
INTERVIEW

In Conversation with B.N. Patnaik (BNP)

Rajesh Kumar (RK) and Devaki Lakshminarayan (DL)

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RK and DL: How did you get interested in Linguistics?

BNP: In 1972, when I was doing my PG Diploma in the Teaching of English at CIEFL (now called EFLU), Hyderabad, I was introduced to general linguistics, phonetics and spoken English and English grammar. I didn't find anything interesting in any of these subjects. In the last two lectures in the general linguistics course, Professor Nadkarni taught transformational generative (TG) grammar. He told us that Noam Chomsky believed that all languages have the same structure at an abstract level of representation called "deep structure". It is this idea that changed the course of my academic journey.

Given that structural differences among languages are all too obvious, Chomsky's claim looked strange to me. But then, many in the linguistic community had already bought this idea. I strongly felt that I had to understand Chomsky's revolutionary claim. So instead of returning to my research in literature, I returned to CIEFL to learn more about TGG. I wrote my doctoral thesis on Odia complement structures in the TG framework. Honestly, Chomsky was the reason I went into linguistics.

In the early 1990s, I got interested in the study of language use as I read H.P. Grice, Norman Fairclough (*Language and Power* and *Critical Discourse*

Analysis), Robin Lakoff's work on politeness, Deborah Tannen, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, Stephen Levinson and Don Zimmermann, among others.

RK and DL: Some of your writings touch on language teaching—particularly the use of newspapers for teaching composition, grammar-translation method, contrastive analysis, and so on. Could you comment on the relevance of these issues in the present context of research in language teaching?

BNP: In an interview with *The Listener* in, I think, 1970, Chomsky said something to this effect: the language teachers are specialists in their fields just as linguists or psychologists are in theirs. He should keep himself informed about the developments in these fields, but in teaching, he must be guided by his own insights. This has been my inspiration as a teacher of English.

To state the obvious, language teaching takes place in a context. The first-year students whom I taught English in their first semester didn't have the command of English necessary for them, in the opinion of the English faculty at IIT Kanpur, to do well in the academic programme, where the medium of instruction was English. But they were intelligent and had good analytical skills. They were exposed to English in every course - in science, humanities, and social sciences, etc. Whatever might be the merits of ESP courses, in my opinion, an "English for Engineering" course was unsuitable for my students. They found the content boring, which didn't help them improve their language competence. My conclusion was this: whatever pedagogical ideas ELT research might offer, the same need not necessarily prove helpful in my context. Once in three years, when my turn would come to become the course-in-charge, I substituted the ESP content of the English Language course with short stories, reflective essays, etc. and gave equal importance to vocabulary, grammar, everyday language and literary language.

A Technical or Business Communication course may be all right as an optional for third and fourth year BTech students. When imaginatively taught, this course could be helpful. However, I would never have advised anyone to use their HSS (Humanities and Social Science) slots for these courses. HSS slots should be used for courses like literature, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, etc.

I used news reports and articles in the newspapers to give my students

content to write short compositions. There were practical considerations behind choosing newspaper articles, one of those being their easy availability. They would read the newspaper piece in the classroom, which gave them practice in reading comprehension and then discuss it in the class. At the end of the discussion, they had enough material to write a hundred-word composition on the topic of the piece or one related to it. Sometimes I asked them to summarize the piece. The “expert” opinion then was not in favour of this activity, but that didn’t trouble me. In another three years, my students would be required to write abstracts, executive summaries of their project proposals, etc. I thought it was time I gave them some practice.

I found the much-criticized grammar-translation method useful in teaching vocabulary. “Teach English Through English” may be a useful strategy in environments where English is the predominant language of communication, but this is not the case in our context. Besides, I have always considered it essential to sensitize my students to how the same content is expressed in their language and in English. In this approach, words have an important place.

Incidentally, I firmly believed that at a certain stage, language (in particular, vocabulary) teaching, be it L1 or L2, should not be dissociated from the socio-cultural context in which the relevant language is used. From this point of view, words are important because they carry socio-cultural meaning. In those days, second/ foreign language pedagogy did not endorse such an approach.

As for contrastive analysis, I thought contrastive lexical analysis is useful. There is one word for “see” and “look at” in Odia, as there is for “hear” and “listen to”. But the grammar of these words in English is different; “see” and “hear” cannot be used in the progressive, for instance, whereas “look at” and “listen to” can be. In Odia, there is no such constraint on the equivalent words. The literature on pedagogically oriented contrastive analysis hasn’t paid attention to the grammar of words.

