

Interview

Praveen Singh (PS) talks to

Professor Anjani Kumar Sinha (AKS)

Prof A K Sinha is a well known linguist who has maintained a sustained interest in both formal and applied linguistics. Having studied linguistics at CIEFL (now EFLU), Hyderabad, he did his Ph D from the University of Chicago. He taught syntax, semantics, applied linguistics and sociolinguistics for several years at the University of Delhi. He has lectured at various Universities in India and abroad. He still takes active interest in the field and is highly respected among his students, colleagues and friends.

PS: Good Evening Sir! Can we begin by going through the beginnings of your journey as a language teacher and linguist?

AKS: Good Evening. I did my MA in English Literature, and soon after became a lecturer at Patna University. As long as I was there, I taught English Literature to the postgraduate classes and English Language to the undergraduate. It so happened, that one undergraduate paper became language-oriented, in our eyes, grammar-oriented. So the Head of the Department asked me to try teaching it, and also offered his help in case I needed it. I picked up the prescribed A. S. Hornby book and went to the class and taught the class according to the given instructions.

In 1965, I was sent to the Central Institute of English (CIE), Hyderabad for training. On returning to Patna, I was asked if I would be interested in a fellowship at CIE, Hyderabad. I took up the assignment, and for one year I did research at Hyderabad; mine was the first report to be submitted. The title of the report was "Error analysis with a view to finding out how to remove them". When I came back to Patna, I got the offer to go to Chicago. In Chicago initially I thought of doing something in the domain of ELT, but I became so interested in linguistic theory that my orientation changed

and I became a strong supporter of Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG).

PS: Pushing on the ELT connection, do you think that being a linguist helps one handle the issues of language learning and language teaching better? If yes, how and what according to you are the points of intersection between linguistics and language teaching?

AKS: Language teaching is a branch of linguistics. There is no point of discussion or debate there. Some British applied linguists claim that their domain of study is different from linguistics. I do not agree with that, and believe that whatever we do in applied linguistics, including language teaching, is guided by a linguistic theory. For instance, most linguists in Britain have been working in the structuralist paradigm, even though they may keep changing labels. That is why they emphasize structural drills and other things like that. Their main focus is on structure. So we cannot say that linguistics is separate from language teaching.

PS: So you do think that all language teachers should have some background, some training in linguistics?

AKS: What I mean is that they should know what a sentence is, what its main constituents

are, what is meant by a phrase, what constitutes a phrase and how its organization takes place. This much knowledge, everybody, not only those who teach a language but also those who teach literature, must have. If you teach literary appreciation and say to your students that the style of a certain text is very complex, you have to explain to them how it is complex. Is it because of the complexity of the structure or is it because of the complexity of thought, or what? So at every stage, whether you teach literature or language, you have to rely on some knowledge of linguistics. You need not go to an institute for training. You can pick up good books, read on your own and develop this habit. There is no bar to that.

PS: Supposing a teacher is not trained in linguistics, could you share something that would help her with her overall performance as a language teacher?

AKS: Yes, the main thing is that he/she should revise his/her grammar, with special emphasis on grammatical structure—how, sentences are built, how they are combined, and how sentences are correlated. For instance, one sentence may lead you to many sentences. Now the reader/speaker, whether he/she is a student or a teacher, when he/she speaks, he/she chooses one of those sentences. For instance, the sentence ‘John broke the glass’, can be said in many different ways—‘The glass was broken by John’, or ‘It was the glass that John broke’, or ‘It was John who broke the glass’, or ‘What John did was break the glass’. These sentences however are not equal as substitutes. They are equal only in the sense of their truth-value, i.e. their semantic-content is the same; syntactically they are different. So why do they choose one sentence in one context and another in another context? When I say, ‘It was John who broke the glass’, I want to assert that nobody

else did it. ‘John broke the glass’ is a plain statement whereas ‘It was John who broke the glass’ emphasizes the actor and brings him into focus.

PS: So, are you saying that a teacher should know that not only the syntax has changed in these sentences but there is something else going on as well?

AKS: Oh! I take that as part of syntax. Knowing sentences means two things: 1) Knowing how sentences are framed and 2) knowing when and how those sentences are used. I also think that learners may not know the subtle nuances in a sentence, but they do know when to use which kind of sentence. They may not be able to analyse sentences, but they know when they should say ‘John broke the glass’, or ‘It was the glass that John broke’, or ‘What John did was break the glass’. They know when to say which sentence.

