INTERVIEW

In Conversation with M.J. Warsi

Suranjana Barua (SB)

***Prof. M. J. Warsi (MJW)**, is Chair, Department of Linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and the current President of the Linguistic Society of India (LSI). A renowned linguist, his wide-ranging research interests encompass South Asian Languages, Mass Media, Cultural Studies, Urdu Journalism, Creative and Literary Translation, Language Pedagogy, Stylistics, Heritage Language Teaching, Applied Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, Cross-cultural Communication, and New Media Discourse. He has earned several national and international awards, including the James McLeod Faculty Award (2012), Colin P. Masica Award (2024), and M B Emeneau Scholar of Excellence Award (2024). His landmark work on Mithilanchal Urdu stands as a significant contribution to regional language studies.*

SB: Thank you for speaking to LLT. I start with a rather simple question: what is language for you and why, would you say, is its study important?

MJW: Language is not just vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation; neither is it just a tool for communication. It is much more than that. It is a doorway to people, to communities and to opportunities. It is a way of living itself. When we learn a language, we do not just learn words. We enter a new world. We begin to understand cultures, beliefs, mind-sets, humour, values and habits that we could never understand otherwise. So, language expands our world and reduces our limitations.

For many people, language is just a skill. But for those who use it well, it becomes a strategy. When you speak a new language, you access knowledge that others may not. You connect with people beyond your surroundings that others may not. I have experienced this in my own life. Coming from a multilingual background, learning English opened

new academic and professional opportunities for me, including exposure to international environments. This made me realize the practical importance of language.

This is why the study of language is important. It helps us understand how communication works, how meaning is created, and how we can express ourselves clearly. It also improves thinking, builds confidence and helps us connect with diverse people. So, language is not just a tool for communication. It is a tool for growth. And studying it helps us use it wisely in life.

In a country like India, where diversity is so rich, language becomes even more powerful. It connects people and creates understanding. I feel that, in India, we still need to give more importance to language learning. Often, even at the family level, languages are not given enough attention beyond basic use. But we need to understand that language has the power to shape careers, confidence and opportunities. This is something that parents also need to understand for their children. Just as we invest time and effort in subjects like Mathematics and Science, we should invest equally in developing language skills. In the twenty-first century, strong language ability is not optional rather I would say, it is essential for success in today's world.

SB: Please tell us something about your relationship with languages: your mother tongue; the languages you were exposed to while growing up; the languages of your education and the languages which you may have learnt out of interest? How did these languages influence the person and linguist that you are today?

MJW: My relationship with languages has been both personal and evolving. I come from Darbhanga—Maithili is my mother tongue and Urdu and Hindi were also widely spoken around me. These were the languages of my home and early social life. They shaped my identity, my way of thinking and my connection with people. My comfort and emotional expression were always rooted in these languages. Alongside them, I also developed an interest in Arabic and Persian, which I learnt to a functional level of reading out of personal and scholarly interest.

During my schooling and later in higher education, I was introduced to English more formally. Initially, my engagement remained stronger with Urdu, especially when I came to Aligarh Muslim University, where my academic and cultural connection with Urdu continued to grow. At

that stage, English was present, but not central to my thinking.

However, as my academic journey progressed, my relationship with English also developed. I began to understand its importance not just as a subject, but as a medium that connects me to wider knowledge and opportunities. Over time, I worked on improving my command over English alongside my academic pursuits.

This multilingual journey became more meaningful when I got the opportunity to go to the USA on a teaching assignment. I have experienced this shift very clearly. Coming from a background where Maithili and Urdu were dominant in my life, I did not even notice when my linguistic space gradually shifted to English. In that new environment, everyday communication, whether professional or social, happened mostly in English. It became a kind of survival language. This experience showed me that knowing multiple languages not only creates opportunities but also gives you the confidence and flexibility to function in different environments. Looking back, I feel that if I had not known even one of these languages, I might have missed that opportunity altogether.

These experiences have deeply influenced me as a person and as a linguist. They have made me more sensitive to linguistic diversity and more aware of how language operates in different social and cultural contexts. I have also understood that no single language is sufficient in today's world. Each language adds a new perspective and strengthens one's ability to connect, think and engage. For me, languages are not separate systems, they are interconnected experiences that have shaped both my identity and my academic journey.

SB: You have been working in the field of language studies for decades now. What was the major focus of linguistic studies in the twentieth century? How do you think has linguistics evolved specially in the twenty-first century? What are the current trends that one can pursue fruitfully?

