

Language and Mind
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Module - 01
Lecture – 01
Introduction

Language is one of the central aspects of human existence. In fact, we cannot imagine our existence without language. In this course on Language and Mind, we are going to be looking at relationship between language and human mind. Language has been studied from varieties of perspectives. Language has been looked at by scholars from all ranges of investigations in human history. Language has been studied by mathematicians, computer scientists, biologists, philosophers, social scientists, to name a few. One of the first things that we need to do is to define language, and the way we define language is going to vary from discipline to discipline.

My name is Rajesh Kumar, and I will be teaching this course on Language and Human Mind. Here are some of the details about me that might be useful to you.

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I teach at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras. And my email addresses are listed here. For any difficulties or any questions related to this course, you can reach me through emails. Sending your questions through emails or on the course portal is the fastest way of getting replies. For the evaluation of this course, please keep checking our course portal where such details are announced.

The objective of the course is very simple.

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Objective

- This course will deal with the relationship between natural language and human mind.
- To be familiar with the fundamental ideas in linguistics at the levels of sounds, words, sentences, cognition, and learning/acquisition of natural language and their role in understanding the relationship between language and mind.



It deals with the relationship between natural language and human mind. By natural language we simply mean, language that we speak, languages that humans speak. And human mind is only the... we will only talk about part of the mind that deals with human language. And we will look at the relationship between the two. Just a note on human mind: it is one of the most complex things to study. We will not be looking at most of the aspects of human mind which deals with other activities. We are only going to be looking at the part that deals with language.

In this course, we try to be familiar with fundamental ideas in linguistics at the level of words, sounds and sentences, and how they together combine with cognition and learning; acquisition of natural language and their role in understanding the relationship between language and human

mind is going to be the primary focus. In short, we are going to achieve this objective to study how human mind interacts with language by looking at the product that is language. So, it is the reverse method of a studying human mind. We will look at the functions of human mind through language; that is how human mind works, functions, with respect to language. We will be looking at that aspect by looking at the details of language. The study of language has huge evidence to show about how human mind works.

Some of the broad topics that we are going to covering in this course are issues like: What is human language? What is natural language?

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Broad Topics

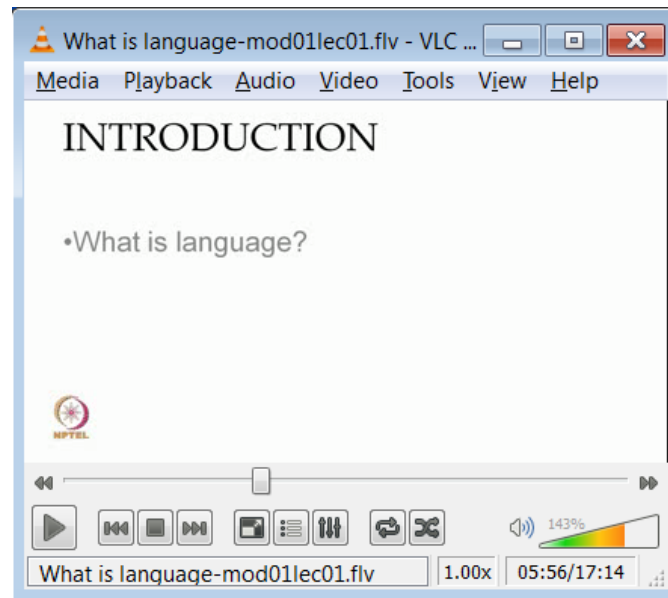
- What is Language?
- Relationship between natural language and human mind
- Critical concepts: Language Acquisition Device (LAD), Universal Grammar (UG), Mother tongue vs. First/ Second/ Foreign language, Critical period hypothesis
- Biologically grounded generative foundation of language acquisition
- Structure of Language around Sounds, Words, and Sentences



We will be looking at some of the critical concepts in understanding human language like: Language Acquisition Device, Universal Grammar, Mother Tongue, Critical period hypothesis. All such details will be looked at from biologically grounded generative foundation of language acquisition. And we will include an understanding of structure of language around sounds, words and sentences to develop a comprehensive understanding about the relationship between human mind and language in this course.

The question, ‘What is language?’ can be answered from variety of perspectives. It depends who we are talking to.

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Without getting into too many complicated details of the definition of language, I would like to introduce to you the simplest possible way of looking at language. You can take up this as part of an assignment and ask people about language, check, put these questions to people, and I am sure you will find one or the other kind of answer from anyone and everyone that you ask these questions. And the more surprising part of that question, or for that matter the answer, is most of the answers are going to be also technically correct. So, the conclusion is, people have pretty good idea about what language is; we are going to put that in short. One of the most frequently mentioned answers about language or about the question on what is language is, language is a medium of communication. Well, that is half-truth. Language is definitely a medium of communication, but it is much more than that.