PS: What do you think about the different approaches to language teaching, or for that matter what is wrong, if at all, with the language teachers that you would want them to work upon?

AKS: If you want to talk about language teachers, that is one thing. If you want to talk about language teaching, that is another thing altogether. Language teachers, as I said, should develop the awareness of the language, know the syntax of the language, the semantics of the language, the function of the sentences. So far as what is wrong with language teaching in India in particular is that we are still hung up on the British models of language teaching that are essentially structuralist. We do not see what is happening elsewhere in the world; and that is because of the organizational skills of the British

Council. Do you know that the British Council earns more money by selling books outside their country than by exporting goods? In other words, book export is their main business and the British Council's main job is to promote export of books. Of course, they are not like booksellers, they do it in a very subtle way. They organize trainings based on their patterns. Then they recommend books. So if you want to teach this, you should take that book, that kind of thing. Linguistics is changing fast but language teachers have not changed because their methods have not changed.

PS: What about the fuss that is made out of the fact that earlier we were focusing on a certain methodology of teaching which had been going on for hundreds of years?

AKS: No, I was talking about methodology and there are several things. We started with the Grammar Translation method in the 17th century and that continued for quite some time. In the 18th century, a new method was developed called the Rational method or the Natural method. It was proposed by Maximilian Berlitz. Let me tell you who Berlitz was. He was not teaching in any school, college or university. He was a German who migrated to the United States of America. He found that there were many Germans there, and they all had to learn English to function in that society. So he organized a small school for people who wanted to learn English, and he and his colleagues would speak only English in the class. The teachers however could understand both German and English, and therefore understood why a student was saying this and not that. In the class, the students were asked to speak only in English and the teachers themselves also spoke only English. This method later developed into the Oral method of Harold Palmer. Both Harold Palmer and Daniel Jones were in favour of learning correct spoken English. They stressed

that real language learning was that of the spoken language, and in order to speak the language well, you have to know the pronunciation well. I think by and large the British system of language teaching is still based on the Oral method.

PS: So you are saying that the methodology of language teaching hasn't really changed?

AKS: Yes, it hasn't really changed much.

PS: But there is always this talk about changing from this particular method to communicative method, task-based method, and so on.

AKS: All these methods are one and the same except for the Developmental approach (i.e. Cognitive approach), which is an offshoot of the two psychological approaches to language, one of Noam Chomsky and the other of Piaget. Except for these two, everybody else talks about the same thing; the labels keep changing with time. As I said earlier, Palmer and others were the first to talk about it. They followed Berlitz's method. They took sentences and made people practice speaking them. When they took sentences in a context, they called it the Situational method. In fact the Audio-Lingual method is an oral method which is a part of the Situational method. According to Situational method, the practice of isolated sentences does not help; they should be put in a context. However, the main focus of Situational method/ Structural method was on the teaching of structures and patterns. In England, this method was championed by A. S. Hornby. In America, its champions were C. C. Fries and Robert Lado.

PS: I am curious; I would like to ask you if Berlitz's method was one of the precursors to the Communicative Language teaching approach which came later?

AKS: Of course, that's what I was trying to show. It was a natural development. One method goes to another, then that goes to the next one and so on, leading to a structural approach, where, as I said, the emphasis was on structure. Later, when Halliday, Widdowson and some other people came on the scene, they talked about the function of those structures; just as I talked about function earlier. But the difference between their view and mine is that when they talk about function, they talk about the function of isolated sentences and they do not relate one sentence to another sentence. When I talk about a sentence, I take the generative method of relating that one sentence to other such sentences which communicate the same idea or meaning. So, during this period of structural approach, the emphasis was on habit formation. This was based on Skinner's advocacy of habit formation which came from Watson and Thorndike.

PS: Having seen the natural growth of these teaching methods, may I now proceed to ask you for a couple of concrete examples where linguistic insights have helped a language teacher deliver better teaching?

AKS: Sure, linguistic insights help a teacher deliver better teaching not only in the grammar class, but even in literature. Let me give you an example that comes to my mind. There is a poem, "All's well with the wind". This poem comprises eight or ten lines and each line says X is in the Y place, A is in the B place, C is in the D place, and they are all well placed. So all the lines function well and all is well. Now the sentences are very simple but none but the last sentence has a verb. It talks about a noun phrase, and the other parts of the predicate are understood in the last sentence 'all's well' meaning 'All IS well'. So we see a kind of parallelism with 'is'. The teachers should

understand what is parallelism and also that this kind of parallelism is not only that of ideas but also of structure. If only I could dig out the poem, maybe I could talk more about it.