Contrastive analysis can be useful in the study of language function. It can inform the language teacher how one’s L1 and English differ regarding greeting, leave-taking, apologizing, disagreeing, asking for a favour, refusing an offer, and expressing sympathy. To be an effective communicator, one must know how to do such things in the target

language. This aspect has been totally neglected in English language teaching, thanks to the second language pedagogy based on behaviourist psychology and American Structural Linguistics. Incidentally, contrastive analysis of language function was part of our senior-level B.Tech. Communication course.

RK and DL: Looking back on the curriculum of the postgraduate programme in Linguistics, what curricular changes should be made?

BNP: Confining myself on this matter to just the Masters' programme, which is not called "postgraduate" in the IIT system, there has to be a much better fit between the programme and the employment situation. The Masters programme must be more application-oriented. As of now, the programme in most universities here views language teaching as the only application of linguistics. Language technology development, editing, translation of the knowledge-based materials, localization, online teaching, etc. are among the critical applications. The programme has to be sensitive to the emerging language market.

Besides, I think our MA Linguistics syllabus is heavily oriented towards the structure of language, not the use of language in society. This imbalance must be corrected. People have the impression that it is an esoteric subject and has minimal social relevance. For an academic field to thrive, social support, even indirect, is necessary.

To turn to a different although related matter unfortunately, linguistics is not taught at the undergraduate level. Thanks to the efforts of Professor Ramakant Agnihotri, a few colleges under Delhi University offer it at the UG level. Because it is offered at only the postgraduate level, it is not a subject of examination for central and state administrative services. This shrinks the employment opportunities for the students of linguistics.

RK and DL: A lot of your time was spent teaching at IIT Kanpur. Any special comments about that period, given that language teaching is now a major task at IITs.

BNP: At IIT Kanpur, I taught linguistics generally to the senior-level B. Tech. and PhD students. I taught the English language to the first-year students and the preparatory class students. Preparatory class students were to join some Institute of Technology the following year.

English Language was not a compulsory subject for the first-year students at IITK. Only those whose performance on the English

diagnostic test was unsatisfactory were to do one or two courses in the English language—whether one or two depended on their score on the test. The students didn't like it. They thought it branded them. Most of them didn't realize that the system was for their own good. They did the course all right, there being no option, but their cooperation was lacking. Those who took the course seriously and worked for the course benefited from it, going by the input I received from them later.

In the late 1990s, the emphasis at the Institute shifted from English language skills to communication skills. The Institute wanted every student to do a credit course on communication skills—communication in English. Administering the course was a huge problem. The English (literature and linguistics) faculty would deliver the lectures, and tutors were from various disciplines: social sciences, sciences and engineering. Incidentally, I wasn't part of teaching this course; I continued to teach the English Language Course.

As far as I know, English language and communication courses at some IITs have been outsourced. I think IIT Delhi was the first to outsource the English language course. That was probably in the 90s.

RK and DL: Could you let us know the rationale for promoting bilingual lexicon as proposed by you in your work on the *Organization of Bilingual Lexicon*?

BNP: In the early 90s, I was teaching courses in Natural Language Processing (NLP) and was part of the project on MT (machine translation) at the Institute. Dr. Lalitha Sobha worked on anaphora resolution (NLP) for her PhD and also worked on the project. We thought of preparing a small bilingual e-RKlexicon for MT purposes, which could be extended to a multilingual lexicon when the need arose, which we knew would undoubtedly happen someday. But we couldn't find the time for it. Sobha says we had a few conference presentations on the subject but couldn't rework on any of these for publication. She says we had done some initial work on how lexicons of the two languages are represented in mind (separately or not, for instance) of a bilingual. We couldn't pursue this fascinating topic for lack of time.

RK and DL: You have worked on language from generative and discourse and power frameworks. How would you see these frameworks in understanding language?

BNP: Generative linguistics is about the structure of language and for me, discourse linguistics is about how language, in the familiar sense of the term, is used in society. Generative linguistics gives us a perspective on understanding the deep structural similarities and systematic (i.e. non-arbitrary) structural differences among languages. On the other hand, discourse linguistics, which includes conversational analysis, is about the use of language. People use language to talk about themselves and the world. They use language for various purposes, both helpful and malicious, in a variety of situations. Then there are cultural constraints on what can be said and how. There always is a power relationship between the participants in an interaction that determines the nature of the exchange. Communication is not always successful, and sometimes there is miscommunication. All this is a vital subject of study for both theoretical and practical purposes.