MJW: The major focus of linguistic studies in the twentieth century was primarily on understanding the structure of language. Early linguistic studies, especially structural approaches, treated language as a system of sounds, words and grammatical rules. This phase was important because it helped us understand language in a systematic and scientific way. It gave linguistics a clear foundation as a discipline.

A major turning point came with the work of Noam Chomsky, who

introduced generative linguistics. This approach suggested that language ability is partly innate and governed by universal principles. It shifted focus to deep structures and the human capacity to generate infinite sentences. This phase was important because it helped us understand that language is not just learned mechanically but is deeply connected to the human mind and cognition.

Gradually, linguistics expanded beyond structure. Sociolinguistics showed that language is closely linked to society, identity and power. This made us realise that language is not neutral—it reflects social realities like class, gender and culture. Functional linguistics further emphasized that language must be studied in real-life use. This helped us understand how people actually communicate in different contexts.

In the twenty-first century, linguistics has become highly interdisciplinary. It now connects with psychology, cognitive science, sociology and computer science. This shift is important because it allows us to study language not only as a system, but as human behaviour and experience.

One of the most important developments has been technology. Artificial intelligence and natural language processing have made it possible to study and process language on a large scale. This is directly useful in translation tools, voice assistants and communication technologies. Corpus linguistics also helps us understand how language is actually used in real life, not just in theory.

Today's trends such as computational linguistics, discourse analysis, multilingual studies and language policy are important because they directly impact education, communication and society. In countries like India, this is especially relevant for managing linguistic diversity and improving language education.

SB: How has globalisation and AI affected the study of languages and the field of linguistics?

MJW: Globalisation and Artificial Intelligence have deeply reshaped both the study of languages and the field of linguistics.

When we talk about globalisation, the first change we notice is how closely the world has come together. Languages are no longer confined to regions. They travel across borders with people, education, media and technology. This has created a world where multilingual communication is a daily reality. In such a situation, linguistics becomes extremely

important because we now need to understand how languages interact with each other. Phenomena like code-switching, code-mixing and borrowing are no longer exceptions—they are part of everyday speech. At the same time, globalisation has also created a concern that some languages are becoming dominant while many local and indigenous languages are slowly losing space. This makes the study of language preservation and linguistic diversity very important.

From my own perspective, globalisation has also changed how we look at language learning itself. Today, a language like English works as a global medium, connecting people across countries. At the same time, regional and local languages continue to carry identity and culture. So, linguistics now helps us understand this balance between global communication and local identity, which is becoming increasingly important in today's world.

Artificial Intelligence has added another powerful dimension to this field. With tools like machine translation, speech recognition and chat-based systems, language is now being processed by machines as well. This has led to the growth of areas like computational linguistics and Natural Language Processing. What is interesting here is that we are no longer only studying how humans use language but also how machines attempt to understand and generate it.

At the same time, AI has also made linguists more aware of the limitations of technology. Issues like bias in language models, loss of cultural nuance and unequal representation of languages have become important concerns. This has made linguistic research even more socially relevant.

SB: How has digital media impacted the use of language? Are language skills 'receding' in younger generations given the rapid expansion of newer forms of expression in digital media?

MJW: Digital media has changed the way we use language in very real and everyday ways. In fact, it is one of the most visible changes in language use in the twenty-first century.

Today, most communication happens through digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, emails, voice notes and short comments on videos. This has changed not only the medium of language but also its structure and style. Instead of full sentences like "I will meet you tomorrow," people often write "tmrw meet?" or "TTYL," for "Talk

to you later" or simply send a voice note. Emojis have also become a parallel communicative system, where a single symbol can sometimes carry an entire emotional meaning. For example, the emoji of laughter is widely used to express laughter or amusement, while the emoji of folded hands is commonly used to show gratitude, request or sometimes even apology, depending on the situation. Digital media has also made language more immediate and spontaneous. People often think less in formal grammar and more in quick expression. In many ways, this reflects spoken language more closely than traditional writing. I have written about the new trends of communication and impact of text messaging in newspapers as well.

Regarding whether language skills are receding among younger generations, I would say it is not a simple decline but a shift. Young people may not always write long formal texts in daily communication, but they actively engage with language through memes, reels, captions and digital storytelling. They are highly skilled in interpreting tone, humour, sarcasm and context, which is also a form of linguistic competence.

However, if informal digital communication becomes the only exposure, structured writing, grammar sensitivity and deep reading habits may weaken unless consciously maintained.