PS: Deviating slightly, what do you think of 'Interference' in language (classrooms) where the children come from different backgrounds with different first languages/mother tongues. So, for example, most of the languages spoken in North India are post-positional languages whereas English is a pre-positional language. However, one sees that even a beginner whose first language is a post-positional language, does not make the kind of mistake that one would expect him/her to make while learning English. In other words, he/she never ends up saying something like 'the House in books burning are' for a Hindi sentence such as '*ghar mein kitaaben jal rahi hain*' (books are burning in the house). How does one explain this?

AKS: You are absolutely correct. You see, the main point is that when you learn a language that is different from your mother tongue and whose writing system is also different, you also learn the new writing system. Similarly, if the word order of this new language is very different from your mother tongue, you learn the word order unconsciously. You do not constantly have to remember that in English the verb has to be in the middle, because there are of course sentences such as 'gone are those days', where the verb comes in the beginning. The point is that the mind is aware of the system, and that is how Chomsky has generalized and said that there is something called Universal Grammar (UG). What is UG? UG lays down the general principles which govern the generation of sentences; these general principles are applicable to all languages but they are guided by specific parameters. Therefore, I think, a student is well aware of the fact that English is

a pre-positional language and Hindi is post-positional.

The second point is that when we think of different language systems, there is interference. That interference is with reference to lexical items and noun and prepositional phrases. Take for example, the Hindi postposition '*par*'. We have two words in English 'on' and 'at'. According to an analysis that I had done in 1976, and some students had also studied lately, learners use 'at' in place of 'on' and 'on' in place of 'at'. This is where the teacher's role comes in. The teacher is not able to explain that 'at' indicates 'nearby' or that 'on' indicates 'covering the surface'. The difference between 'he is at the gate' and 'the cat is on the gate' must be pointed out. If you say, 'the man is on the gate', you would be wrong because he cannot be 'on the gate'. Another similar example is that of '*mein*' in Hindi and 'in', 'into' and 'inside' in English, which are used by students interchangeably because they do not know the difference between them and are confused about their usage. There is, however, one thing with which I agree and that is that people learn a language in chunks. For instance, if I learn the phrase 'inside the enclosure', I can also say 'inside the enclosure', 'inside the classroom', 'inside the hall', 'inside the meeting', and so on. Interference may also be found at a phonological level. Many Hindi speakers, not Urdu speakers, say /ph/ instead of /f/. And why do they do that? Because Hindi originally did not have /f/, and so you find the speakers of Hindi using its nearest substitute /ph/.

PS: Is there something that a language teacher can do in order to remedy these things, and should she/he do it?

AKS: Yes, of course the teacher should, especially for pronunciation. When I was in Hyderabad in the 1960s, and also much later, when I came back from the United States, the

thinking was that we should have a version of English called Indian English which is intelligible throughout India. I think that idea is not valid in the eyes of the public today. People want jobs within as well as outside India. Therefore, we have to have a pronunciation that is easily intelligible to anyone from any part of the world. Let me give you an instance of how important pronunciation is from an article published in the newspapers a few years ago. A British lady checked in at one of the hotels in Agra. She went to the clerk and told him to arrange for a taxi to take her to Jaipur and that she be woken up at four o'clock the next morning. The next morning, when the porter went to wake her up, she wouldn't wake up. The manager went and thumped at her door, at the same time yelling something like "I have just to give you a massage". Instead of saying 'message', he said 'massage'. That alarmed the British lady and frightened her so much that she jumped out of the window for she feared an attack on her modesty. The wrong pronunciation of the Indian manager led to this misunderstanding.

PS: Are you then in favour of some kind of standardization or uniformity?

AKS: That is a must, especially for those people who use English for international communication.

PS: But don't you think that this is problematic especially in a country such as India, where bilinguality or multilinguality seems to be more of a norm? Just because one language provides you with more job opportunities, that does not mean that one lets that language dominate the other languages.

AKS: You have asked something very different. If you are talking about more jobs, then jobs are

not created by a language. Jobs are created by market position, and it is the globalized market that dictates that people learn English. Let me tell you that good teachers in high schools in the Hindi-speaking belt in India are aware of standard English pronunciation. As an observer in a high school in Bihar, I have seen teachers making students practice the difference between /sh/ and /s/, /v/ and /w/, etc. These teachers do not have any linguistic training, but their intuition tells them that the students should be able to say /shabda/ (word) and not /sabda/ which has the same initial consonant /sh/ as is found in English words /she/ and /shy/, etc.

