

Language Workshop for Field Members of Azim Premji Foundation

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State Institute Office, Azim Premji Foundation, Jaipur.

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‘The Language Workshop’ was held from 19 to 24 March 2013 at Jaipur State Institute Office of Azim Premji Foundation, Rajasthan under the guidance of Prof. Rama Kant Agnihotri and Prof. Amrit Lal Khanna. It was attended by forty-seven members; twenty-one from the English Co-development group, three from the Kannada Co-development group, twenty from the Hindi Co-development group and three members from Vidya Bhavan Society. The objectives of the workshop were:

- i. Understanding how children learn languages
- ii. Understanding the nature and structure of language
- iii. Understanding the nature of language acquisition and language learning

Language Profile of the Learners: The First Step towards Understanding Multilinguality

The need to prepare a language profile of the learners was discussed by Rajni and an outline for creating a language profile of the participants was prepared. The second session focused on the capability of the child to acquire a language. It addressed questions such as whether language acquisition occurs through imitation and association, the relationship between language and cognition, whether language acquisition takes place step by step, or in a simultaneous manner, and the prior knowledge of the child. The next day started with the singing of the

poem, ‘*Le mashale chal pare hain log mere gaon ke*’. It was discussed how this poem could be written in the Roman script. The participants were divided into groups according to their native languages. Incidentally, there were nine languages represented in the hall. Each group translated the song into their language and wrote it in the Roman script and displayed it on the walls of the room.

Reflections on the Task of Translation

In the afternoon session, Professor Agnihotri helped the participants reflect on the task they had done in the morning. The participants realized that all languages can be written in one script, any language can be written in any script with some modifications. In fact, a language has nothing to do with its script and we must release ourselves from the bondage of script. Also, knowledge of one language leads to an understanding of another language. They understood that translation cannot be done without understanding a discourse. They also recognized the similarities in the structures of human languages along with an appreciation of the differences between vocalic and consonantal sounds. The final session on ‘What is Reading’ was anchored by Pallavi. This session was marked by a lively debate on authorial intention and multiplicity of meanings.

Explorations into the Nature of Language

The first session on day three of the workshop was devoted to resolving the doubts of the participants. The second session comprised group tasks such as identifying the following consonantal patterns ‘CCCV and VCCC’ in words in the poem that the participants had translated into their language, and the rules for change in number in their language using the data from the poem. The presentation of this task led to the discovery of a fundamental

universal rule underlying the sound system of almost all languages—the structure of sound clusters (in words) in most human languages is CVCV. It was concluded that language learning is a process of unlearning because a child can learn any language by using universal rules.

What is the Nature of Language?

The fourth day began with a discussion on the nature of language. Professor Agnihotri explained that spoken languages change faster than written languages, and that one has to keep formulating new relationships between sound and script. Language is at the same time 100 per cent arbitrary and 100 per cent rule governed.

The next session began with a discussion on the composition of a syllable. A syllable is the smallest cluster of sounds which we can say in one breath. The vocalic sound in the syllable is the nucleus and constitutes the syllabic peak. True consonantal sounds are not syllabic, i.e. they need a vowel to actualize the syllable. The sounds /m/, /n/, /l/ are special as they can belong to both the + syllabic and – syllabic category. They can form a syllabic peak in words such as ‘little’ or ‘button’ in English, or they can be true consonants in the initial position. /w/ and /j/ on the other hand are tricky sounds. Neither are they consonants, nor can they form a syllabic peak. All true vowels can form a syllabic peak. They are the nucleus of a syllable. This discussion was followed by task-wise presentations on plurals by the participants.

A Discussion on the Plural Morpheme in English

Professor Agnihotri explained that in English the plural allomorphs comprise /s/, /z/ and /iz/. Words such as child, ox, mouse, tooth, wife, and knife are listed words, exceptions to the norm.

He also elaborated on the three rules for the formation of the plurals of all other words. The final session was based on the reading material given the day before and focused on the nature of language. There was an exhaustive discussion on the linguistic capability of a four-year-old child.

More Explorations into Language Acquisition

On the fifth day of the workshop, Professor Agnihotri put a problem related to plural morphemes before the participants and asked them to solve it. With complete confidence the participants solved the problem. Professor Agnihotri explained that a three-year-old child also has the same knowledge. This proves that a child can recreate the rules underlying the sound system of a language without conscious effort. This was followed by a discussion on the findings on pluralization in Hindi. The discussion revealed that different plural noun forms may look the same but they perform different functions in a sentence. Children who are native speakers of English acquire plurals before gender, but children who are native speakers of Hindi acquire gender before plurals.

Word Webs Reveal the Structure of Language: Demystifying Language Acquisition

The next task was to create word webs. The word *chal* in Hindi was written on the board, and the groups came up with up to twenty forms of the word in Hindi and other Indian languages. However, there were fewer forms for ‘walk’ in English. It was pointed out that a child needs only five-six such word webs to hypothesize the structure of word-building in a language, after which s/he can form variations of words s/he has not yet heard. This is the reason why children

make logical mistakes with listed words or exceptions to a rule. This is also how children invent pseudo words.

In the next session, the structure of sentences was analyzed. SVO and SOV sentence patterns were discussed in detail and the participants were asked to fill in a table to discuss rules of Person-Number-Gender (PNG) in their language. This was followed by a discussion on language families in the post-lunch session.

The last day began with a beautiful *Bal Geet* by Khajaan Singhji, which was followed by a group discussion on language and aesthetics. The discussion was followed by a group activity. The participants were divided into six groups. The task was to identify the rules for making i) negative sentences, ii) yes-no questions, and iii) 'Wh' questions.

The second session began with presentations on negation, 'yes/no' questions and 'wh' questions in both English and Hindi. The participants analyzed the general rules for negation in English, Hindi and Kannada and concluded that in most languages, the negative marker occurs very close to the verb. The participants marvelled at the fact that a child of four possesses this knowledge.

The 'yes-no' questions were examined closely for both English and Hindi. The case with 'wh' questions is slightly different in Hindi and English. It was emphasized that children know the difference between the rules for formation of all such type of questions and answering them. It is indeed a surprising fact that the language input that children receive is far less than the output produced by them; this is known as 'Plato's Problem'. Children follow all the rules of language, including the ones mentioned above and many more without being formally taught. These observations lead to positing a Language Acquisition Device which has a Universal

Grammar and a parameter setting device. Children cannot learn by repetition alone as they utter sentences that they have never heard before. A child can learn any language provided the child is able to make meaning out of the language she/he is exposed to. Language learning should, as much as possible, replicate language acquisition.

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