vowel sounds, as was necessary for human language. If that were so, how and why is it that Neanderthals didn’t develop a language with just one vowel or why didn’t they use another modality; perhaps a form of sign language? One wonders why the language faculty would have lain idle and unexploited until the throat changed shape at some point of time in the history. This entire theory of the Neanderthals appears a most unlikely history, but whatever the fossil evidence, such a view would not be helpful for somebody who views language as the product of a mental organ with a rich structure provided by

the genotype. In this regard it would be extremely interesting to know how that mental organ evolved in the species (Lightfoot 228).

Language is a very complex human phenomenon all attempts to define it in the past have proved inadequate. In a nutshell, 'it is an organized noise used in actual social situations,' (Varshney 1). Sometimes it is also defined as 'contextualized systematic sounds.' According to 'Patanjali,' an ancient Indian Linguist, 'Language is that human expression which is uttered out by speech organs.' According to Encyclopedia Britannica vol. 13, "Language is a system of conventional, spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participant in its culture communicate" (Varshney 1).

Some of the well known definitions of Language are as follows: According to Edward Sapir, "Language is a primarily human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" (Varshney 1). A.H. Gardiner defines language as follows, "Language in its widest sense means the sum total of such signs of our thoughts and feelings as are capable of external perception and as could be produced and repeated at will" (Varshney 1). Henry Sweet has the following words to describe language, "Language may be defined as the expression of thought by means of speech-sounds" (Varshney 1). Thus, Linguists have different definitions to offer pertaining language. In all these definitions they emphasize how crucial language is for human civilization and existence.

2.2 Characteristics of a Language

Having had a close look at what language is and having attempted to define language let us now have a look at some of the important characteristics of Language. The following are the most widely accepted characteristics of language presented by prominent linguists.

2.2.1 Language is Sound

Language it is said is “an organization of sounds, of vocal symbols, the sounds produced from the mouth with the help of various organs of speech to convey some meaningful message” (Varshney 3) Language is said to be a systematic verbal symbolism which makes use of verbal elements such as sounds, words and phrases which are arranged in such a way as to make sentence formation possible. Language is vocal because it is made up of sounds which can be produced by the organs of speech (Varshney 3; Smartenglishnotes; Robbins).

2.2.2 Language is a means of Communication

Language it is said is the most powerful, convenient and permanent means and form of communication. Some of the non- linguistic symbols such as expressive gestures, signals of various kinds- traffic lights, road-signs etc, are also means of communication but they are not so flexible, comprehensive, perfect and extensive as language is. Language is the best means of self-expression. It is through language that humans express

their thoughts, desires, emotions and feelings; it is through it that they store knowledge, transmit messages, knowledge and experience from one person to another from one generation to another. In fact most of the activities in the world are carried out through or by it (Varshney 3; Hakim).

2.2.3 Language is Non-Instinctive and Conventional

One fact about language is that “no language was created in a day out of a mutually agreed upon formula by a group of humans” (“10 Main Features Or Characteristics of Language”). Language is the outcome of evolution and convention. Each generation transmits this convention on to the next. Like all human institutions, languages also change and die, grow and expand. Every language then is a convention in a community. Language in the context of humans can be described as non- instinctive because it is acquired. Nobody inherits a language without making any effort. He/she has to learn or acquire it through personal effort. Humans have the innate ability to acquire language. Unlike human beings, in the case of Animals they inherit their system of communication by heredity (Varshney 4; “10 Main Features Or Characteristics of Language”).

2.2.4 Language is Arbitrary

Arbitrariness of language here refers to the fact that in the context of language and its meaning there is absence of inherent or logical relation or similarity between any

given features. Language and its meaning is entirely arbitrary, there is no direct, necessary connection between the nature of things or ideas that language deals with. It is through the linguistic units and their combinations by which ideas or things are expressed. There is no reason why the four legged domestic animals should be called dog in English, *Kutta* in Hindi, *Kukkur* in Sanskrit etc., those particular words (rather than any other) used in these different languages are merely an accident of linguistic history. When we compare one language to the other Languages we can see that there is no uniformity; in fact there are various variations in languages (Varshney 4-5; “10 Main Features Or Characteristics of Language”).