I see the study of the structure of language and the study of the use of language as non-conflicting and as complementary, although their concerns are different.

RK and DL: If one looks at the Census, the number of Odia speakers has steadily declined from 3.62 per cent in 1977 to 3.2 per cent in 2011. Could you comment on the current trends in the Odia language movement in the context of the NEP 2020?

BNP: I wasn't aware of this. I suppose it is because people, who had earlier declared their mother tongue to be Odia, declared some other language as their mother tongue in the last Census. For instance, quite a few mother tongues belonging to some districts of western Odisha might have named Koshali as their mother tongue. Incidentally, the state government has recommended that it be included in the Eighth Schedule.

The most active language movement in Odisha today is concerned with the situation of Odia in administration. Although it is officially declared as the language of the state, in practice, it is not. The state government has not been able to implement its own decision yet fully. English continues to be used as though it is the state's main official language. To put the matter in perspective, the same thing happened in the 19th century. Although the government of the day had instructed that Odia be used as the language of the Court, Persian continued to be used because the *amalas* (clerical staff) could not easily give up their habit. The

same seems to be the case with the bureaucrats in Odisha today.

RK and DL: What led you to shift your attention from the pursuit of linguistics to Odiya literature?

BNP: Not really to Odia literature but to “Sarala (pronounced saaralaa in Odia) Mahabharata”. This shift, in 2004, was as accidental in my academic life as had been my shift to linguistics. I had just retired from IIT Kanpur and joined CIIL, Mysore, as Senior Fellow. I had a project in historical linguistics. It was roughly about studying some syntactic constructions in Odia from the 15th century to the present times. I hypothesized that syntactic change could be described but not fully explained in purely syntactic terms. To better explain the change or the lack of change when it is expected, insights from socio-linguistics, culture and communication studies would be necessary.

I started reading *Sarala Mahabharata* for the relevant data. I still have the data with me, unused. I had barely finished the “Aadi Parva”, the first of the eighteen parvas, when I realized that I was reading a truly exceptional work. Sarala’s creativity in storytelling and his profound philosophical insights on various issues, which he expressed in almost everyday language, impressed me deeply. I thought the linguistics project could wait. I just wanted to tell Sarala Mahabharata stories as I understood them. Indrani Roy, a Fellow at CIIL and Krishna, designed a blog for my Sarala Mahabharata stories: saralamahabharat.blogspot.com. Retelling the stories has been an immensely satisfying experience for me. My academic writing on Sarala Mahabharata came later. Eighteen years after, I am still with this text.

This shift to Sarala Mahabharata led to another shift. I shifted to pragmatics, conversational analysis and discourse linguistics. I realized that these would be more relevant for studying the great Odia classic than generative linguistics, cognitive linguistics and computational linguistics. In more concrete terms, I started reading, for example, Chomsky’s work on power and protest instead of his technical linguistic work.

RK and DL: Your *Sarala Mahabharata* reads as an ethical analysis where characters, including *Duryodhana* and *Shakuni*, are painted grey rather than in stark black and white as generally done. How do you think readers received this analysis?

BNP: The Mahabharata scholars had no problems with it. They encouraged me in my effort to introduce *Sarala Mahabharata* to the non-Odia speakers. As for the general non-Odia readers, their responses, by and large, have been positive. Most who interacted with me told me that they found Sarala's narrative interesting and quite different from the canonical work, namely, Vyasa Mahabharata. But a few said that Sarala's is a false narrative and advised me to read Vyasa Mahabharata, the true narrative and write about it.

During the 10th and the 17th centuries, when these great texts were retold in the local languages, the elite were not very uncomfortable with the idea of there being many more than one version of these texts. It might have been because the Ramayana and Mahabharata were designated as itihaasas and not puranas; thus, not like sacred texts, like Srimad Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavad. So, when the poets in the local languages retold the narratives, embodying their interpretations, they were not persecuted.

Today, as in the past, many strongly believe that only one of these compositions embodies the truth: Valmiki Ramayana and Vyasa Mahabharata. Except for Ramcharitmanas and maybe Kamba Ramayanam, the rest are mere tales. Our people have always enjoyed great puranic stories and celebrated them, even when they believe the "truth" is elsewhere. Telling people that other versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata exist cannot effectively counter this attitude.

Maybe, due to this attitude, namely that the local language versions may be enjoyed but need not be taken seriously, Sarala's portrayal of Duryodhana and Shakuni hasn't received censor.

RK and DL: Thank you for sharing your journey with us. Your narration has made it enjoyable and inspiring.

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