PS: Can something be done to ensure that local languages are not lost because of pressures from these 'privileged' languages?

AKS: Well, this is a big debatable issue. Something can of course be done. In fact the government is trying to do it and so are organizations like Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore. But if individuals themselves are not interested, it cannot be done. Look in England too, before the time of Chaucer, there were many dialects, in fact there were six prominent dialects. When London developed as the capital of the British Island, one dialect became prominent. Everybody learnt that dialect, and the other dialects disappeared. That is normal. The so-called dialects of Hindi may be replaced by Hindi, but English cannot replace Hindi or a standard regional language.

Then again, losing tribal languages and identity is a separate issue. It is different from the dialects of languages which disappear as more and more unification and standardization takes place. It is not done by a set of linguists who sit as language planners. They have failed. Language planners tried to impose Sanskrit terms in Hindi but failed as nobody speaks those Sanskrit terms. How many people actually

understand that '*vaataanukuulit yaan*' means air-conditioned coach?

PS: There seems to be another favorite topic among language teachers other than Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD), and that is Krashen's Monitor Model. What are your views on that?

AKS: I am sorry; but, Krashen's Monitor Model is just an offshoot of Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device. It is not a parallel thing. What Krashen says is that there is a language environment. Chomsky also talks about environment. If the speaker has to speak something, he/she filters out certain other things which come to the mind, retains certain things and organizes them into sentences. All of this happens subconsciously and so fast that even the speaker is not aware of the fact that these things are going on in the mind. Finally, when the speaker starts uttering, he/she monitors whether he/she has spoken the correct thing or not. So, monitoring is the performance aspect; filtering and organization the internal aspect. This is one point on which both Chomsky and Krashen agree, i.e. that this is an internal process, a mental process.

PS: Borrowing from your personal experience as a teacher of English and Hindi, what was it like and what did you learn from it?

AKS: I think, a language teacher has to encourage students to speak fluently. My own experience and also my conviction is that when a student responds in the class, he/she should be allowed to speak whether he/she speaks correctly or incorrectly. The teacher must however mentally note what has been spoken incorrectly and later explain it to the student.

The teacher must also be careful about his/her own pronunciation, and sentence structure. When a teacher asks a question and the student responds, and the teacher interrupts the student to correct him/her in the middle of his/her answer, then the student becomes hesitant to speak and can never attain fluency in that language. At the University of Chicago, I had two PhD students who were learning Hindi. One of them was very cautious, very careful. He would not write or speak any sentence that was wrong; but he could never attain fluency. The other student was very careful when it came to writing, but while speaking, he spoke whatever came to his mind. He made errors, but it was evident from his talking that there was fluency of thought in the language. I would always choose someone who makes mistakes, but speaks and writes fluently rather than someone who does not make mistakes but is hesitant.

PS: So fluency should be given primacy in some sense?

AKS: That's right. For both writing and speaking, fluency should be given primacy. Why do Hindi speakers find it difficult to write essays in English? The same people, by and large, write better in Hindi than they do in English (some of course will not be able to write in Hindi or English). Why does that happen? Well, that's because you start groping for words and phrases and sentence structure. Also, the teacher's habit of correcting the student inhibits them right from the start. The teachers say: "This is wrong, that is wrong and so on. This should not be done".

PS: The last question, any further suggestions for language teachers and maybe for policymakers?

AKS: For policymakers I have nothing to say. Teachers, on the other hand should understand new things. They must have open minds. I would like them to understand one main point. A teacher should not get baffled, irritated or angry just because he/she comes across a sentence that seems wrong to him/her. It is possible that he/she is not aware of the changes that are taking place in the language. Then there are certain things in a language which I wish were not there, but I cannot do anything to get rid of them. For instance, in Hindi we have 'aasanna bhuut'. In English we have present perfect tense. They look like the same thing on first sight, but if you translate 'aasanna', 'aasanna bhuut' means near past. That is the sense in which we use it in Hindi as well as in English. You will find that many people use present perfect in English instead of past tense, but in English, present perfect is well defined. You can use it only when the past action has an impact on the present. The impact point is not there in 'aasanna bhuut' and that is why people make such mistakes. To conclude, essentially a teacher has to have an open mind to do well.

PS: Thank you so much for your precious inputs Professor Sinha. We look forward to receiving more insights from you in future.

Praveen Singh is a professionally trained English language teacher. He holds an M.Phil. in Linguistics and looks forward to exploring further areas in Micro-Linguistics to get an understanding of the workings of Language.

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