2.2.5 Language is Dynamic

Language is so far known and believed to be a unique phenomenon of the earth. Other planets do not seem to have any language, although this fact may be invalidated if the future discoveries prove it otherwise; (a distant possibility of discovering a talking generation on another planet.) But so far there has not been any evidence of such an existence. Each language is unique in its own way. This does not mean that languages do not have any similarities or universals; what we wish to say is that despite their common features, each language has its peculiarities and distinct features. Language has creativity and productivity; the structural element of human language can be combined to produce new utterances. It is very important to note that Language changes according to the needs of the society. Thus, old English is different from the modern English so is the case of Hindi and other languages (Varshney 5-6).

2.3 Theories of Language Change

It is said Language changes from generation to generation. Some historical linguists say that ‘phenotypical’ language change is subject to the same principles as those which guide the evolution of species. This, in other words refer to the theory of ‘natural selection.’ This theory suggests that languages with certain new properties are fitter for our communicative needs, better, and therefore more likely to flourish. This was a common view in the nineteenth century when historians sought a general direction to change (Lightfoot 227).

Language has a tendency to change from complexity towards simplicity, from length towards precision, from difficulty towards ease, from disorder towards order. Need for uniformity or diversity, desire for novelty, need for new expressions because of new inventions, discoveries, developments, and need to find words for new objects, concepts and places cause language change. Language changes because of linguistic, social cultural, psychological, historical and geographical factors too (Varshney 275).

According to Saussure, language changes due to the innovations of individuals (which is likely even among Bodos) and of community and at certain times also due to historical reasons. Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) an American linguist gives several accounts of linguistic change and concludes that ‘sound change arises from the preference for one non-distinctive variant of a phoneme over another’ (Varshney 275). Changes in the syntax or phonology or meaning of a language also result from borrowing which, in most cases takes place because of ‘prestige which may not be true in the case of the Bodos. Neighbouring dialects and languages as well as foreign languages also bring about linguistic changes through inter-community mingling of people (Varshney 275).

The application of Darwin's theory of natural selection in the context of language change points to the reality that languages voluntarily accept easier and shorter forms in place of the more difficult ones. The Contemporaries of Darwin too agreed that languages become simpler, more natural, or easier to pronounce, and these ideas continued into the twentieth century (Lightfoot 227). Brigitte Bauer thinks that right-branching languages are easier to pronounce and hence fitter; and this is offered as an explanation for why left-branching Latin developed into right-branching French. For her, evolutionary principles guide this kind of language change, and children eventually come to select fitter languages (Lightfoot 227).

However, we have seen that quest for general direction to change have not been successful as there have always been arbitrariness. Thus, we can't say that present day English is fitter than old English in any way nor is French fitter than Latin. As far as we can tell languages have always been as complex as they are today. When we look at the earliest records of languages we can conclude that there never were any simple languages. Change in grammars turns out to be more contingent than Darwin and Bauer expected and thus the theory of natural selection does not seem the most appropriate notion to explain how languages change (Lightfoot 228).

2.4 Types of Language Change

Language change may be very broadly divided into two categories: internal change and external change. 'Borrowings' in all its forms are instances of external change. Changes that do not come about through borrowing maybe called instances of

internal change. Some forms of internal changes are addition and loss of sounds and lexical items, coinages and extensions (Varshney 275). In this section we shall discuss the causes of internal change in language. The causes of external change will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

2.4.1 Internal Language Change

To begin with let us study the cause of internal changes in a language. As mentioned earlier the internal changes in a language can happen due to various reasons some of them being addition, loss of sounds, coinages, extensions etc (Varshney 275).

2.4.1.1 Sound Change

It is a term employed to describe the passage or historical transition from a given phoneme or groups of phonemes to another. In other words it may be defined as creation or disappearance of phonemes. A sound change occurs when the pronunciation by a social unit (town, village or nation) of that sound at a time is different from what it was at an earlier time (Varshney 276). Sound change can happen due to various factors let us discuss them in the following sections:

2.4.1.1.1 Causes of Sound Change

There are various theories to explain why sound change takes place. The first theory says that sound change is brought about by anatomical (bodily structural) changes within the population. Others assign sound change to social or historical reasons and discover a link between political instability and linguistic instability. Then there are substratum theories based on the assumption that the absorption of new comers or immigrants by indigenous populations brings about certain changes in sound (Varshney 276). All the reasons mentioned above by the theories do contribute to sound change to a certain degree. But we can't assign to a single particular theory the sole cause for sound change.