From a linguist's perspective, such changes are natural and inevitable. Language has never been static, it evolves with society and technology. Every new medium brings new forms of expression. At the same time, formal and structured forms of language must also be preserved as they ensure depth and clarity.

So, rather than viewing this as a decline or as language skills receding in younger generations, I would see it as a reconfiguration of language. Digital media is not destroying language; it is expanding its possibilities. And as linguists, our role is to understand both change and continuity and to appreciate how language evolves while also ensuring that its deeper, structured forms are not lost.

SB: India has multiple dialects and languages as also different categories of languages such as Official Languages, Scheduled Languages and now Classical Languages. As a linguist, what is your view on this? The National Education Policy envisages mother tongue to be the medium of instruction 'until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond'.

In a deeply multilingual and heterogeneous country like India, how realistic is the goal of education in mother tongue, given that students in the same classroom may come different linguistic backgrounds?

MJW: India's linguistic diversity is extremely rich and this is both its greatest strength and its greatest educational challenge. We have Official languages, Scheduled languages and Classical languages, along with a vast range of regional dialects and varieties. From a linguist's perspective, this diversity should be seen as a resource, not a problem.

The National Education Policy's (NEP 2020) suggestion of mother tongue-based education until at least Grade 5, and preferably beyond, is linguistically very well-grounded. Research consistently shows that children learn concepts better in their home language, as it strengthens comprehension and reduces cognitive load in early learning. However, when we move from policy to classroom reality, the situation becomes more complex.

This is where the challenge of implementation arises. The first challenge is sheer scale. In many Indian classrooms students come from different linguistic backgrounds. For example, a single classroom may include children speaking Hindi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Tamil, Urdu or Marathi. In such situations, it is not always possible to choose one 'mother tongue' as the medium of instruction for all students. If every dialect were to be included separately in formal education, the system itself would become unmanageable.

The second challenge is standardisation versus variation. Education systems, administration, and national communication require some level of standard language. That is why languages like Hindi, English, Tamil, Gujarati or Bengali function as standardised codes. But linguistically, we also know that real language lives in its dialects and everyday usage.

The idea is sound but the ground reality demands flexibility. In such classrooms, teachers often naturally adopt multilingual practices explaining concepts in more than one language or using code-switching to ensure understanding. This already reflects how multilingual India functions in practice.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that not every language or dialect can serve as a formal medium of instruction. Education systems require standardisation for textbooks, examinations and mobility. Therefore, a balance must be maintained between local language inclu-

sion and wider communicative accessibility. Early education should strongly support the child's home language wherever possible, while gradually introducing bridge languages such as regional or official languages in a structured manner. So, I would say, the goal of mother tongue education is realistic in principle but its success depends on inclusive implementation, teacher training and recognition of classroom diversity.

SB: Linguistics still remains a 'hidden' subject, or at best, a niche field, in India: as you well know, not many Universities and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) offer programmes in this important subject and it is still not introduced at the graduate level in colleges. In fact, many departments of linguistics have been closed down in the past 50 years or so. What would you say are the core challenges in this regard and what are your recommendations for making linguistics as popular as other subjects in Humanities and Social Sciences in India?

MJW: Linguistics in India is steadily gaining the recognition it deserves as an important discipline. In a multilingual country like India, the scope of linguistics is naturally immense, and today its value is being appreciated more seriously than ever before.

Despite this growing recognition, certain structural and academic challenges still need to be addressed. One of the foremost among them has been visibility. At the school and undergraduate levels, students are rarely introduced to linguistics as a discipline. Language is taught but the scientific study of language is not. As a result, many students do not even realise that linguistics exists as an independent field of study. Another challenge has been perception. Students often prefer subjects that appear directly linked to employment, whereas the career potential of linguistics in areas such as artificial intelligence, speech technology, translation, language teaching, media, communication and policy studies is not always widely recognised.

A further challenge is institutional presence. Very few universities offer linguistics at the undergraduate level and where it exists, it is often attached to language departments rather than being developed as an independent, well-funded discipline. This reduces both visibility and academic growth.

Beyond these structural issues, there is also a related concern in language education itself. Even after studying English or Hindi for

many years in school, many students do not achieve real proficiency. They may pass examinations but they often struggle with confident communication. This reflects a deeper gap—language is often taught as memorisation of grammar rules rather than as a system of use, context and communication. This is where linguistic awareness can make a real difference. For example, understanding that code-switching is a natural feature of bilingual speech or that errors are part of language development, can positively reshape the way language is taught and learned. It can reduce fear and improve actual communication ability.