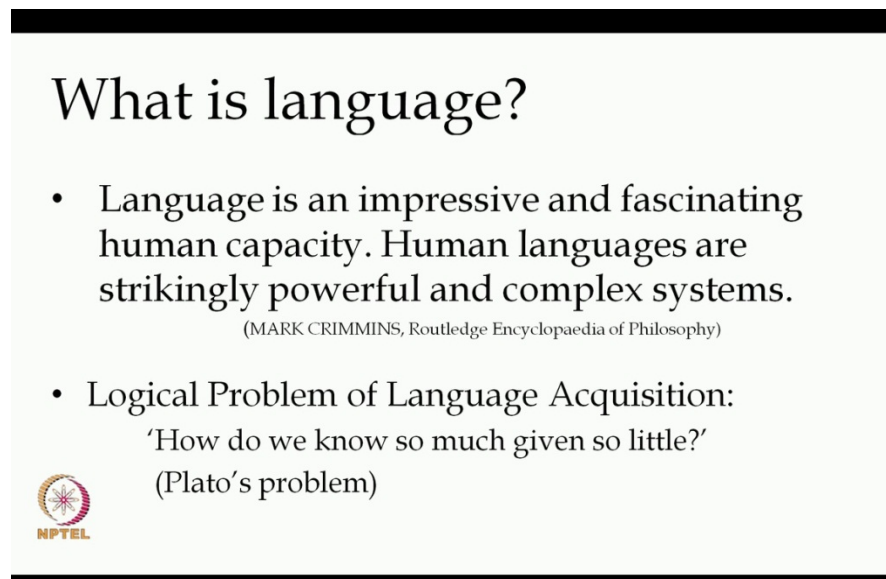
For the purpose of simplicity, I would want you to ponder upon this question and think for yourself in the following context. Language is a system by itself. It is one of the most sophisticated products of human mind. It is mathematically grounded. The parts of language can be studied in a very systematic way. And that systematic pattern gives us a window into human

mind. So, language is a system by itself and to be more precise, it is a rule governed system. There are very finite set of rules that operate underlying language which are universal in nature, and some are parametric which are responsible for differences between one language and the other.

As a footnote here, I would like to remind you once again that we will be talking about natural language; that is, the language that we speak; in other words, only the spoken language. And the capacity to speak is the fascinating capacity of humans and human mind. And we will be looking at that capacity vis a vis human mind.


So, when you look at some of the texts, when you analyze, synthesize and combine responses from the people that you get about language, you are going to be coming to very close to the following definition of language; the following understanding of language which comes from encyclopedia of philosophy.

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What is language?

- Language is an impressive and fascinating human capacity. Human languages are strikingly powerful and complex systems.
(MARK CRIMMINS, Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)
- Logical Problem of Language Acquisition:
‘How do we know so much given so little?’
(Plato’s problem)



Language is an impressive and fascinating human capacity; human languages are strikingly powerful and complex systems. We will look at how we learn language very soon. And then, that

is the point of beginning, to see the last part of definition that you have just seen ‘strikingly powerful and complex systems’.

What makes languages, human languages powerful and what makes the system complex? The answers to these questions come...if you look at the logical problem of language acquisition which is also known as Plato’s problem. And as we know, Plato’s problem is, ‘How do we know so much given so little’. This idea has taken up in a study of language and in particular in the study of how we learn language as a child, and how we acquire language as a child. And thus it has helped linguists, particularly in studying language acquisition a lot, in putting up an answer to the complexity of the system that we call language.

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Language: Innate Capacity

- “Man has instinctive tendency to speak as we see in the babbles of our children while no child has an instinctive tendency to bake, brew, and write.”

- Charles Darwin

- Birds fly, fish swim, and humans speak.
- This innate capacity requires input from immediate society.



In more simple terms, to understand the complexity of system of language, we can quote something from Charles Darwin, which says, ‘Man has instinctive tendency to speak as we see in the babbles of our children while no child has an instinctive tendency to bake, brew, and write’. This is a very powerful commentary on language and also on language acquisition. This is going to help us a lot in understanding different aspects of language.

To begin with, let see what Charles Darwin is trying to separate. The instinctive tendency to speak is very different from learning to write. And this is why he says, we have instinctive tendency to speak; that is to say, all normal human children will definitely speak. That is not controllable; we will get into the details of that little later; but it is not instinctive, it is not innate for a child or a grown up individual to write. And that is what he puts in the terms of bake, brew and write. That is to say, a lot of activities that human children are involved with are not instinctive. So, we are also making a distinction between activities that are instinctive to humans and some that are not. We put these distinctions also in terms like, there are lots of activities that are natural and automatic among human children; however lots of activities require efforts and we learn them by putting in efforts into them.

Some other people have said things like, birds fly, fish swim, and humans speak. In other words, just as birds learn to fly and fish learn to swim, humans learn to speak. Again, the bottom line of this is, speaking for humans is natural; speaking for humans is automatic, innate. And this innate human capacity is what helps us understand, the study of this innate human capacity is what helps us understand the underlying system of language.

So, to give it a summary of what we have discussed so far as part of the beginning of this course is the following. Language is one of the most fascinating human capacities. It is a complex system by itself. It is mathematical in nature. It is biologically grounded. The innate human capacity to speak, comes to human, develops in human, just like birds learn to fly, and fish would learn to swim. It is innate for human children to speak but not to bake, brew or write, in words of Darwin.

There is a way to look at language. In terms of its acquisition, we can put them in two parts: whatever we have discussed so far is the part of the form of language, and the other part is going to be about the function of language. That is, the language that develops in human mind and the language that is used in human society; in other words, language - the way it works in human mind, the way it grows in human mind and language, the way it is used in society.

At some point the two are merged but they can be studied in different ways with different perspectives. We will be primarily focusing in this course on the form of language and we will take help from the function of language to substantiate the point; that the relationship between human mind and human language is more obvious from the study of the underlying structure of human language.

Thank you.