According to the 'ease theory,' sound changes are said to occur because of human laziness, indolence, inertia, shirking, easy-goingness, sluggishness etc. The imitation theory attributes origin of phonetic change as any other linguistic change in imitation whether conscious or unconscious of the speech habits of other people. Just as imitation produces change so also does resistance to imitation. Therefore, willingness to imitate and unwillingness to do so has the same result that is change in sound. Lastly the most potent and widespread cause of sound change it is said is the speech interference in the bilingual speaker (Varshney 276). In a multi-cultural nation like India most people are bilingual. The following are few broad division of sound changes most of the sound changes can be fitted into the following three categories:

2.4.1.1.1 Unconditioned or Generic Changes

It is a change that affects every occurrence of a certain sound no matter where about in the word it occurs. For instance old English ‘a:’ changes to ‘o:’ and later to ‘ou’. The word ‘ham’ became ‘hoom’ and later ‘home’. Similarly, the word ‘ban’ became ‘boon’ and later ‘bone.’ Unconditioned or generic changes are rare (Varshney 276). The example of generic sound change here is specific to English language. However, there are many languages in the world that experience generic change in their own way. As mentioned earlier it happens very rarely though.

2.4.1.1.2 Conditioned Changes

Conditioned or Combinatory Changes occur only under a fixed set of conditions. Allophones of phonemes are generally restricted to certain environments where they are conditioned by their surroundings. When such allophones undergo change we speak of a conditioned or a combinatory change. For instance in Middle English the first syllable of any three syllable word was shortened so ‘halidaeg’ eventually became ‘holiday.’ Similarly Middle English ‘e’ became ‘a’ before ‘r’ thus ‘stere’ became ‘stare’ and later ‘star’ (Varshney 276-77). Thus, we see how allophones ⁱ and phonemes ⁱⁱ changed in English.

2.4.1.1.1.3 Sporadic or Miscellaneous Changes

It is not easy to draw the line between conditioned change and sporadic change since the two merge into one another. So the word 'sporadic' here should be treated very loosely to mean a change of phoneme that does not occur elsewhere and also to include morphenemic changes. The most important types of sporadic changes are: Assimilation,ⁱⁱⁱ dissimilation,^{iv} metathesis,^v Epenthesis, Hypology, Vowel mutation and Elision^{vi} (Varshney 277-280).

2.4.1.2 Grammatical and Lexical Change

Another type of language change is grammatical change. Grammatical and lexical change is the change in grammar and vocabulary. It is often regarded as totally different from sound change. Yet frequently it is motivated by the same driving force that is the need to maintain and simplify the patterns of language in order to lighten the burden on memory (Varshney 280). By grammatical change the members of a grammatical set are increased or reduced in number and the means involved in marking grammatical categories are extended. Since such changes are carried out in accordance with patterns which already exist in the language they are sometimes referred to as analogical. Thus, this process is called analogy (Varshney 280).

Analogy is a process by which morphs, combination of morphs or linguistic patterns are modified or new ones created in accordance with those already present in a language. Analogy is a fundamental feature of human language irrespective of which language we are dealing with. Analogy is most obvious in child language when children

form plurals such as ‘mans,’ ‘mouses,’ ‘foots’ after hearing plurals such as ‘cats,’ ‘dogs,’ ‘horses’ or form past tenses such as ‘maked,’ ‘breaeked’ after hearing past tense forms such as ‘played,’ ‘called,’ ‘cooked.’ It is because of analogy that many English plurals mostly ending in ‘en’ have gradually been ousted in favour of ‘s’ (Varshney 280-81).

2.4.1.3 Semantic Change

According to referential theory a semantic change will occur whenever a new name becomes attached to a sense or a new sense to a name. The main factors responsible for semantic change are vagueness in meanings, loss of motivation, ambiguous contexts and the structure of the vocabulary (Varshney 284). One of the examples of semantic change is the term ‘persona’ which in the beginning in Roman drama meant ‘mask’ then a ‘character’ indicated by a mask and later a ‘character’ or a ‘role’ in a play. From this developed the meaning representative of a ‘character,’ then a ‘representative’ in general. Thus, the word ‘persona’ has undergone a considerable change, from referring to an ‘article of stage costume’ through designation for concrete human roles to a general designation for man (Varshney 284). Some of the major causes of semantic changes are discussed below:

2.4.1.3.1 Linguistic Causes

Some semantic changes take place because of the associations which words contract in speech. Sometimes habitual collocations may permanently affect the meaning

of the term involved by a process known as ‘contagion,’ the sense of one word may be transferred to another simply because they occur together in many contexts (Varshney 284-285).