We also often overlook the fact that linguistics is already present in everyday technology. Tools like Google Translate, Siri, Alexa and AI-based language models are all built on linguistic principles, yet students rarely recognise this connection. This makes linguistics seem "invisible" despite being widely used. If we look at international examples, universities such as MIT, Stanford and University College London treat linguistics as a strong interdisciplinary field linked with cognitive science, psychology and artificial intelligence.

With hundreds of languages and dialects, India provides one of the richest environments for linguistic research anywhere in the world. We know that the first major comprehensive linguistic survey of India, the Linguistic Survey of India, was conducted by the foreign scholar Sir George Abraham Grierson. While that was a landmark contribution, it also reminds us that the systematic study of our linguistic wealth now needs to be carried forward more actively through Indian institutions and scholars. Encouragingly, this process has already begun through recent work in language documentation, multilingual education, endangered language preservation and policy initiatives.

To make linguistics as popular as other subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences, I would recommend introducing basic linguistic studies at the senior secondary level, especially in Classes 11 and 12. Early exposure would help students understand the discipline, explore its relevance and make informed career choices. At the higher education level, more universities should establish dedicated departments and interdisciplinary programmes linking linguistics with psychology, computer science, education, media and artificial intelligence.

Another meaningful step would be to include linguistics as a recognised subject in competitive examinations such as UPSC. This would not

only enhance the academic status of the discipline but also encourage talented students to pursue it seriously. It would create broader career pathways in administration, language policy, education, translation and governance.

Public outreach is equally important. Seminars, workshops, language festivals, and technology-based initiatives can help students and society see that linguistics is not limited to theory but has practical relevance in everyday life. In a country as linguistically diverse as India, the scientific study of language is not a luxury, it is a necessity for inclusive education, cultural preservation and national development.

So, I would say the issue is not a lack of relevance but a need for greater visibility and structured support. With these efforts, the true potential of linguistics can be fully realised and it can emerge as one of the most dynamic and future-oriented disciplines in India.

SB: In this context, what is the role of the Linguistic Society of India (LSI) in promoting the study of Linguistics? What concrete steps have been taken to popularise its study? In your view, how successful has LSI been in promoting the study of Linguistics and what else needs to be done?

MJW: The Linguistic Society of India (LSI) has played a very important role in sustaining and promoting the study of Linguistics in the country, especially at a time when the discipline has had limited visibility within mainstream higher education. It has served as one of the most significant academic bodies for creating continuity, scholarship and professional engagement in the field.

One of its key contributions has been functioning as a national academic platform for linguists. Through its annual conferences, seminars, workshops and publications, LSI has consistently provided space for scholars to engage with Indian languages, sociolinguistics, language documentation, language policy and applied linguistics. In a country as linguistically diverse as India, this role of bringing researchers together is highly significant.

LSI has also contributed through its journals and scholarly publications, which have helped document and analyse Indian languages systematically. This is particularly valuable for lesser-studied languages and dialects that may not always find adequate space in formal curricula.

In this sense, LSI has acted as a repository of linguistic knowledge and has ensured scholarly continuity across generations.

In terms of popularising the subject, LSI has also taken constructive policy-oriented steps. It has recently submitted proposals to the Chairman of UPSC, the Secretary of UPSC, and the Additional Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India, recommending including linguistics within the UPSC curriculum framework and the introduction of linguistics as a separate subject in universities and colleges across the country at undergraduate level. These initiatives reflect LSI's commitment to expanding both academic visibility and career relevance for the discipline. We are hopeful for a positive outcome in the near future.

Another important initiative taken by LSI has been to honour distinguished scholars through the conferment of Honorary Fellowships. By recognising senior linguists who have made outstanding contributions to the discipline throughout their academic careers, LSI has helped preserve academic legacy and inspire younger scholars. Anyone can recommend names of senior linguists who have made significant contributions in linguistic research.

Going forward, a few additional steps can further strengthen its impact. LSI can expand outreach through collaborations with schools, teacher-training institutes, curriculum bodies, and universities. It can also increase its digital presence through webinars, open-access resources, online certificate courses, and internships. Greater engagement with language technology, AI, translation studies, and multilingual education would also make the subject more visible to younger generations.

Overall, LSI has played a foundational role in promoting linguistics in India. It has helped sustain the discipline academically, supported its growth at the institutional level, and recognised excellence within the field. Going forward, its next important step would be to bring linguistics beyond specialised academic circles into wider educational spaces and greater public awareness.

SB: Thank you for your valuable insights.

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