2.4.1.3.2 Historical Causes

The processes of conservatism and of innovation too can cause semantic changes. For instance the English word ‘car’ originates from Latin ‘carrus,’ which meant a four wheeled wagon and was repeatedly mentioned in Caesar’s commentaries on the Gallic war. Though the modern cars bear little or no resemblance to the old Celtic wagons the label has not been replaced and the word has remained phonetically almost unaltered. On the other hand the meaning of the word ‘parliament,’ borrowed from old French ‘parlement’ has changed beyond recognition (Varshney 285).

2.4.1.3.3 Environmental Causes

Semantic changes are also caused by environmental changes such as social, cultural, geographical, political, religious, physical and economic. To cite only a few examples in western countries winter is cruel and difficult and can convey such an idea as in Shelly’s “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?” (Varshney 285). But in India winter connotes just the opposite effect. To take another example: In Hindi and Sanskrit the word ‘hans/mranala’ standing for the ‘swan’ can be used for a ‘scholar,’ ‘critic’ etc, but in English it cannot convey the same meaning. Also when people change their

inhibitions we find names such as New England, New York, New Guinea. Thus we see the phenomenon of specialization (in the case of first two examples) and generalization (in the case of third example of inhibitions) in the above discussed examples (Varshney 285). Environment in this way plays a huge role in the semantic change of a particular language.

2.4.1.3.4 Psychological Causes

It is said semantic changes often take place in the speaker's mind. A chance, similarity which catches the eye, a humorous association which strikes the mind may produce an image which because of its appropriateness or its expressive quality will pass from individual style into common usage (Varshney 285). For example, 'clothes-horse,' 'horse-fish,' 'horse-tail,' 'horse-play,' 'horse-sense,' 'to flog a dead horse,' 'to mount the high horse,' 'to look a gift horse in the mouth' etc. have come out of the 'horse' because something had a vague resemblance to a horse in shape, situation, or character. Similarly words such as 'chicken hearted,' 'henpecked' etc, are the results of semantic changes caused by psychological factors. Emotive factors and taboo seem to be the main psychological causes which are strongly emphasized in semantic studies as it affects the most in the context of psychological influence (Varshney 285-86).

2.4.1.3.5 Foreign Influences

Semantic change is also caused by foreign languages for instance French ‘Parlement’ which originally meant ‘speaking’ later came to denote a ‘judicious court.’ Gradually it acquired its modern sense of ‘legislative assembly’ under the influence of English term ‘parliament,’ (Varshney 286).

2.4.1.3.6 The Need for a New Name

When the need for a new name to denote a new object or idea arises people could do one of the three things: either they form a new word from existing elements, borrow a term from a foreign language or some other source and alter the meaning of an old word. The need to find a new name is thus an extremely important cause of semantic changes. ‘Sputnik,’ ‘rocket,’ ‘missile,’ ‘torpedo,’ ‘satellite’ are just few examples to show how need for new name can drive people to coin new words (Varshney 287).

ⁱ Allophones refers to any of the various phonetic realizations of a phoneme in a language, which do not contribute to distinctions of meaning. For example, in English an aspirated p (as in pin) and unaspirated p (as in spin) are allophones of the phoneme /p/.

ⁱⁱ Phonemes refer to any of the perceptually distinct units of sound in a specified language that distinguish one word from another, for example p, b, d, and t in the English words pad, pat, bad, and bat.

ⁱⁱⁱ Assimilation is a sound change in which some phonemes (typically consonants or vowels) change to become more similar to other nearby sounds.

^{iv} Dissimilation refers to the process by which one sound becomes different from a neighbouring sound. For example, the word “pilgrim” (French pèlerin) derives ultimately from the Latin peregrinus; the l sound results from dissimilation of the first r under the influence of the second r (Hamp).

^v Metathesis refers to a change of place or condition: such as. a: transposition of two phonemes in a word (as in the development of crud from curd or the pronunciation \ 'pər-tē\ for pretty).

^{vi} In linguistics, an elision or deletion is broadly defined as the omission of one or more sounds (such as a vowel, a consonant, or a whole syllable) in a word or phrase. However, it is also used to refer more narrowly to cases where two words are run together by the omission of a final sound (Hamp).